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wikileaks-lucas

Is WikiLeaks right to release confidential information?

Yes

Scott Lucas, Professor of American Studies

"In the Category of Irony….

The US State Department announced on Tuesday that it will host UNESCO's World Press Freedom Day event in 2011, "to champion the free flow of information on the Internet". On the same day, the US Government was pressing companies including Amazon, PayPal, MasterCard and a major Swiss bank, to withdraw technical, communications and financial services from WikiLeaks in the hope that it would knock the website out of existence.

The immediate "crisis" is WikiLeaks' possible release of more than 250,000 cables from US Embassy. Less than 1000 have been published so far, but already there is a wealth of material about the day-to-day realities and complications of US foreign policy in the public domain. These are the documents that expose the deals, deceptions and diplomatic manoeuvres that are made.

There are three snap responses from those criticising the release of the information.T he first is that the publication of the cables jeopardises "national security". The second objection is the more substantive one - that the cables will complicate the practice of diplomacy.

The third, and most serious, is that sources will be endangered by the release, with their governments discovering their identities and exacting retribution – although this claim is usually made by a critic who has not yet read the documents.

None of these objections should obscure what this debate is really about - control. The US Government, contrary to the State Department's declaration on Tuesday, does not want "free flow of information". It wants to be able to set limits on what an interested public should know. In the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, the Bush Administration did not want the public to know the reality of American intelligence - that it was unclear whether or not Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Until it was able to push through the decision last month, it did not want the American people to know that President Obama's deadline of July 2011 for combat troops in Afghanistan was a fiction.

These documents, released by WikiLeaks, take control from the US Government on a range of issues. We would not have learned for decades much of the information that has emerged this week. A sample:

1. The oil company Shell brags that it controls the Nigerian Government.
2. The US Embassy in Afghanistan covered up the hiring of child prostitutes by DynCorp, the major American contractor, in Afghanistan.
3. Washington used espionage, threats and aid to push through its preferred version of the climate change accord, reached at Copenhagen in 2009.
4. State Department personnel were instructed to spy on fellow diplomats at the United Nations.
5. A source told US diplomats that martial arts instructors were being pressured to train "ninja assassins" in Iran.

The last item, while true, may be a bit frivolous, but the other four are quite serious and there are dozens more stories of significance.

The Government shelters American and British citizens from such stories for decades through its regulation of information and secrecy. Primarily it does so not for reasons of security, but because it would prefer to pursue activity without worrying about scrutiny.

WikiLeaks is not an angel in this story. It, along with the media outlets posting its cables, is a participant in a new environment in which we can be empowered through access to information. The issue here is not a threat to national security or a threat to diplomacy, but whether we allow a the Government to re-assert unchecked and unquestioned control.

Perhaps then the State Department can have a World Press Freedom Day free from irony.

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