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**WIKILEAKS**

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**CONFIDENTIAL**

**DEBATING MATTERS  
TOPIC  
GUIDES**

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**MOTION:**

**“WIKILEAKS IS GOOD  
FOR DEMOCRACY”**

# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The Wikileaks debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Backgrounders**

**Organisations**

**In the news**

## KEY TERMS

[Afghanistan War Logs](#)

[Iraq War Logs](#)

[US Embassy Cables](#)

# INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

# NOTES

1  
1  
2  
4  
5  
5  
6

The leaking of 251,287 US Embassy Cables at the end of 2010 put Wikileaks firmly in the public eye. Launched in 2007, the controversial site was set up with the aim of publishing previously unseen information for the public. Since its inception the site has released countless disclosures from the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the BNP membership, to – perhaps most famously - 400,000 US military logs from Iraq and nearly 90,000 classified military records from Afghanistan [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Their decision to publish huge swathes of information has shaken up the political world and started a worldwide discussion around journalism. But the site has also divided opinion: are founder Julian Assange and his team making history, increasing accountability and improving the democratic process as a result [Ref: [Forbes](#)]? Or are they whistle blowing gossipers who are severely damaging diplomacy, journalism and democracy with their dangerous actions? Some have hailed Assange as a hero [Ref: [Democracy Now](#)], whilst others have condemned his actions; Sarah Palin even went so far as to say that Assange should be “pursued with the same urgency we pursue Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. At the centre of the debate are countless big questions: Do governments have the right to keep secrets, or should citizens resist being kept in the dark about the dealings of international and domestic affairs? Do leaks such as these serve to strengthen our democracy, or do they potentially weaken or even undermine it? And, connected to all of these questions, what is the role of a journalist, and how does this relate to the public interest and journalism’s relationship to democracy?



**WIKILEAKS:**  
“Wikileaks is good for democracy”



### Truth, transparency and democracy

At first glance, it might seem hard to argue that transparency is not a good idea. But does transparency per se deliver accountability and democracy? Critics of Wikileaks argue that, rather than enhancing democracy, all that they have really done is dump huge amounts of information - largely diplomatic tittle-tattle - onto the web; encouraging voyeurism and cynicism more than public debate about serious issues. For critics there is the world of difference between, for example, the targeted leak of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, for a clear political purpose, and the mindless mass leaking of information by Wikileaks today [Ref: [Big Issue Scotland](#)]. Others worry about the damage done to international diplomacy and argue that blowing the work of US security forces wide open undermines the work they are doing to protect people, and indeed democracy [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Supporters counter that transparency is vital if we are to ever call ourselves truly democratic. Elected politicians, directly accountable to the people, should be open about their plans, interests and failings or we can never make any truly informed opinions relating to them. Assange and his team have often made reference to the fact that they are exposing the 'truth', and many agree. They point to the killing of innocent civilians by US forces [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)], the abuse suffered by prisoners held by Iraqi security forces and ignored by the US [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and over 15,000 previously unlisted civilian deaths in Iraq, all exposed by Wikileaks and all helping to improve transparency and consequently democracy [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

### Exposing corruption or undermining true accountability?

One of the main aims of Wikileaks is to expose the wrongdoings of those in power. On their website, Wikileaks state that they are "fearless in [their] efforts to get the unvarnished truth out to the public" [Ref: [Wikileaks](#)]. Whilst some see this as a noble aim, others are not so forgiving arguing that professional life of any kind would be virtually impossible without confidential communication. Simply put, policies and proposals need to be formulated in private and traditionally journalists have generally considered private conversations to be no-go areas. From this point of view, supporters of Wikileaks fail to recognise that the erosion of a private sphere both incapacitates institutions and encourages greater opacity and dishonesty [Ref: [spiked](#)]. However, advocates of Wikileaks argue governments are guilty of terrible double standards: whilst they demand secrecy for themselves, they are all too happy to pry into the private lives of their citizens. They claim that our ability to hold power to account and to expose their wrongdoings is an integral part of a liberal society; as technological advances make this easier, we should be seeking to expose more injustices. With more exposures of their misdemeanours, the hope is that governments and companies will be forced to operate fairly and honestly [Ref: [Wired](#)]. Moreover, given the global dominance of the United States, supporters argue that Wikileaks assists people everywhere to 'challenge and hold it to account' [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

### The role of journalists

One key issue informing the debate about Wikileaks' contribution to democracy is the discussion around journalism.

## DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 6

NOTES

Central to the critics' argument is the role of investigative journalism and the need for journalists to pro-actively seek out the truth: agitating for information, asking awkward questions and sifting information and leads to ascertain what is important. Whilst some argue that Wikileaks are advancing this tradition on a great scale, exposing more corruption than ever before, and strengthening democratic accountability along the way, others believe that the site is undermining journalistic standards. By dumping huge amounts of raw material into the public square, Wikileaks compromises the vital role of journalists in weighing up facts and arguments [Ref: [Vanity Fair](#)]. This has led to criticism not just of Wikileaks but of newspapers such as the Guardian and the New York Times for publishing the documents. On the flip side, many feel that Wikileaks is revolutionising journalism. Assange has argued that Wikileaks enhances journalism because it allows people to judge for themselves whether a news story is true by clicking online to read the original document it is based on [Ref: [Australian](#)]. Alan Rushbridger, editor of the Guardian, has strongly defended the public interest served by Wikileaks and the high journalistic standards his newspaper applied to investigating and determining which cables to publish [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. The judges of the UK Press Awards cited the importance of Wikileaks, as 'an enormous story with reverberations around the world', when awarding the Newspaper of the Year Award to the Guardian in April 2011 [Ref: [Press Awards](#)]. Does Wikileaks' contribution to 'the fourth estate' enhance or degrade democratic accountability?

