

## LEAKS AND LIBRARIES: A SOUL MATCH?

*Do librarians love Wikileaks? Derek Whitehead, Director, Information Resources and University Copyright Officer at Swinburne University of Technology says we should. Here, he tells us why.*

As a copyright professional, I have been a WikiLeaks user quite often over the past two or three years. We have used it to find out about the details of the secret Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) negotiations, in which Australia participated. They weren't secret of course - powerful lobbyists have not only known what is being discussed, but also were attempting to dictate the outcomes.

Wikileaks was invaluable as we tried to follow a process of great interest and relevance, but hidden from us by our governments. From WikiLeaks we were able to obtain the text of drafts, as well as meeting agendas and other documents; they informed our comments to government throughout the negotiation process. It was so useful that in the end the participants in the negotiations reluctantly agreed to make the text public.

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But WikiLeaks is much more important than that. "To oppose WikiLeaks is to oppose freedom of the press and, more critically, free speech," said Chris Berg, a researcher at what is often called a 'conservative think tank', Australia's Centre for Independent Studies.

"Leaks are one of the best techniques we have to peek behind the curtain of government," he said. The fact that government doesn't like us knowing what it wishes to keep secret makes it all the more important.

Librarians should love Wikileaks. The 'corest' core value of our profession is "promotion of the free flow of information and ideas through open access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works". This is just what Wikileaks does.

Of course, most people (though not everyone) agree that although we are committed to the free flow of information, not everything should flow so freely. Wikileaks adopts that stance too. They do not make public everything they are given, but examine it clearly, make judgements, and exclude some things. Browse the Wikileaks site for their rationale - there are many temporary sites and also a list of the many Wikileaks mirrors readily available.

Is our support for Wikileaks isolated? Certainly not. Most Australians are onside on this issue, not to mention the entire Australian media who, through the Walkley Foundation, jointly sent a letter on behalf of newspaper editors, television and radio directors and online media editors to the Prime Minister to say so.

Wikileaks is widely seen as a valuable corrective to too much government control over information. As Chris Berg says, "The last thing we want is our media to be deferential or subservient to the interests of the state".

In fact, Australians couldn't have a clearer view on the matter. According to the Melbourne Age, 59% of us "support Wikileaks action in making the cables public and 25% oppose it." Only 19% believe that Julian Assange should be prosecuted.

In fact the issue is not Julian Assange, but openness and access to information. As librarians that is exactly what we are about, which is why the American Library Association has recently published An Open Letter to U.S. Government Officials Regarding Free Expression in the Wake of the Wikileaks Controversy, providing clear support for Wikileaks.

Former Chief Justice Sir Anthony Mason once set out a clear principle that we should be supporting too. In 1980 (when he was Mr Justice Mason) he rejected a bid by the Commonwealth Government to block publication of leaked information. At the time he said, "it is unacceptable in our democratic society that there should be restraint on the publication of information relating to government when the only vice of that information is that it enables the public to discuss, review and criticise government action".

Governments claim that the material lately released by Wikileaks creates harm, but they have provided no evidence of this. Wikileaks responds that the material they release is carefully scrutinised, and in most cases released first to the mainstream press.

The response to Wikileaks by governments has been bizarrely aggressive. The might of the US government has been brought to bear on their internet sites, domain names, payment arrangements and all of the apparatus which enables the flow of information across the open web. This has taken place in the absence of any legal indictment or even evidence of infringement or harm by the organisation.

Discussions about Wikileaks have become muddled by irrelevant issues. One is the personality of Julian Assange, another is recent outpouring of American patriotism, and a third is nitpicking over what is or what may possibly be illegal. But there is one core issue which should not be in dispute for us - we need leakers and whistleblowers if we are to be fully informed citizens in a democratic society.

Derek Whitehead



### MORE INFORMATION

- ALIA's core values: [www.alia.org.au/policies/core.values.html](http://www.alia.org.au/policies/core.values.html)
- Wikileaks rationale and mirror sites: [213.251.145.96/About.html](http://213.251.145.96/About.html) and [wikileaks.info](http://wikileaks.info)
- Open letter from the Australian media: [www.walkleys.com/news/1076/](http://www.walkleys.com/news/1076/)

We farewell our Library Provocateur and thank him/her for much food for thought. *On The Edge* is now *OPINION*. Each month, *OPINION* features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.