

The empowerment of civil society by using technology media essay



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The use of Information technology over the years has become a means of political and social change resulting in the empowerment of civil society and also effecting public opinion through sharing information via internet blogging, informative websites, etc. It has also been very successful in exposing violations of human rights, civil liberties, corruption, and misuse of power by various international organisations and governments. One such website which has created an international uproar between officials of states and civil society is Wikileaks. In my essay I shall discuss the impact of information technology on civil society following which I shall discuss the positive and negative activist and legal effects Wikileaks has on civil society and states. I shall also discuss the effect of Information technology and Wikileaks on democracy, fundamental human rights, secrecy and transparency.

Over the years many people around the world have become increasingly aware of the expanding use of information technology, which has become a tool for social and political change globally. The use of internet all over the world has empowered civil society and many social activists to share information instantly with one another. Technologies such as internet websites, electronic mail, mobile phones, etc., have given more power to activists to communicate effectively with more people around the world than ever before. The internet increases access to publications, news stories, reports and gives opportunities to discover information that is normally suppressed (e. g. Wikileaks). The internet can be used as a medium or tool for whistle blowers and journalists to publish information concerning unethical behaviour of governments and corporations which can be difficult

to trace and censor. Due to the advancement of information technology and as a result the age of the internet, there is very little that is really 'secret' these days.[1] However the drawbacks to such information technology is that it is also misused for wrongful purposes, such as terrorism, sex-trafficking, cyber hacking, as well as spreading information which can be false or dangerous and as a result harmful to others etc. The internet has showed that it is a useful space in which citizens can debate, discuss or negotiate on many social, political and economic issues. Such discussion has a profound effect on public opinion around the world and encourages society towards a true democratic system. It is also an effective tool for civil rights organisations to communicate to people and to groups in different parts of the world through email, websites and forums. Moreover, due to the advancement of information technology civil activists can keep in touch with supporters and campaigners effectively and effortlessly.[2]

Wikileaks is a website which describes itself as an 'activist organisation' or in other words the 'intelligence agency of the people'.[3] Wikileaks is an international non-profit organisation that works for transparency and publishes submissions of private or secret, classified information from anonymous news sources, news leaks, and whistleblowers.[4] The website relies on Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".[5] The website works towards uncovering government, individual and corporate corruption through leaked sources and bringing it to

the attention of civil society. In 2006 Wikileaks won many awards from organizations such as Amnesty International and the Economist for exposing issues around the world.[6]The advancement of information technology allows the internet and so as to say Wikileaks the ability to receive and publish leaked information cheaply and quickly. In addition the website has the ability to bypass the legal framework that would otherwise have to go through courts and officials to consider before being disclosed.

Wikileaks has been successful in uncovering many illegal activities and corruption scandals starting from 2006 when it published information concerning assassination details of government officials by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, corruption by the family of the former Kenyan leader Daniel arap Moi, allegations of illegal activities at the Cayman Islands branch of the Swiss Bank Julius Baer and the revelation of involvement of politicians and businessmen in the 2008 Peru oil scandal.[7]Wikileaks has been successful in uncovering many human rights violations and civil liberties. Some of the most famous revelations that it uncovered were the documents regarding hidden war crimes or prisoner abuse. In March 2007 Wikileaks published a leaked manual of the US military for the Guantanamo prison camp. In July 2010, Wikileaks published the Afghan War diary, which was a compilation of more than 76, 900 documents concerning the war in Afghanistan. The documents stated the number of innocent deaths of civilians that had been covered up by the international forces. Also in October 2010 Wikileaks, along with some media organisations, released the Iraq War logs which included almost 400, 000 documents. The documents revealed evidence of torture and more than 109, 000 violent deaths between 2004 and 2009 including 66,

081 civilians. This was considered one of the biggest leaks in US military history.[8] In November 2010 Wikileaks started to publish US state department diplomatic cables. Many of these cables were labelled confidential, secret or top secret by the US state department. This further antagonised governments, more so than the leak of previous documents. The US government therefore suggested that the revelation of such documents put at risk lives of several of its people and allies around the world.[9]

A number of civil rights activists were divided over the actions taken by Wikileaks. Many activists supported Wikileaks and the importance of uncovering and exposing such documents which revealed and brought to the attention of the world violations of human rights, civil liberties, corruption, and misuse of power by various international organisations and governments. Activists believed that this would support and justify the idea of a fair, functional and democratic civil society. Many civil activists believed that such misuse of power to cover such violations needed to be addressed openly through legal means in order to protect citizens from arbitrary government authority.[10] In addition it can also be said that due to the popularity that Wikileaks has gained over the years, documents published on the website could also have an effect on potential political reform. Also documents published on the website could have either a positive or a negative effect on civil society including political or economic decisions made by states, as well as international relations and policy decisions. In such cases one can argue that information technology has been successful in uniting people all over the world by sharing knowledge, debating political

and economic issues, revealing human rights violations and civil liberties thereby bringing change to public opinion and encouraging a free transparent democratic society.