## ESSENTIAL READING

This house believes whistleblowers make the world a safer place: part 1

*New Statesman* 10 April 2011

Why Wikileaks changes everything

Christian Caryl *New York Review of Books* 15 December 2010

Wikileaks evolves

Raffi Khatchadourian *New Yorker* 1 December 2010

## FOR

What's new about WikiLeaks?

Julian Assange *New Statesman* 14 April 2011

Why WikiLeaks Is Good for America

Evan Hansen *Wired* 6 December 2010

WikiLeaks is holding US global power to account

Seumas Milne *Guardian* 1 December 2010

'Data journalism' scores a massive hit with Wikileaks revelations

Roy Greenslade *Guardian* 26 July 2010

## AGAINST

Wikileaks: recasting betrayal as a democratic virtue

Frank Furedi *spiked* 9 March 2011

WikiLeaks is delinquent and anti-democratic

Janet Daley *Telegraph* 11 December 2010

Misplaced muzzles

Richard Cohen *Washington Post* 7 December 2010

Who's to blame for damage from WikiLeaks?

Michael V. Hayden *CNN* 7 December 2010

## IN DEPTH

Good Manners in the Age of Wikileaks

Slavoj Žižek *London Review of Books* 20 January 2011

Why Journalists Aren't Standing Up for WikiLeaks

Ben Adler *Newsweek* 4 January 2011

Turn Yourself In, Julian Assange

Christopher Hitchens *Slate* 6 December 2010

Ooh-err...it's leaking all over the place

Sam Delaney and Brendan O'Neill *Big Issue Scotland* 6 December 2010

Leaked Cables Stir Resentment and Shrugs

Alan Cowell *New York Times* 3 December 2010

US embassy cables: The job of the media is not to protect the powerful from embarrassment

Simon Jenkins *Guardian* 28 November 2010

4 of 6

NOTES

## BACKGROUNDERS

5 of 6

NOTES

Alan Rusbridger WikiLeaks Interview: Editor Of The 'Guardian'  
On The Cables

*Huffington Post* 6 February 2011

The Man Who Spilled the Secrets

Sarah Ellison *Vanity Fair* February 2011

Transcript: The Assange interview

*BBC News* 21 December 2010

Julian Assange

Barton Gellman *Time* 15 December 2010

What is Wikileaks?

Jonathan Fildes *BBC News* 7 December 2010

Is WikiLeaks' Julian Assange a Hero?

*Democracy Now* 3 December 2010

Jay Rosen on Wikileaks: "The watchdog press died; we have this  
instead."

*Vimeo* December 2010

Wikileaks: this isn't journalism - it's voyeurism

Frank Furedi *spiked* 30 November 2010

An interview with Wikileaks' Julian Assange

Andy Greenberg *Forbes* 29 November 2010

How 250,000 US embassy cables were leaked

David Leigh *Guardian* 28 November 2010

WikiLeaks: The Back Story

*New York Times*

WikiLeaks: Security Threat or Media Savior?

*Fora.tv*

## ORGANISATIONS

Wikileaks



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"Wikileaks is good for democracy"



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## IN THE NEWS

New arrest over Anonymous' pro-WikiLeaks attacks  
*Telegraph* 15 April 2011

Assange praises Indian newspaper's use of WikiLeaks disclosures  
*Guardian* 13 April 2011

Press Awards 2011: Guardian wins Newspaper of the Year  
*Guardian* 6 April 2011

Ecuador expels US ambassador over Wikileaks cable  
*BBC News* 5 April 2011

I've got secret files on Murdoch as 'insurance', claims Assange  
*Independent* 13 January 2011

Republicans prioritise WikiLeaks investigation  
*Guardian* 3 January 2011

Wikileaks: Assange supporters rally at London court  
*BBC News* 14 December 2010

Poll: Americans say WikiLeaks harmed public interest; most want Assange arrested  
*Washington Post* 14 December 2010

Wikileaks defectors to launch Openleaks alternative  
*BBC News* 13 December 2010

Europeans Criticize Fierce U.S. Response to Leaks  
*New York Times* 6 December 2010

PayPal cuts Wikileaks access for donations  
*BBC News* 4 December 2010

WikiLeaks: Is it journalism?  
*CBC News* 3 December 2010

WikiLeaks website pulled by Amazon after US political pressure  
*Guardian* 2 December 2010

6 of 6

NOTES

US embassy cables culprit should be executed, says Mike Huckabee

*Guardian* 1 December 2010

Sarah Palin: hunt WikiLeaks founder like al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders

*Telegraph* 30 November 2010

Wikileaks founder leads race to be Time magazine's 'person of the year'

*Telegraph* 12 November 2010

Wikileaks: Release has exposed the terrifying reality of the Iraq War

*Guardian* 24 October 2010

Iraq war logs reveal 15,000 previously unlisted civilian deaths  
*Guardian* 22 October 2010

Wikileaks condemned by White House over war documents  
*Guardian* 26 July 2010

'Ha ha, I hit 'em': Top secret video showing U.S. helicopter pilots gunning down 12 civilians

*Daily Mail* 7 April 2010

Wikileaks publishes 570,000 messages capturing chaos of 9/11  
*Guardian* 25 November 2009

BNP membership list appears on Wikileaks  
*Guardian* 20 October 2009

Ministry of Defence blocks Wikileaks  
*Guardian* 25 June 2009

## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

First name

Surname

School/company/  
organisation

Professional role  
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone



**“TEENAGE CITIZENS  
THINKING DEEPLY  
ABOUT...SOCIAL  
ISSUES”**

**IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA**

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