

Why Julian Assange is in the vanguard of global press freedom

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Assange understood the changing nature of how information is created in large quantities continuously by the government, stored and transmitted.

On September 8, we celebrated International World Journalists' Day as a reminder that the role of journalists is to speak truth to power. Not to manufacture consent - to use Chomsky's famous words - for the government and ruling classes.

It was an occasion to remember three people who exemplify the need for truth-telling: Daniel Ellsberg of the Pentagon Papers; Julian Assange of WikiLeaks; and Chelsea Manning, without whom we would have no evidence of what the United States was doing, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but around the world. I would also like to address the changing nature of government "secrets": what it meant to bring them out and what it means to bring them out now.

Today, just as the government's power to snoop into our lives and activities has increased exponentially (e.g., NSA's Prism and NSO's Pegasus) so has the scale of the leaks. Ellsberg's Pentagon Papers were a mere 7,000 pages, and he photocopied them by hand (Daniel Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*). The Chelsea Manning "papers" that Assange released, earning the enmity of the U.S. government, consisted of some 750,000 documents (Iraq war records, Afghanistan war records, and U.S. diplomatic cables). Manning used his computer to copy this huge cache of data. Ellsberg had one of the highest security clearances in the U.S. government. Snowden, a systems administrator, supposedly "exfiltrated" more than a million NSA documents.

Manning occupied a lower rung on the military ladder and was a mere corporal. Assange had identified a key feature of our age: the digital revolution means the enormous centralization of information and also the ease with which it can be disseminated. At a conference in 1984, the author Stewart Brand, in a conversation with Steve Wozniak, the co-founder of Apple, had brought this duality of information in the digital age: the centralization of information as it is so valuable to the rulers. And also the ease of duplicating it and thus freeing it from the rulers. That is why Assange created WikiLeaks. The people, who had access to this valuable information stored in "secure" government vaults, could use WikiLeaks to reach the people. Both use the power of digital technologies and their ability to produce copies, but for completely different purposes.

In 1971, just over 50 years ago, Daniel Ellsberg leaked a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense - the Pentagon Papers - on the Vietnam War to the New York Times and, subsequently, to many other news organizations. The anti-Vietnam War movement, which had then exploded in the United States, with cascading effects around the world for my generation, had turned Ellsberg into a radical. Just as it had done to many of us around the world who demonstrated against the United States and its war. The Vietnam War had discredited the American empire and produced a radical generation, of which Daniel Ellsberg was a proud member.

The Pentagon Papers laid out in detail why the Vietnam War was already a lost cause and why the Vietnamese people would defeat the neocolonial puppet government of Ngo Dinh Diem (backed by the United States in South Vietnam). Although it was concluded in 1968 that the US could not win, the US had moved from a ground and air war against the Vietnamese liberation forces in South Vietnam to the aerial bombardment of North Vietnam and Cambodia as well. Ellsberg believed that if the American public knew the truth about the Vietnam War, it would help stop it. That is why he and a former colleague, Anthony Russo, shared the Pentagon papers with the press. The American people, he believed, had a right to know about the war being waged in their name.

The release of the Pentagon Papers helped the anti-war movement, but it did not stop the war. It took another four years - April 1975 - for Vietnamese fighters to liberate Saigon. The images of U.S. forces leaving in ignominy, clinging to helicopters as they took off from the roof of the U.S. Embassy, are similar to what we saw recently in Kabul.

By the time we got to the Iraq war, the world of information had changed. Information was no longer on paper. Copies were not on paper either. The digitization of information meant that huge amounts could be

collected, stored and used in real time for the purposes of warfare: both its physical-kinetic variety and also information warfare. The full might of the United States, its technological power and its monetary power could be used to build not only the U.S. war machine, but also what we now call the surveillance state. Not only its invasion of every aspect of our lives, but also the creation of new invisible hands of the Ministry of Truth. This is information warfare of a different kind from the days when Ellsberg photocopied the Pentagon Papers.

This is the world Assange saw and understood. If Ellsberg understood the world of power, Assange understood the changing nature of how information is created in vast quantities continuously by the government, stored and transmitted. The very nature of the technology that allows this almost costless duplication of information and its flows also makes it vulnerable to being shared and made available to the public.

Let's look at some figures. In Ellsberg's time, there were perhaps a few hundred, maybe a maximum of 1,000, who had access to the Pentagon papers and could have photocopied them by hand as he did. He had a security clearance level of GS-18, a civilian equivalent to a clearance level between major general and lieutenant general in the Army. Chelsea Manning was a "specialist," the equivalent rank of a corporal in the U.S. military. It is the nature of the change in technology that made it possible for a specialist with the rank of corporal to strike a deadly blow in the U.S. war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Technology specialists are needed to run the gears of the global information infrastructure. They may have "low" ranks, but by virtue of being closer to the information in these vast military and diplomatic networks maintained by governments, they have full access. And the computer, as a copying device, is a much more powerful device for copying information. And finally, the disks on which we copy data today, including our humble USB stick, can store hundreds of thousands of pages!

It was Assange and WikiLeaks that made it possible for Manning's information to reach people around the world. And even when he and Manning have been arrested, imprisoned and isolated, WikiLeaks information is still accessible to all of us. Even today. The Baghdad video of Collateral Murder, released on WikiLeaks, was seen around the world and brought home that the U.S. was lying and engaged in a massive cover-up of its war crimes. The WikiLeaks diplomatic cables informed the Tunisian people about the kleptocratic regime of the Ben Ali family and started what was later called the Arab Spring.

The battle of the Chagos Islanders at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), illegally expelled by the UK and the US to establish the US naval base at Diego Garcia, was based in part on Wikileaks documents. This is only a very small fraction of the information that is now available to activists, and cannot be erased from either the Internet or our memory. Just as the surveillance state has invaded every corner of our lives, the surveillance state's pathological need to access and store all this information also makes the state porous and vulnerable.

The latest example of this vulnerability is that a 21-year-old Air National Guardsman, Jack Teixeira, had access to top secret Pentagon and CIA documents on Ukraine. He shared these documents on a private Discord game server, not for the noble purpose of stopping the war, but simply to show off. Whether this was the only leak, whether others are also leaking documents to create a fog of war, whether it is a mix of leaks or whether they are also plants is another story. What is important to this story is that Airman Teixeira, despite being near the bottom of the echelon in the U.S. Air Force, has access to top secret documents normally seen by the top brass of the U.S. military and intelligence authorities. She was part of a team that managed the central network and was one of 1.5 million people who had this level of access.

Yes, today we find ourselves in a surveillance state panopticon where our rulers can look into every part of our lives. But what Manning and Teixeira show us is that the same technology that allows them to look at what we do also works in reverse. As long as we have Assange, Ellsberg, Manning and others, they too will be visible to us. As the English poet Shelly wrote in 1819 after the Peterloo massacre, "You are many, they are few." This has not changed in the digital age either.

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