On the other hand several activists did not agree to the actions taken by Wikileaks particularly in the case of the ' Afghan War Diary'. They believed that the exposure of such documents led to the revelation of identities of many people who had collaborated with the coalition in Afghanistan, which endangered such people to further violence. Press freedom groups, many human rights groups including Amnesty International, accused Wikileaks of being ' irresponsible' for the publication of the afghan war logs.[11]The criticism of Wikileaks gave rise to the public opinion that it was doing more harm than good. Many argued that this would most probably increase internet surveillance, more secrecy and further restrictions. In addition it encouraged people to believe that the publication of classified secret government information would make it more difficult to support and protect people and sources after such information is disclosed. Furthermore, the consequences of publishing such documents on Wikileaks would result in the loss of protection of the sources mentioned within the documents and sources from where the information was retrieved. The outcome of such revelations could therefore lead to an extreme kind of transparency which would result in the loss of jobs, reputation or lives, etc., for such sources, which questions the fact of how this would positively support democracy and civil society. Therefore one can also argue that information technology can be used to leak confidential information which can result in stricter laws, regulation and increased internet surveillance.

Whilst Wikileaks brought to light many issues concerning corruption and violations of human rights and civil liberties through the publication of documents and diplomatic cables, this release of classified information angered governments throughout the world, especially the United States which was associated with many of the of leaks. As a result governments pressured many online companies to limit or block their association with Wikileaks. Amazon dropped Wikileaks from its servers, which temporarily caused Wikileaks to be inaccessible. Later, Swiss bank PostFinance froze the Director of Wikileaks website Julian Assange's assets, while PayPal, a money transfer website, disabled Wikileaks account which it used to collect donations. MasterCard and Visa also followed suit by refusing donations to Wikileaks.[12]Hence it can be argued that governments and corporations are also activists and use information technology to promote their own agenda for instance in the case of Wikileaks, clamping down on activities which they do not consent to or which are not beneficial to them economically or politically.

When financial services were denied to Wikileaks, a group of anonymous activists under the name of ' Anonymous' carried out decentralised attacks on many corporations websites such as MasterCard and Visa. Around the world thousands of online protesters got together to form a virtual internet attack under the name of ' Operation Payback.' Operation Payback used denial of service (DDoS) attacks to temporarily close down the websites which had opposed Wikileaks. This way such websites cannot handle the level of web traffic and are temporarily inaccessible to users around the world. DDoS attacks are internet piracy actions and not hacking but are

nevertheless illegal and traceable. It is believed that through such a system of online attacks, Wikileaks produced one of the first global internet civil-disobedience movements.[13] Thus one can say that internet activists can also use information technology to rebel and forcefully further their cause against individuals, corporations or the state through the internet.

While many online activists admit that the attack was illegal they disagree on it being malicious criminal hacking since they believe that they did not intend to bring any collateral damage to the public. Online activists believed this would raise awareness of internet censorship and protect freedom of expression. They argued that the internet should be free and not controlled by governments. Many of these activists believed that the grounds for stoppage of donations through corporations was more politically motivated than legally towards the Wikileaks website. On the other hand, these corporations argued that Wikileaks violated the companies terms of service concerning illegal behaviour. Furthermore activists pointed out that while many leading newspapers such as the New York Times and the Guardian, etc. also published parts of classified documents from Wikileaks, no action was taken against them.[14] The Wikileaks case therefore raises several questions on popular participation of civil society using the internet and information technology to disseminate information in an effort to voice their opinions and bring about social and political awareness to instigate changes in a society.

The Wikileaks saga has created many future legal concerns over the use of information technology and the internet in particular. There are concerns over increased forms of internet censorship and surveillance. The US has <https://assignbuster.com/the-empowerment-of-civil-society-by-using-technology-media-essay/>

introduced a bill called the Securing Human Intelligence and Enforcing Lawful Dissemination Act which is aimed at preventing websites such as Wikileaks publishing classified information which could result in the compromise of national security. The US is also in the process of introducing the wiretapping bill which is currently under discussion. The bill is aimed at wiretapping all kinds of online communication and internet traffic which includes foreign based service providers and will require software developers to enable peer-to-peer communication, redesign their service and allow interception.

