

WikiLeaks, a Napster-style Internet gamechanger for 2010

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The homepage of Wikileaks.ch with a picture of its founder Julian Assange is seen on a computer screen on December 4. WikiLeaks has governments, institutions and individuals around the world searching for answers to difficult questions surrounding US policy, free speech, Internet freedom, privacy, secrecy, transparency and the power -- and dangers -- of the Web.

If 1999 was the Year of Napster in the history of the Internet then 2010 will go down as the Year of WikiLeaks.

Napster, the file-sharing renegade, upended the music industry and copyright in ways still being felt a decade later while [WikiLeaks](http://wikileaks.org), for better or worse, is likely to have a similar impact on government secrecy and transparency.

For now, WikiLeaks has governments, institutions and individuals

around the world searching for answers to difficult questions surrounding US policy, free speech, [Internet freedom](#), privacy, secrecy, transparency and the power -- and dangers -- of the Web.

WikiLeaks has argued that its release of hundreds of thousands of secret US documents about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the inner workings of US diplomacy exposes US military abuses on the battlefield and "contradictions between the US's public persona and what it says behind closed doors."

Its detractors denounce the release of the documents as a crime carried out by a disgruntled US soldier and abetted by a self-appointed truth-teller in the person of WikiLeaks founder [Julian Assange](#).

Clay Shirky, a prominent US writer on the social and economic effects of Internet technologies, said he has mixed feelings about WikiLeaks although he staunchly opposes extrajudicial efforts to shut it down.

"Like a lot of people, I am conflicted about WikiLeaks," Shirky said in a blog post on his website, Shirky.com.

"Citizens of a functioning democracy must be able to know what the state is saying and doing in our name," Shirky said. "Wikileaks plainly improves those abilities.

"On the other hand, human systems can't stand pure transparency," he said. "People trying to come to consensus must be able to privately voice opinions they would publicly abjure, and may later abandon.

"Wikileaks plainly damages those abilities."



A protester holds a placard reading, "Free Julian Assange" as he talks to a police officer at the City of Westminster Magistrates Court, ahead of a hearing for the Wikileaks founder, in London.

Andrew Rasiej, co-founder of technology and politics blog techPresident.com, said he sees WikiLeaks as a "Napster moment in the evolution of how technology changes the relationship between people and their governments."

"The way in which we think about power itself is altered as a result of the Web," Rasiej told AFP. "Everybody, basically, has a printing press in their hands that is connected to every other printing press."

"I would hope that after everything calms down that the government recognizes that it has to fight for openness and transparency and use classification only in rare occasions," he said.

Rasiej said he was concerned, however, that instead of embracing greater transparency, "governments may try to invoke a cure that may be worse than the disease."

James Lewis, a cybersecurity expert at the Washington-based Center for

Strategic and International Studies, said just such a clampdown may be the legacy of WikiLeaks.

He noted that [Napster](#) was eventually shut down by the courts although it lives on in myriad reincarnations such as The Pirate Bay.

"Ten years from now no one's going to look back and say WikiLeaks was a good thing," Lewis told AFP. "They may have started out with good intentions but it's going to backfire.

"I think the thing that's going to happen is people are going to step back and ask 'Is this responsible politics?' 'Is this what we want?' And I think the answer is going to be no," he said.

"The WikiLeaks people have been about as irresponsible as you can get and they're going to provoke a response and the response will be to try to constrain this kind of activity in the future," Lewis said.

"No government and no company is happy with the idea that somebody can steal their data and these guys can just publish it," he said.

Media analyst Jeff Jarvis, in an op-ed article for Germany's Welt am Sonntag republished on his blog Buzzmachine.com, said WikiLeaks and the Internet have combined to "puncture" the power of government secrecy.

"Whether or not it ever reveals another document -- and we can be certain that it will -- Wikileaks has made us all aware that no secret is safe," Jarvis said.

"Let us use this episode to examine as citizens just how secret and how transparent our governments should be," he said. "For today, in the Internet age, power shifts from those who hold secrets to those who

create openness.

"That is our emerging reality."

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