

Why WikiLeaks' bid for radical transparency failed

March 22 2012

The scale and significance of the 2010 WikiLeaks disclosures were overstated, according to new research. Analysis of the WikiLeaks debacle in the *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, published by SAGE on behalf of the Institute for Administrative Sciences (IIAS), serves to highlight four key reasons why radical transparency is hard to achieve, and why a technological fix alone will not achieve it.

Some regard the WikiLeaks disclosures of 2010 as evidence that conventional mechanisms for controlling government-held information are breaking down, heralding a new world of 'radical transparency'. However, Alasdair Roberts of Suffolk University Law School, Boston USA, argues that claims that old-style [secrecy](#) is over are an illusion, and that Wikileaks' [advocates](#) have overstated their scale and significance.

"They also overlook many ways in which the simple logic of radical transparency – leak, publish, and wait for the inevitable outrage –can be defeated in practice," Roberts says.

WikiLeaks' aim is to challenge 'increasing authoritarian tendencies' in government and the growth of unaccountable corporate power. By the end of 2010, WikiLeaks and its editor in chief and founder, Julian Assange, were in the eye of a media storm, with few doubting the significance of the extensive leaked material. Yet Roberts suggests that the 2010 leaks actually revealed the obstacles to achievement of increased transparency, even in the digital age.

The leaks' sheer size in terms of volume of pages was cited as proof of their significance - these were the largest set of confidential documents ever leaked to the public. Yet in quantitative terms, the data's significance as a fraction of the total number of confidential documents is no greater than previous leaks during other eras. The sheer quantity of this type of data held by governments is constantly increasing.

On the Internet, commercial and political considerations compromise the free flow of information, just as they did when we relied on earlier communications technologies. When WikiLeaks released US State Department cables in November 2010, several companies that Wikileaks used, including Amazon Web Services, EveryDNS.net, PayPal and Apple, cut off their services, citing contractual violations or threats to their own businesses that would hinder other customers. This complicated WikiLeaks' ability to distribute leaked information, and damaged it financially.

The radical transparency vision has a further difficulty, in that it neglects the significance of intermediation – organizing, interpreting, and drawing attention to information. Skilled in the use of information technology, WikiLeaks' members were nonetheless daunted by the task of handling bulk data leaked from the Defence Department. WikiLeaks released a series of US military counterinsurgency manuals in 2008, anticipating a strong reaction and press attention. In reality it garnered little reaction because the material was too complex, and there was no clear story to grasp.

Wikileaks subsequently turned to a number of major media outlets to help with handling information releases. However, this also meant that the media became gatekeepers for the information, taking their own decisions regarding which content should be published, and what was newsworthy or what they had the budget to investigate.

Wikileaks expected its leaks to spark outrage, shifting public opinion. But the American public, in general, did not react with the expected level of outrage: perceptions about the conduct of the war in Afghanistan actually improved after WikiLeaks' July 2010 [disclosures](#).

Roberts observes that: "The incidents revealed by WikiLeaks might not even be construed as abuses of power at all. On the contrary, they might provide reassurance that the American government is willing to act ruthlessly in the pursuit of American interests, and that it actually has the capacity to act ruthlessly."

The final difficulty with the vision of radical transparency is that it assumes a passive government reaction. In fact, governments have shown they can respond to such threats with "speed and brutality". US Army private Bradley Manning, the apparent source of all four of the 2010 leaks, has taken the hardest fall. US federal agencies have responded to the leaks by tightening administrative controls on access to sensitive information. Even if government officials lost control of the information itself, they have not lost their capacity to shape its interpretation.

"There is no such thing, even in the age of the Internet, as the instantaneous and complete revelation of the truth. In its undigested form, information has no transformative power at all," Roberts says. "Raw data must be distilled; the attention of a distracted audience must be captured; and that audience must accept the message that is put before it."

Roberts is a proponent of stronger accountability and increased [transparency](#), for diplomatic and national security institutions. However, he concludes that this will require hard work, rather than a technological fix. "A major difficulty with the WikiLeaks project is that it may delude us into believing otherwise," he concludes.

More information: WikiLeaks: the illusion of transparency by Alasdair Roberts is published today, 23 March 2012, in the *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. ras.sagepub.com/

Provided by SAGE Publications

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