

Topic Page: [Wikileaks](#)

Definition: **WikiLeaks** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

an organisation that publishes private, secret, or classified information on its internet website, such information being submitted by various anonymous sources; launched in 2006, claiming as its founders various journalists, dissidents, and computer technologists from a number of countries, including Julian Assange; originally used the wiki concept but later disallowed user editing or comment; in 2010 caused controversy when began publishing classified US diplomatic cables and US military archives relating to Iraq.

Etymology: trademark ; wiki + leak 708 + -s3



Image from:

[Australian Internet activist Julian Assange... in *Global Social Issues: An Encyclopedia*](#)

Summary Article: **WikiLeaks**

from *Blackwell Encyclopedias in Social Sciences: The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*

Julian Assange launched a Web site, *WikiLeaks.org*, in December 2006. Since its inception, WikiLeaks has been at the center of intense scrutiny by nation-state governments and corporations alike. WikiLeaks is a Web site that posts confidential and sensitive information. The aim is captured by the slogan “We open governments,” and the Web site states that “Publishing improves transparency, and this transparency creates a better society for all people.

Better scrutiny leads to reduced corruption and stronger democracies in all society's institutions, including government, corporations and other organizations. A healthy, vibrant and inquisitive journalistic media plays a vital role in achieving these goals” (WikiLeaks 2010). The administrators of WikiLeaks have a clear goal: information that is deemed secret by nation-states should be open to the public, and this will lead to the strengthening of democracy. WikiLeaks depends upon individual users to submit information, documents, and various files to a drop-box on its Web site. The drop-box is meant to allow users to remain anonymous and submit information, just as it keeps WikiLeaks from being involved in obtaining the information directly.

The more infamous documents that have been published by WikiLeaks include a counterintelligence report produced by the US military and the Standard Operating Procedure for Camp Delta, which served as the acting protocol for military personnel at Guantanamo Bay. In November 2010, WikiLeaks began publishing a small fraction of the supposed 250 000 messages sent between and within US embassies and the US State Department. Each publication that WikiLeaks posts comes with its own unique circumstances and controversy; however, the developments that followed the leakage of embassy and State Department documents in November 2010 are similar to, and telling of, the aftermath that follows each publication.

The controversy revolved around putting US foreign relations in danger, as some of the cables could be embarrassing or sensitive in nature, might reveal intelligence sources, and could then be used against the US military. Once the cables were published, it did not take long for further accusations to be leveled at WikiLeaks. Attorney General Eric Holder of the US Justice Department was quoted, saying, “The national security of the United States has been put at risk.... The American people, themselves,

have been put at risk by these actions that I believe are arrogant, misguided and ultimately not helpful in any way” (Johnson & Hall 2010: 6A). As a result, the Attorney General launched an investigation into the actions of WikiLeaks to determine if any US federal law had been violated (Johnson & Hall 2010). Representatives of the US Congress have also weighed in on the issue. Senator Joseph Lieberman stated on a Fox News television show that he believed WikiLeaks had violated the Espionage Act, which prohibits any persons from releasing classified information (Savage 2010: A10).

Several major corporations withdrew their services from WikiLeaks amidst all of the political fallout, including Visa, MasterCard, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), and PayPal. Some of the companies claimed that there were violations of terms of use agreements, while others simply did not wish to support WikiLeaks because they believed that what it had done was simply wrong. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) denied WikiLeaks the use of its computer servers; the other corporations discontinued accepting donations for WikiLeaks (Burns & Somaiya 2010; Hwang 2010).

The withdrawal of corporations from being involved with WikiLeaks, however, ultimately resulted in a backlash by WikiLeaks supporters. Loosely coordinated groups of “hacktivists” (a play on hacker and activist) attempted to shut down the Web sites belonging to Visa, MasterCard, and PayPal through a denial of service (DoS) attack (Hwang 2010). A DoS attack essentially bombards the Web site to the point that it becomes overloaded with requests and crashes. Though Assange distanced himself from these attacks, the hacktivists claimed their efforts were to maintain a free and open Internet, which is fundamental to the foundation of WikiLeaks (Hwang 2010). The site *WikiLeaks.org* was also the victim of a similar tactic, which resulted in its going down. However, “[t]o keep the information available even when the site is under attack, WikiLeaks allies are creating copies of the WikiLeaks Web site, called mirrors” (Bennett 2010: 4). So, despite efforts to prevent access to the information on the WikiLeaks Web site, it proved to be only too easy to reproduce.

In November of 2010, Assange stated in an interview with *Forbes* magazine that state secrets would not be the only focus of WikiLeaks in the future. Instead, WikiLeaks would also begin to publish documents that expose corporate corruption and deceitful business practices (Greenberg 2010). Despite the possibility of many future leaks, there is no indication that WikiLeaks will succeed in making the US government transparent and persuading it to discontinue the use of classified information. As of December 2010, the Obama Administration began developing plans to scale back the amount of information available to US military members and members of the US Department of Defense in order to prevent leaks of information in the future (Shane 2010). So, in effect, rather than achieving the goal of freeing information, WikiLeaks has only led the US government to prevent such classified information from being easy to access and to make the information more secure. In an even more ironic twist, there is evidence to show that WikiLeaks is beginning to censor itself as well, by redacting the names of individuals in their published documents in order to protect them from harm. Likewise, WikiLeaks has shared its leaked information with much of the mainstream media in order to coordinate simultaneous releases of the material (Shane 2010). As a result, “In recent months, some of Mr. Assange's closest associates in WikiLeaks abandoned him, calling him autocratic and capricious and accusing him of reneging on WikiLeaks's original pledge of impartiality to launch a concerted attack on the United States” (Burns & Somaiya 2010: A1).

Though the Web site has drawn much attention in the journalistic media, WikiLeaks remains largely understudied in the social sciences. It is likely that WikiLeaks, as well as Web sites that are similar and also rely on citizen journalism, will become an integral part of the way news is produced and consumed

in the Information Age. Further, as WikiLeaks begins to share its information with media outlets like the *New York Times*, it calls into question what role organizations based online will have in the future vis-à-vis traditional media outlets and conglomerates both in the United States and throughout the globe. WikiLeaks presents an interesting case for sociological inquiry with regard to globalization, nation-state security, liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and the prosumer (Toffler 1981; Ritzer 2010). The significance of WikiLeaks and similar Web sites cannot be understated, given that once the information is published it becomes global and has been shown to have a far-reaching political impact.

SEE ALSO: Digitality & Socio-Political Networks; Hacktivists; Information and Communication Technologies; Liquidity; Mediascapes; Nation-State; Public Sphere.

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William A. Yagatich

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

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