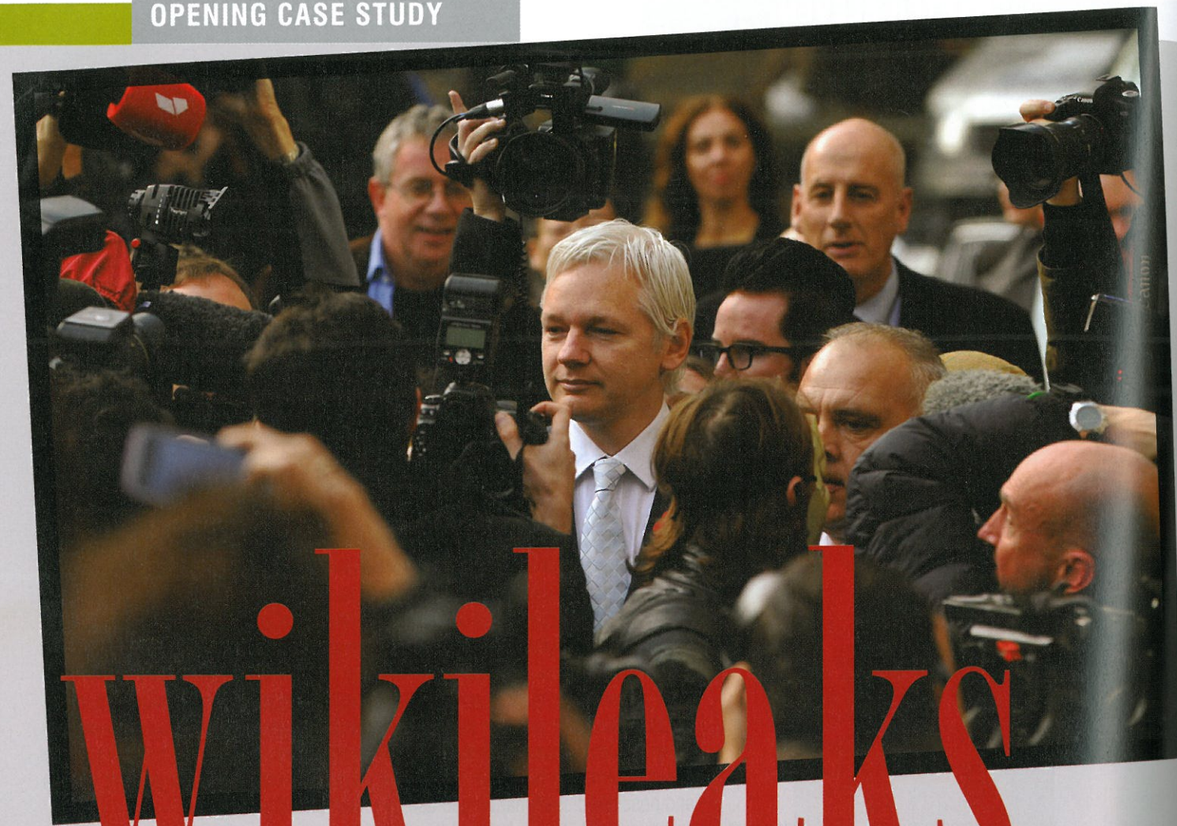

wikileaks

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Julian Assange is an Australian publisher, journalist, computer programmer and internet activist. He is the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, a whistleblowing website and conduit for worldwide news leaks, with the stated purpose of creating open governments. WikiLeaks publishes corporate, secret and classified information that has been anonymously submitted (this information is either submitted online or physically mailed to WikiLeaks).

The submitted information is assessed by WikiLeaks staff and volunteers before being published on the WikiLeaks website. The information being disclosed through this website is information that would not normally be available to the general public. Some key WikiLeaks disclosures include the following.

- During the global financial crisis, WikiLeaks disclosed financial information relating to banking organisations, in particular regarding the Icelandic and the UK banking systems.
- In March 2009, WikiLeaks disclosed material from the Australian Communications and Media Authority. This material included a list of internet sites to be banned under Australia's proposed laws on internet censorship.
- In July 2009, 92 000 reports relating to the war in Afghanistan were made available to the public via WikiLeaks.
- Since 2010, a total of 250 000 confidential US State Department diplomatic cable reports have been disclosed.[1]

WikiLeaks has faced criticism from both governments and intelligence organisations around the world, the main accusation being that it puts people's lives at risk by disclosing sensitive or secret information. For example, tensions have arisen as a result of WikiLeaks that create very tenuous ethical relationships between several parties. The leaked video footage of the 2007 Baghdad airstrike is perhaps the most polarising.

In this instance, footage depicting an attack on Iraqi civilians by the US military caused myriad ethical issues. Firstly, what was the position of the soldier who leaked the video? Where does he or she stand regarding issues of treason and patriotism? What does such leaked footage mean for the safety of US/allied troops in warzones? What do such leaks mean for freedom of the press? Has the public a right to know about such things, and is such a right neutralised by the fact that such information can compromise the safety of allied troops overseas?

To what extent should government be open? In this case, this video was not footage that the American government would have chosen to reveal. It shows the American troops making a grave and deadly mistake. Should the onus to make such decisions lie with the government rather than with internet activists?

Despite the criticisms, Assange and WikiLeaks have received a number of awards and nominations, including the 2009 Amnesty International Media Award for publishing material about extrajudicial killings in Kenya, and Readers' Choice for *TIME* magazine's 2010 Person of the Year. In February 2011, it was announced that Assange had been awarded a gold medal by the Sydney Peace Foundation of the University of Sydney for his 'exceptional courage and initiative in pursuit of human rights'.[2] There have been just four recipients of the award in the foundation's 14-year history: Nelson Mandela; the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso; Daisaku Ikeda; and Assange.

Has the public a right to know about such things, and is such a right neutralised by the fact that such information can compromise the safety of allied troops overseas?

reflect

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for Opening case study reflection