[15]However many information technology advocates have argued that by implementing so many restrictions over the internet would create holes that could be exploited by hackers and undermine the right to freedom of speech.

The US furious over the leak of confidential diplomatic cables, tried to invoke the Espionage Act 1917 to prosecute the Wikileaks founder Julian Assange for the leak of classified government documents. Under the Act, it a crime to disclose classified information unlawfully however it does not state any distinction on who discloses such classified information. Activists have argued that this would be complicated since the founder is technically the publisher and not the one who revealed the classified information. The man who did reveal the classified information – Bradley Manning is currently being prosecuted for leaking the confidential government documents. Thus by arresting Julian Assange, or any of the leading newspapers that were involved, would further mean that any citizen who addresses or discusses classified information can be arrested on national security grounds.

[16]Assange being a foreign citizen he would have to be extradited to the US to stand trial for espionage (if a country is prepared to hand him over). The

US first amendment of the Constitution provides a lot of protection for publishers of state secrets, not including government officials. If the government is successful to get around the Constitution and charge Assange, it may end up damaging the press freedoms enjoyed by every publisher. It would result in Wikileaks paying the price for freedom of the press in the US and many parts of the world.[17] Many journalist activists have argued that to criminalise what Wikileaks is doing is to criminalise investigative journalism. They argue that the media is responsible to report material that comes within its possession and any pressure to shutdown Wikileaks or prosecute those who publish official leaks or companies that are doing business with it, is a threat to democracy, which relies on a free and fearless press.[18]

However criminalising Wikileaks will not be an easy task. Wikileaks has multiple servers in many jurisdictions with generous whistleblower-protection laws. These servers are all subject to the laws of the state, where they are each connected in. The laws in these states protect the safety of such information being passed on from the servers. Currently Wikileaks is protected by the laws of different jurisdictions to pass information freely, however it is unsure whether these laws will continue to favour Wikileaks in the future if there is any pressures from other states to change or limit them. [19] Critics argue that the legal impact of Wikileaks on information technology will create a borderless nature of the internet. They say that Wikileaks has encouraged the fact that the internet can also be used to undermine the relationship between legally significant (online) phenomena and physical location. That the increase in the use of computer network all

over the world is destroying the link between geographical location and (i) the authority of local government to assert control over internet behaviour (ii) the effects of internet behaviour on people or things (iii) the legality of the efforts of a local government to enforce rules applicable to worldwide phenomena; and (iv) the ability of geographical location to give notice of which sets of rules can apply. This could make online organisations or individuals absent themselves or even exploit legal or social norms of any country by the use of multiple servers, mirrors or other information technology tools.[20]

The legal impact of Wikileaks will have a negative effect on information technology. Due to much legislation in the pipeline in the US aiming to increase restrictions on the use of internet; censorship and blocking of websites would affect users, organizations and library associations around the world. The consequence of Wikileaks will be used as a case to support such new bills, surveillance practices and use of information technologies which extend capabilities of censorship and data surveillance, thereafter resulting in less transparency and freedom of speech.[21] If Wikileaks is shut down permanently then most probably a new Wikileaks will appear anytime in the future. Information security is never a single security measure since it is always more of them together meaning the measures are not only information technology related, but also involve organizational issues, human resources management, physical security and legal protection. The problem with information technology and the internet is that it is advancing day by day. The internet has the power for information to be quickly copied, duplicated, published and spread around the world. If Wikileaks is closed

down, then new websites similar to Wikileaks will spring up or new technological ways to publish information will spring up. In other words, the threat of leaking information to the public is constantly increasing. Therefore making it harder and harder to regulate and waiting for new legislation /laws for trying to curb it. It is very difficult to draft a law that targets Wikileaks and websites alike at the same time also leaving intact many legal systems concerning press freedoms.[22]

Information technology has become a tool for social and political change worldwide. The use of internet has globally empowered civil society and many social activists to share information instantly with one another thereby effecting public opinion around the world and encourage society towards a true democratic system. Wikileaks has been successful in exposing violations of human rights, civil liberties, corruption, and misuse of power by various international organisations and governments. On the whole I believe that citizens of a functioning democracy should be able to know what the state is saying and doing in their name and not engaging in acts of counter-democracy.[23]Information technology such as Wikileaks plainly improves those abilities. However I also believe that there should be equilibrium, where democracy and fundamental rights are not undermined by too much secrecy or too much transparency. The right to publish should be equal to the citizen's right to know. Nevertheless a balance should be kept for the need of personal privacy, confidentiality and disclosure in the interest of the public at the same time guaranteeing liberty, accountability and true democratic choice.

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