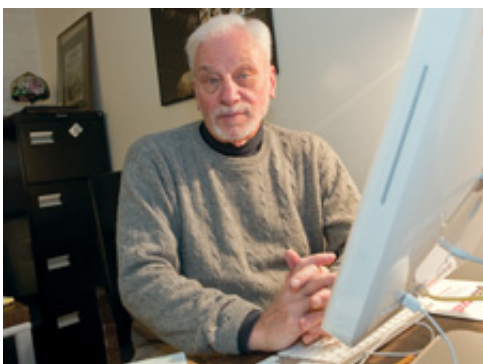


In the Internet age, government secrecy harder to maintain: expert

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Journalism professor William Kirtz analyzes government secrecy and journalism in the digital age. Photo by Lauren McFalls.

WikiLeaks' exposure of thousands of leaked U.S. diplomatic cables has thrust America's foreign policy and government secrecy into the global spotlight. The media's role in reporting on these sensitive documents — while also trying to balance national security concerns — has sparked debate, as well.

William Kirtz, associate professor in the School of Journalism at Northeastern University, examines the potential for future “document dumps” on the Internet and discusses the challenges journalists face in the digital age.

In the aftermath of the WikiLeaks release of

diplomatic cables, do you think more government secrets will be exposed, or will increased government efforts to maintain secrecy succeed?

More secrets will be exposed because the Internet makes it so easy to disseminate information—whether or not it harms national security.

What is your assessment of how the news organizations that initially received these documents covered this story?

The documents were distributed to a few leading traditional [news](#) outlets, such as The New York Times, which redacted information that might endanger people and programs and discussed what they were preparing to print with government officials. And in some cases, according to Times editor Bill Keller, material was deleted or modified to address government concerns. The danger is that some group without professional journalism standards will do an Internet “document dump” of information that could indeed damage national security.

How has Wikileaks’ coverage by major news organizations compared to the coverage of those who have leaked sensitive material in the past?

The media coverage of [WikiLeaks](#) founder Julian Assange has detailed his legal problems; their treatment of him has been much more critical than that which Daniel Ellsberg received when he leaked the Pentagon Papers. This seems appropriate; a source’s motive in disclosing information can be quite relevant.

In this new media age, what challenges do journalists face in reporting on government secrecy and preserving national security?

Threats of prosecution under the vague and outdated Espionage Act are a challenge. So potentially is proposed legislation that would make it illegal to publish the names of military or intelligence community informants. Increased use of subpoena power to compel journalists to disclose confidential sources is another problem. Finally, the mainstream media's ongoing financial crisis may dissuade news organizations from starting and continuing the long and expensive battle to obtain information that officials want to keep secret — not out of national security concerns, but because it might embarrass them politically or personally.

Provided by Northeastern University

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