Spreading Leaks Before WikiLeaks

WEB EXCLUSIVE
The parallels between the shadowy Web operation and a syndicated columnist from back in the day.

By Mark Feldstein
Mark Feldstein (prof.feldstein@gmail.com), a veteran investigative reporter, is the Richard Eaton Chair in Broadcast Journalism at the University of Maryland.

Before WikiLeaks, there was "Washington Merry-Go-Round."

When Julian Assange, founder of the Web site devoted to exposing government secrets, was still literally in diapers, columnist Jack Anderson was gleefully waving top-secret documents at news conferences and handing them out the old-fashioned way, using a Xerox machine.

Anderson has largely been forgotten, but a generation ago his syndicated column provided the most consistently damning disclosures of state secrets anywhere — the WikiLeaks of its day. His experience is instructive about what can happen when a canny and determined crusader challenges the national security claims of authorities.

The parallels between Anderson and Assange are striking. Both cultivated low-level but well-placed whistleblowers to leak documents revealing corruption and deceit by governments and corporations. Both cultivated an air of mystery in their public personas, recognizing the inherent theatrical nature of their roles as public provocateurs. And both were feared and despised by their targets, and subjected to allegations of sexual misconduct said to be spread by those who wanted to discredit them.

Anderson's biggest scoop involved American support for Pakistan's corrupt, authoritarian regime. Anderson's cache of classified documents revealed that the Nixon administration was secretly arming the Pakistani military during its 1971 war with India, despite public declarations of U.S. neutrality in the conflict.
neutrality. The reaction then was similar to what would occur decades later with WikiLeaks.

A Pentagon official charged that Anderson's "devastating security" breach "made the enemy aware of U.S. military secrets." But like Assange, Anderson believed that the government was invoking national security to hide its wartime blunders, which had "been paid in blood. Should those who were responsible be allowed to remain in their shadowy world safe from public exposure?"

In Anderson's case, administration claims that lives were jeopardized by his reporting were exaggerated; in the end, the only real casualty proved to be government credibility. Whether the same turns out to be true with the recent WikiLeaks disclosures remains to be seen.

To be sure, the parallels should not be overstated. Anderson's documents totaled just a fraction of the tens of thousands of records posted on the Internet by WikiLeaks, whose Web site instantly makes its files available to anyone on the globe with the click of a mouse. In addition, Anderson was a seasoned reporter who took more care to disguise the identities of informants and to gather valuable corroborating information from interviews in the field.

Still, pioneers like Anderson and Assange are rarely respected in their own time by their establishment competitors. Just as the founder of WikiLeaks has been dismissed as a hacker/activist, so Anderson was "not a journalist," another columnist declared back in the day, but "a sewer pipe" whose reporting "goes beyond disloyalty; it sails close to the windward edge of treason." Such contempt was reciprocated by Anderson and Assange, who disparaged the press as mere stenographers for those in power.

Nonetheless, Anderson and Assange understood that they needed the mainstream media as much as the mainstream media needed them. Both WikiLeaks and the syndicated "Merry-Go-Round" column benefited from the respectability and audience provided when elite news outlets picked up their stories. At the same time, outliers like Assange and Anderson provide establishment journalists access to the fruits of whistleblowers outside their reach, even while guaranteeing a safe distance from lawbreaking informants.

Moreover, by publicly releasing their raw records, Anderson and Assange allowed the press corps to authenticate their information, unlike journalistic accounts based on anonymous sources that can easily be dismissed without any independent way to verify them. Indeed, as Assange and Anderson understood better than anyone, their dramatic penetration of official secrecy frequently generated as much attention as the substance of their disclosures, often forcing mainstream outlets to follow up on their work — and the government to react.
In 1971, as today, the Justice Department debated whether to file criminal charges over the leak. "The culprit who turned this crap over to Anderson," President Richard Nixon shouted, "that son of a bitch should be shot! He has to be shot!" But the chief executive backed down after Anderson blackmailed him by threatening to reveal even more incriminating secrets if any prosecution took place.

So instead, Nixon's men tried to infiltrate Anderson's office — just as authorities reportedly did with WikiLeaks — and turned to sexual dirty tricks, which Assange, too, says he was victimized by. (In Anderson's case, Nixon ordered aides to smear the reporter and his source as gay lovers — "sexual up the ass," as the president indelicately put it.) Eventually, Nixon's henchmen even plotted to assassinate Anderson, although the plan was ultimately aborted, its conspirators arrested a few weeks later for breaking into the Watergate office complex.

It is hard to imagine the Obama administration turning to such outlandish or illegal tactics. But federal prosecutors have already filed charges against WikiLeaks' alleged source as well as others accused of disclosing classified information to journalists. Authorities are even examining whether to dust off the 1917 Espionage Act to prosecute Assange, the same law that Nixon wanted to use against Anderson.

Whether that will ultimately happen seems questionable. Assange, too, can use "greymail" to threaten release of additional secrets if indicted; and his foreign citizenship and offshore activities may remove him from U.S. jurisdiction anyway. Equally important, the administration risks losing a prosecutorial showdown in the court of public opinion. After all, when protracted wars turn unpopular and official channels don't work — whether in Iraq and Afghanistan or India and Pakistan — whistleblowers inevitably turn to the outside for help. The "first law of leaks," a journalist wrote of the Anderson disclosures, is that they "tend to follow the course of greatest impact."

In the 1970s, the course of greatest impact was Jack Anderson's column. Today, it is WikiLeaks. The lesson then, and now, is that when mainstream journalism doesn't uncover abuses, more radical muckraking activists will, sometimes influencing events in ways politicians and generals do not anticipate.

###