

## A New Narrative

She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.

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# Wikileaks: A Spy Agency for the 21st Century

We are, in a sense, a pure expression of what the media should be: an intelligence agency of the people, casting pearls before swine. --Julian Assange

From its humble beginnings as a neutral worldwide watchdog in 2006, Wikileaks has successfully transformed itself into a transnational spy service, turning the traditional spy agency model on its head. The nation-state spy agency is no longer the greatest threat to a state's secrets.

Autonomous, unaccountable agencies, like Wikileaks, can arguably do as much or more damage to a nation's security. This is not a condemnation of Wikileaks; its founder, Julian Assange, is not a US citizen and owes no allegiance to the US or its constitutional laws. At the same time, Americans must recognize that Wikileaks is not a benign whistle-blowing organization acting on their behalf.

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WikiLeaks is a not-for-profit media organisation. Our goal is to bring important news and information to the public... The power of principled leaking to call governments, corporations and institutions to account is amply demonstrated through recent history. The public scrutiny of otherwise unaccountable and secretive institutions forces them to consider the ethical implications of their actions. Which official will chance a secret, corrupt transaction when the public is likely to find out? What repressive plan will be carried out when it is revealed to the citizenry, not just of its own country, but the world? When the risks of embarrassment and discovery increase, the tables are turned against conspiracy, corruption, exploitation and oppression. Open government answers injustice rather than causing it. Open government exposes and undoes corruption. Open governance is the most effective method of promoting good governance<sup>1</sup>.

Wikileaks' mission sounds noble but peeling back the layers reveals Wikileaks operates more like a spy agency than a media outlet. Wikileaks does not function as the people's intelligence agency that Assange described in the *NewStatesman* in 2011<sup>2</sup>. Assange has his own priorities, his own goals, his own mission, and empowering the American people is not one of them. Upon closer examination it becomes clear that Wikileaks views the United States as its primary enemy. The goal appears to be a strong attempt at undermining US hegemony. In a January 2, 2007 email, Assange explains Wikileaks potential, "...Wikileaks can advance the political/governance aspects of these developments by several years...the least of which is total annihilation of the current US regime and any other regime that holds its authority through mendacity alone."<sup>3</sup> In a bid to diminish US power, Wikileaks engages in many of the same activities as a traditional nation-state spy agency, including the recruitment of spies; the collection, exploitation and analysis of secret

## A New Narrative

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information; and psychological operations, in support of its goals.

## I. Recruitment

Wikileaks recruits sources, known in the spy world as assets or agents, much like a nation-state intelligence service would. Unlike traditional intelligence services, Wikileaks does not have access to dossiers on diplomats it can wine and dine in hopes of turning them into spies. Instead, Wikileaks uses the internet to advertise its mission, making it easy for leakers to find them. Wikileaks operates based on digital walk-ins, similar to how

<https://twitter.com/wikileaks/status/841313583212429312>

Although the above tweet was framed as a joke, it was a recruitment pitch. A Whistleblower happens upon corruption, s/he does not go to work for an organization with plans to abscond with secret documents, under the assumption the organization is corrupt. A week later, on March 20, 2017, Wikileaks tweeted a more direct pitch to would be digital walk-ins.

<https://twitter.com/wikileaks/status/843618457874784256>

A person entering on duty at CIA with the goal of "exposing abuses" for Wikileaks would be the equivalent of a mole or penetration agent. The dictionary of espionage defines a mole or penetration agent as, "a person who's loyalty lies with the rival power but who joins another cause for duty purposes<sup>6</sup>." Wikileaks is trying to recruit people to penetrate the Intelligence Community with plans to steal classified information. Wikileaks calls it whistleblowing because that makes its operations more palatable to the public. Make no mistake, Wikileaks' goal is recruiting spies, specifically American spies, not Whistleblowers.

## II: Collection, exploitation and analysis of secret information

Like nation-state intelligence agencies, Wikileaks collects, exploits and analyzes the secret information it receives. If you visit [Wikileaks.org](http://Wikileaks.org), you will find commentary and analysis alongside the documents it publishes. Wikileaks' most explosive stories come from secret information about the US. Wikileaks maintains collection priorities, just as nation-state intelligence services do.

Although Wikileaks portrays itself as exposing corrupt and oppressive regimes worldwide, it is clear that collecting against the US national security apparatus is Wikileaks top priority. By Wikileaks' own account, the majority of its "greatest hits" over the past decade have been about the US. The list ends with the Democratic National Committee leak in 2016. One can conclude if the list were compiled today, [Vault 7](#) would make the top 10.

## A New Narrative

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Notwithstanding the similarities between Wikileaks and traditional intelligence agencies, Wikileaks appears to have no interest in hoarding secrets to advance its interests, at least not American secrets. Instead, Wikileaks places the secrets it obtains in the public domain, arguably doing more damage to national security than traditional spy agencies operating against the US. One could argue that Wikileaks is not actively collecting against the US, that Wikileaks publishes the information it receives, and the majority of leaked information just happens to come from the US. Is it believable that only the US national security community has a problem with leaks?

Is it believable that there are no leaks within Russian, Chinese or other intelligence services or that these services are not engaged in corrupt behavior? Clearly the answer to these questions is no; which raises the question, why is a majority of the information Wikileaks releases about the US?

