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Assange Is a Jerk. So What?

Why it takes flawed characters like WikiLeaks' Julian Assange to make governments behave better.

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Long ago, I wrote about the Internet pioneer Julf Helsingius, who ran a precursor to WikiLeaks called [anon.penet.fi](#), and that: "Anonymity in itself should not be illegal. There are enough good reasons for people to be anonymous that it should be [allowed]—at least in some places on the Net (as in real life)."

But anon.penet.fi got little notice: There weren't enough people on the Internet at the time to read what was posted, and Helsingius did not use the WikiLeaks "business model" of cooperation with "establishment media." In 1996, he had to shut down the site in a tussle with the Church of Scientology, which used copyright law to keep its secrets.

There can be no clear line marking what needs to be kept secret (or never uttered) from what does not, but it should be drawn far from where most authorities put it—at least in a world where authorities are imperfect. If we are unwilling or unable to demand transparency from the institutions that have power over us, we should be grateful for those who put their lives (and their consciences) at risk to do so.

So I was eager to meet [WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange](#) at the 2009 Personal Democracy Forum in Barcelona. At that time, Assange was just gaining visibility outside the tech community. He was opaque and playfully cryptic, already a little paranoid—perhaps justifiably so. More recently, it appears that he ruled his little organization with no tolerance for dissent. That makes him a jerk, and presumably we will soon find out whether he is also a rapist according to Swedish law.

But you probably need to be a bit weird and callous to devote your life to transparency for others. [Mikhail Khodorkovsky](#), the imprisoned ex-CEO of what was Russia's largest oil company, is another example of a flawed, uncompromising person who challenged the flawed people in power and their unaccountability. Such people do not die for our sins; Rather, they sin on our behalf, so that we may live comfortably while they afflict the authorities at great personal risk and in disregard of (authorities' interpretation of) the law and sometimes even ethics.

Assange's motives, as far as I know, are not anti-American, but anti-authority. He would argue, I believe, that he has no power other than to authenticate and publish documents that others send to him about people with power, and thus that he has no obligation to reveal anything about himself.

This is and should be the principle behind WikiLeaks and *its* successors—to publish information that officials would keep secret, not information about private lives. In a world where governments, corporations, and other institutions have so much information about us, it is only right that we should have more information about them and about the activities of people acting on their behalf.

If institutions are not fully accountable, it is useful to have an unaccountable countervailing institution to reveal their secrets. In fact, the WikiLeaks model is fairly sensible: It solicits documents from anyone, assesses whether they are real, and posts them with alerts to the establishment press, which operates as *de facto* gatekeeper to the masses. After all, how many people actually visit the WikiLeaks originals? Few, compared with the millions who see them interpreted in the mass media.

What about the possibility of endangering lives? What about real secrets about terrorists and delicate negotiations? By all accounts, that point has not been reached. If it is, I would support throttling WikiLeaks' revelations ... and most media would not republish its content.

The irony is that little has been revealed that we didn't know already. What we're getting is the details—the personal comments, the texture of diplomats' lives and those of the people they watch, the horrible toll of war and its daily indignities, the hypocrisies and lies of those in power.

Will all this make us more cynical rather than more demanding? Will it make governments more opaque rather than more transparent? Are we headed for an era of more paranoia about secrets, including less sharing of useful information?

If the cure is to be worse than the disease, to quote Personal Democracy Forum co-founder Andrew Rasiej, let's find a better cure: Let's make the proper distinction between what should be secret and what everyone knows. Let's foster more transparency about the institutions that have power over us so that a WikiLeaks is no longer necessary or justifiable.

So far, little damage has been done—and little positive change accomplished. The American reaction has been over the top. It called on Amazon to cancel its contract with WikiLeaks, while PayPal shut off WikiLeaks' account—apparently without even being asked. Why is it that the call for transparency seems to apply only to countries that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visits, rather than to the one that she represents?

I recently talked with an establishment stalwart who told me how much more difficult these leaks will make it for the U.S. diplomatic corps to accomplish its putatively worthy goals. But is diplomatic convenience really so important? Perhaps it's useful for us all to understand how things actually work. In any case, the official reaction is overkill.

In the long run, WikiLeaks matters for two reasons. The first is that we need a better balance of power between people and power. Information—and specifically the Internet's power to spread it—is our best defense against bad, unaccountable behavior.

Second, we *do* want to trust our governments and institutions. The point of openness is to make those in power behave better—and to make us trust them more. Rather than viewing them as enemies, we should know what they are up to and perhaps have a little more say in what they do.

Making that happen requires someone willing to face opprobrium, jail, and a life of surveillance. I wish Julian Assange were a better person, but better people are not rising to the challenge.

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