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What makes WikiLeaks so dangerous?

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Misguided, irresponsible, reprehensible – these are just some of the words used by critics to describe the latest set of releases on the website, WikiLeaks. But is this more than hurt pride and should we really care one way or another?
On one level probably not. For anyone following international affairs, there is very little surprising or new material beyond what most of us either already knew or suspected. There is a problem with organised crime in Russia? The Chinese are fed up with North Korea? The Saudis are opposed to an Iranian bomb? Chris Patten is sceptical about the EU ever becoming a real power? It does not take a genius to figure any of this out.

But publicly confirmed knowledge of these issues is only half the story – having this knowledge in the public domain has consequences. On the one hand, it makes the position of those who go against the grain much harder, including in their own societies or cultures. How is exposing leading Arab politicians for taking a rather grim view on the Iranian nuclear programme going to help to prevent a very dangerous escalation in the Middle East and beyond? Will North Korea now suddenly play nice knowing that its only supposed ally has had enough?

Perhaps more importantly, and contrary to all WikiLeaks' assurances, the release of confidential diplomatic cables puts at risk the lives of people who are the source of the information. While it is difficult to see how Chris Patten might come to serious harm at the hands of a staunch Europhile, sources in authoritarian regimes do not have this luxury. Even if source names are erased from the cables before publication, it will often be relatively easy to determine who could have passed on information.

Accusations may target the ‘right’ or the ‘wrong’ person, but regardless, people will suffer the consequences – not because someone had the courage to speak to American diplomats, but because someone else, operating in the comfort of democratic Iceland, Sweden or Switzerland, all governed by clear rule-of-law and abiding by the highest standards of human rights, sees it as befitting his personal agenda to put their lives at risk.

It takes a very particular kind of courage to expose and address crime and corruption in authoritarian regimes – courage which is displayed by those who say things that are unpopular or controversial in their own circumstances in an effort to stand up to injustice and oppression. The latest self-serving stunt by Julian Assange has done nothing to honour such courage, but everything to make it shorter-lived and in shorter supply. Tragically, the better world for which Assange allegedly crusades is now a good deal further off.

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The Birmingham debate on WikiLeaks will be available shortly at **www.birmingham.ac.uk (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/)**

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