Is it possible Wikileaks deliberately withholds information on some countries? Some have asserted Wikileaks is a front for Russian intelligence, that its releases advance Russian interests, but the publicly available evidence is inconclusive. Although the Intelligence Community has established that Russian intelligence distributed hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee to Wikileaks and other media outlets during the 2016 presidential election, there is no publicly available evidence suggesting Wikileaks obtained the Vault 7 or other US leaks from Russia<sup>7</sup>. What is clear is Wikileaks has an anti-American agenda and its collection priorities reflect this agenda.

### III. Psychological Operations

In addition to recruitment and collection, Wikileaks engages in a limited but effective form of psychological operations (PSYOP), mainly through propaganda, to shape public perception of its activities.

The purpose of propaganda is to convey an ideology to an audience with a related objective. Whether it is a government agency attempting to instill a massive wave of patriotism in a national audience to support a war effort, a terrorist network enlisting followers in a jihad, a military leader trying to frighten the enemy by exaggerating the strength of its army, a corporation pursuing a credible image to maintain its legitimacy among its clientele, or a company seeking to malign a rival to deter competition for its product, a careful and predetermined plan of prefabricated symbol manipulation is used to communicate an objective to an audience. The objective is to modify the attitudes, the behavior, or both of an audience<sup>8</sup>.

Wikileaks is active on social media with official and non-official accounts on websites such as Twitter and Reddit promoting its mission. Wikileaks never releases documents without comment, rather Wikileaks seeks to shape public opinion. Assange employs a vast network to accomplish his targeted propaganda goals. At an October 4, 2016 press conference in Berlin, Assange announced the formation of a "task force" to combat misinformation about Wikileaks. Assange

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explained, "We have engaged in a new project; to recruit people across the world to defend our publications." Assange's army will defend Wikileaks perspective, the goal is not objectivity.

Most recently Wikileaks engaged in a sustained propaganda based campaign to shape public views of its Vault 7 release of CIA's hacking arsenal. Vault 7 was portrayed as an out of control CIA operation with global reach, if one believed the hype, we were all under 24/7 surveillance. On Twitter, Wikileaks gave a blow by blow rundown of how CIA was invading the world's privacy, from plots to hack our cars in order to conduct undetectable assassinations to watching us through our Smart TVs. According to Wikileaks, nobody was safe from CIA. What was lost in the noise is while CIA's hacking is global, it is targeted. Vault 7 produced no evidence CIA was engaged in a worldwide mass-surveillance program. Wikileaks has continued to feed the public's fears, one of its featured tweets recently asked, "are your devices compromised by CIA?"

<https://twitter.com/wikileaks/status/843674135414935553>

There was little debate about the legality of CIA's operations or whether CIA's conduct was standard operating procedure for sophisticated intelligence services worldwide. Vault 7 was presented as a rogue program, unique to CIA, which had put the world in danger. While this debate benefited Assange's and Wikileaks' agenda, it did little to help the public. If CIA's cyber weapons are as dangerous as Wikileaks has characterized, should we not be concerned about other nations possessing similar weapons? The US is not the only country engaged in espionage and certainly other countries have developed cyber weapons as well. Indeed, who is to say China, Russia, or another country's intelligence services do not have more advanced cyber weapons than CIA? These questions rarely surfaced because Wikileaks has a robust and effective PSYOP capability.

Wikileaks PSYOP prowess can also be measured by one of its biggest coups, gaining the support of the President of the United States, Donald Trump. During the 2016 campaign, President Trump repeatedly praised the spy service, some memorable quotes include:

1. "Wikileaks is amazing" (10/11/2016)
2. "Wikileaks. I love Wikileaks" (10/10/2016)
3. "I'll tell you this Wikileaks stuff is unbelievable...you gotta read it." (10/12/2016)
4. "You hear this? Wikileaks. Big stuff but the press does not report it" (10/12/2016)
5. "The sad part is we don't talk about Wikileaks because it's incredible." (10/13/2016)
6. "Wikileaks came out with lots of really unbelievable things" (10/15/2016)
7. "We've learned so much from Wikileaks" (10/20/2016)
8. "We love Wikileaks. Wikileaks." (10/21/2016)

President Trump sided with Wikileaks over the Intelligence Community regarding Russian

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interference in the 2016 election, tweeting out Assange's assessment of who hacked the Democrat's accounts.

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/816620855958601730>

With the President's endorsement, Wikileaks has gained substantial support from Republicans. According to an Economist-YouGov poll, the majority of Republicans view the spy agency positively, a reversal from 2013, when Wikileaks had little support among the GOP<sup>9</sup>.

From a credulous public to the President of the United States, Wikileaks has successfully employed targeted propaganda to advance its goals.

## **IV. Conclusion**

When most people think of Wikileaks, spy agency is not what comes to mind, although that was the vision Julian Assange had when he founded Wikileaks in 2006. The time has come for the public to recognize Wikileaks for what it is: a spy agency masquerading as an organization that fights the corrupt and powerful. When Wikileaks obtains US secrets, anyone with an internet connection has

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access, from terrorists to hostile countries. No matter how Wikileaks frames its releases, its goal is to undermine US power. Former Secretary of State Henry Stimson was wrong when he said, “gentlemen don’t read each other’s mail.” While intelligence agencies should not be allowed to operate with impunity, it is important to recognize that secret intelligence is critical to the maintenance of democracy. Our way of life has been saved more than once by secret intelligence.

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## A New Narrative

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<http://lynnaewilliams.com>

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<http://lyннаewilliams.com>

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