

The Post-Cablegate Era

By Ron Deibert

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The venomous furor surrounding WikiLeaks, including charges of “terrorism” and calls for the assassination of Julian Assange, has to rank as one of the biggest temper tantrums in recent years. Granted, it must be frustrating for U.S. government officials and others to see thousands of secret cables splashed across the globe. But stamping feet and lashing out at Assange is simply misdirected anger.

When Assange said that from now on geopolitics would be divided into pre- and post-Cablegate eras, he hit upon something important, but missed the bull's-eye by overestimating his own organization's impact on history. We have indeed entered a new era, but not because of WikiLeaks, which is only a symptom of a much larger trend.

As we discovered in our Tracking Ghostnet and Shadows in the Clouds reports, the means to engage in cyber espionage have expanded dramatically because of the shift to networked infrastructures and social networking habits. With Ghostnet, the confidential information of dozens of ministries of foreign affairs, embassies, international organizations and private firms was pilfered by the use of a free (and open source) Trojan horse. In the Shadows in the Clouds case, a likely single attacker vacuumed minutes of the Indian National Security Council secretariat as efficiently as making photocopies during the meeting itself. Cyberspace has brought us the world of do-it-yourself signals intelligence.

Many lament the loss of individual privacy as we leave digital traces that are then harvested and collated by large organizations with ever-increasing precision. But if individuals are subject to this new ecosystem, what would make anyone think governments or organizations are immune? Blaming WikiLeaks for this state of affairs is like blaming a tremor for tectonic plate shifts.

Certainly a portion of that anger could be mitigated by the conduct of WikiLeaks itself. The cult of personality around Assange, his photoshopped image now pasted across the WikiLeaks Web site, only plays into this animosity. So do vigilante cyberattacks carried out by supporters of WikiLeaks that contribute to a climate of lawlessness and vengeance seeking. If everyone can blast Web sites and services with which they disagree into oblivion -- be it WikiLeaks or MasterCard -- a total information war will ensue to the detriment of the public sphere.

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An organization like WikiLeaks should professionalize and depersonalize itself as much as possible. It should hold itself to the highest possible ethical standards. It should act with the utmost discretion in releasing into the public domain otherwise classified information that comes its way only on the basis of an obvious transgression of law or morality. This has not happened. The latest batch of China cables, for example, shows no evidence of any wrongdoing on the part of the State Department, but they might unintentionally reveal the identities of Chinese dissidents who shared their views with U.S. officials.

WikiLeaks is only a symptom of a much larger phenomenon to which governments, businesses and individuals will all have to get accustomed. Our lives have been turned inside out by a digital world of our own spinning. We will need new rules, norms and principles to adjust to this new environment. Meanwhile, some timeless legal and ethical principles should always apply.