The Implications of WikiLeaks

WEB EXCLUSIVE
Its founder's cause will endure regardless of his fate. Posted: Tue, Dec. 14 2010

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.

For all the attention lavished on its controversial founder, WikiLeaks has now become more important than either Julian Assange or the revelations contained in his latest batch of classified diplomatic cables.

Why? Because WikiLeaks is not just a Web site. It is, more significantly, an idea — of transparency — married to an equally powerful technology — the Internet — that is able to defy censorship as never before.

No less an old-media figure than Arthur Sulzberger Jr. recognized the potential more than a decade ago. "There are now millions of electronic printing presses in cyberspace," the New York Times publisher declared in May 2000. "Digital technology might be the true agent of political transformation."

How much political transformation this digital technology will provide is only now starting to become apparent. In an increasingly interdependent age — when crime, pollution, migration and multinational corporations cross borders with impunity — the era of online global investigative reporting has arrived.

To be sure, WikiLeaks is not a traditional journalistic outlet but rather a repository and clearinghouse for documents leaked by whistleblowers. Still, it has begun exposing more official secrets than any media outlet anywhere, even while shrewdly collaborating with leading newspapers across the globe, which have the reportorial muscle to provide fact-checking, context,
nuance and, above all, the publicity that comes from their establishment imprimatur.

Governments are understandably uneasy about where all of this may lead. WikiLeaks “might already have on their hands the blood of some young soldier,” Adm Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has warned.

Ironically, it was the Pentagon itself that first designed the Internet’s “open architecture” that has been crucial to WikiLeaks’ success. The innovation would morph into the World Wide Web — and out of the control of the Defense Department.

One Pentagon official realized the political implications early on. “The Internet is clearly a significant long-term strategic threat to authoritarian regimes, one that they will be unable to counter effectively,” Charles Swett, a Defense Department assistant specializing in strategic assessment, predicted fifteen years ago. “News from the outside world brought by the Internet into nations subjugated by such regimes will clash with the distorted version provided by their governments, eroding the credibility of their positions and encouraging unrest.”

But such unrest — and eroded credibility — need not be limited to authoritarian regimes, as the U.S. is learning the hard way from WikiLeaks.

Consider the events of the past two weeks: American prosecutors have launched a criminal investigation to see if Assange can be charged with espionage. Sweden wants him extradited from Britain for alleged sex crimes. Hackers of unknown provenance are bombarding WikiLeaks’ Web site with cyberattacks while Amazon, Pay Pal, MasterCard and various Internet service providers have stopped doing business with the site. Meantime, politicians in democratic countries have publicly demanded Assange’s assassination.

In response, hundreds of Internet hactivists have begun mounting their own retaliatory attacks — a self-described “cyber war” — against the critics of WikiLeaks. Assange has put together an encrypted “insurance file” of additional incriminating documents to be released by his supporters if he is silenced. And more than one thousand “mirror” Web sites have popped up across the globe to host the same content as WikiLeaks. Many more copycat sites are sure to follow.

"Cut us down," WikiLeaks vows, "and the stronger we become."

The rhetoric may sound apocalyptic, but the site’s instantaneous global reach poses a challenge not only to state secrets everywhere, but even perhaps to the very idea of government itself. "By subverting national boundaries," one early scholar wrote of the Internet, "it calls into question the power of the state as the dominant force...around which human life has largely been
structured for centuries."

Whatever else may happen to Julian Assange, his ideal of transparency — and the technology that empowers his Web site and is riveting the world — will live on long after him.

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