

What Wikileaks Tells Us – *new media 1*

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Welcome to the new media. Everything has changed. Or, if you prefer, it's the same old circus, it will all blow over. Relax, obey and consume. Everything's OK.

So far it's unclear whether the Wikileaks affair will prove to be a good thing or a fitting post modern post mortem. It has quickly become a global lottery containing all possibilities from a promise of purification to the end of elected government as we understand the term. It has a long way to run yet. So far, though, some things can be said with a degree of certainty.

The reaction against Julian Assange appears to be contrived, and clumsily contrived at that, which illuminates the extent to which he is irritating the powerful. There seems to be no evidence that he has committed the rape he's apparently accused of; his own efforts to discuss this affair with Swedish prosecutors have been rebuffed; no evidence has been provided to his lawyers (a cornerstone of proper legal procedure); he appears to have broken no other laws; the overnight financial service denials to Wikileaks, as if from a science fiction novel, suggest a sinister invisible power structure adding credence to the claims of conspiracy theorists. Any respectable newspaper editor in the same circumstances, moreover, would see it as his or her ethical duty to publish the material Assange is publishing. This has happened in the past and continues today, and no-one is hunting down the editor of The Guardian or the Sydney Morning Herald.

Wikileaks also tells us that our leaders lie habitually. Alright, we knew this. And a certain degree of prudent secrecy perhaps protects democratic stability (though no-one has ever experimented with openly telling the truth about government interactions). But now we know it goes much further than that. The world is governed, some may now argue, by people incapable of applying moral principle to political interest. By people, they may say, who in fact are unfit to govern. Wikileaks provides the final confirmation, if one were needed, of Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The extent of political incompetence is seen in the Australian Prime Minister's hopeless public assertion of Assange's criminality and her reliance, not for the first time, on repair work by the man she deposed; and in calls by extreme American opinion managers (you wouldn't call them political leaders) for Assange's execution. These are the people making, or not making, decisions critical to the future of the planet at a time when the future has never been more critical. Since we finance them, we are presumably entitled to know if they are feeble half wits.

Where Assange has arguably erred is in making the USA his sole target – though men with poisoned umbrellas would no doubt be getting on airplanes in Moscow had Russian diplomatic messages been published. Wikileaks has been on the news periphery for some months but now the saga is mainstream, unfolding by the day and qualifying every other information stream. However it concludes, it shows just how fast everything could change. Everything changes anyway. It's been evident since the late eighties that something has arrived with the revolutionary force of the wheel, the printing press and industrial steam power. Once wiki technology was created, there would always be a Julian Assange. Perhaps in the future Wikileaks *will* reveal information from Moscow, or Jerusalem, or Beijing. But for the moment we have at least been confronted with our

own tendency to make heroes of those who – like Obama, Blair and Rudd – relieve us of tired governments. Then, because they also fail us, our cynicism continually renews itself, placing democracy under threat. If nothing else, we should be on guard against any 1933-type moves to save us from it.

As Timothy Garton Ash notes in *The Guardian*, there is a public interest in the confidential conduct of foreign policy and an equally clear public interest in understanding how the world works and what is done in our name. The two public interests conflict, as sometimes happens. The biggest lesson of all is in our own response to the changes Wikileaks has set in motion and the great question with all change is whether it enhances or retards civilization. The so-called new media environment is powerful and the public taste for truth, like the French Revolution, could evolve into a blood lust against established government (metaphorically speaking, one hopes). Meanwhile, the big one – the one they really want to keep from us (a scientific confirmation, for example, that continued life on earth may soon become uncertain without drastic population cuts) – will henceforth be as close as tomorrow's breakfast news.

Julian Assange talks to John Humphrys of BBC Radio 4's *Today* program
listen (25.20) / full transcript
http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9308000/9308216.stm