

# THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHISTLE-BLOWING AND DATA-DUMPING

dumping is made possible by modern technology where vast reams of information can be copied onto a thumb-drive. In reality, this is what WikiLeaks specialises in: data-dumping, not whistle blowing. The difference is best illustrated by the fact that until WikiLeaks sought out “media partners” (the UK’s *The Guardian* and Germany’s *Der Spiegel*, in particular)

much of the information they’d dumped on their site went unnoticed.

Ironically, despite its best intentions, any site engaging in this activity is fooling itself if it thinks it is providing the tools to bring down tyrants. It is democracies – where data exchange is less paranoically guarded and where journalists and whistleblowers do not simply disappear and where personal data technology is more ubiquitous – that are most prone to having state and corporate secrets leaked. This is why China, North Korea, Iran and Saudi Arabia have not been rocked by major WikiLeaks scandals and why few, if any, whistleblowers have come forth. Tyrants remain in power because, well, they’re tyrants. Revelations laid bare in WikiLeaks, some say, prompted the so-called Arab Spring. But where did that actually go? A civil war in Lybia, Islamists, not democrats, poised for a take-over in Egypt and thousands dead on the street of Syria as the regime does what regimes untroubled by internet-led scandals do. The sword is mightier than the byte after all.

No, the whistleblowers have chiefly been from the North America and Western Europe – places that already have a robust press and human rights watchdogs. This observation alone leads one to ask whether it all isn’t a form of personal narcissism both for the leakers and the facilitators like Assange. Certainly his sexual antics and the bizarre conspiracies he’s constructed to avoid answering criticism for them point one to this conclusion.

It really wasn’t about a wild “information wants to be free” ethos all along. No, it wasn’t long before Assange fell out with *The Guardian*. Bizarrely, according to *The Huffington Post*, Assange threatened to sue *The Guardian* for releasing some of the leaked

information without his permission “arguing that he owned the information and had a financial interest in how and when it was released”. This is an extraordinary position for a free-information crusader to take; but an unsurprising one for a narcissist and self-publicist.

It was a mistake for the mainstream media to get into bed with a data maverick in the first place. For some editors, reading private diplomatic correspondence and classified military documents must have been a similar thrill to the one their tabloid colleagues got from listening to celebrity voicemail. But the honeymoon is over and the established print and broadcast media needs to take stock and get back to what they should have been doing all along: serious investigative journalism and maintaining the trust of the public, and the respect of democratic governments and the anxiety of tyrants.

Information needs to be mediated by experienced – and above all – ethical, agents, not internet cowboys. That is why, after all, we’re called the media and must make our case to the public.



**T**he editor of the satirical magazine *Private Eye* – which specialises in exposing the myriad hypocrisies of the political establishment and the media – received a curious phone call from Julian Assange, the founder of the website WikiLeaks. Assange snapped that a critical piece on WikiLeaks in the magazine was “crap”. Asked what was “crap” about it, the WikiLeaks czar slurred that he “hadn’t read it”.

In full rant mode, Assange went on to claim that there was “an international conspiracy” against WikiLeaks led by the (British) *Guardian* newspaper and – that old canard – “Jews”. What had upset Assange was the fact that *Private Eye* – following the lead of political bloggers – had exposed Wikileaks’s involvement with a shadowy figure of the European far-right known as Israel Shamir.

This somewhat deranged haranguing of *Private Eye*’s editor must prompt questions about the good sense of hailing secretive and unaccountable internet-based initiatives as mediators of important information. Journalists should stop and think about how this undermines the role of the press in society as the most suitable watchdog against power and corruption. Editors of respectable newspapers are able to tell the difference between “the public interest” and what “the public is interested in”. Internet mavericks tend not to know the difference, nor care to. Certainly in Wikileaks’s case, the failure to competently redact put innocent people in danger. A whistleblower with specific information would be better advised to go to a reputable newspaper; one driven by a sense of newsworthiness, not sensation for the sake of sensation.

But this really is the trouble. Bradley Manning – one of Wikileaks’s most notable so-called whistleblowers – was nothing of the sort. Manning had no specific issue to blow the whistle on. What he did was data-dump – a sort of digital tantrum. Data-