

# WikiLeaks

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*Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection, 2010*

In 2010, WikiLeaks went from being a relatively obscure Web site to one of the most infamous and controversial sources of information in the world. The site makes sensitive and classified information available to the public, with a focus on documents that expose actions the site administrators view as criminal or unethical. The material available on WikiLeaks is donated by anonymous individuals, and site staffers take great pains to ensure that those who leak the documents remain anonymous for their own protection. With its massive release of confidential reports on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, WikiLeaks has become recognized as one of the world's leading sources of leaked information. It has also been called a terrorist organization, and has been targeted by numerous politicians, governments, and corporations in an attempt to shut it down.

## An Attack on Secrecy

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WikiLeaks was founded by Julian Assange (1971—), an Australian with a long history as a computer hacker. Early in his career, even as he illegally gained access to information in corporate and military computers, he was known for his strong convictions against corporate and government secrecy and for his condemnation of destructive hacking. WikiLeaks' servers are based in Sweden, but volunteers working for the organization come from a number of countries. Assange himself moves offices frequently for his own security: since many of the documents featured on the site reveal political, military, and corporate secrets, Assange believes he might be a target of violent reprisals.

WikiLeaks readers are free to view primary documents and arrive at their own conclusions based on the information presented. However, Assange and other editors do provide their own commentary on documents in order to help readers understand jargon, technical information, and historical context. WikiLeaks sometimes provides leading news organizations with leaked documents weeks in advance of their release on WikiLeaks, to allow journalists a chance to perform research and identify significant pieces of information. The site claims to have no official political agenda beyond the "anti-secrecy" philosophy of its founder, and WikiLeaks' anonymous contributors have exposed targets across the political spectrum.

## Secrets from the Iraq and Afghan Wars

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WikiLeaks gained international attention in April 2010 when it released video footage of a controversial incident in the Iraq War. On July 12, 2007, two journalists from the news agency Reuters and an unknown number of Iraqi civilians were killed when two U.S. Apache helicopters fired on a group of suspected insurgents in the district of New Baghdad, and subsequently destroyed a nearby building with missile strikes. In early 2010, WikiLeaks received an encrypted copy of video footage of the incident taken from a camera on one of the Apache helicopters. The video showed that U.S. soldiers mistakenly identified a wounded journalist and unarmed civilians as enemy combatants and shot them.

In July 2010, WikiLeaks posted a collection of more than ninety-one thousand documents related to the U.S. military conflict in Afghanistan. The collection, called Afghan War Diary (or AWD), features classified reports related to various missions and actions in the region. The AWD documents contain details on civilian casualties and so-called "friendly fire" incidents (in which military personnel accidentally fire on their own people). They also revealed candid assessments of Afghan and Pakistani leaders.

In October 2010, WikiLeaks released four hundred thousand classified U.S. documents related to the war in Iraq. It is considered the largest leak of classified material in United States history. The leaked documents held few surprises, but the details made headlines. Some reports covered several cases of abuse and torture of Iraqi detainees by Iraqi security forces. The leaked documents also revealed that the United States government had been tracking civilian casualties, though officials had publicly denied keeping count.

## More Secrets, and Backlash

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On November 28th, 2010 tens of thousands of sensitive State Department cables and other documents were published by a handful of news providers to whom WikiLeaks gave an advance look at the documents. Many of the documents contained candid and unflattering assessments of world leaders made by U.S. diplomats. Other revelations in the documents were embarrassing but unsurprising. For example, a leaked document reveals that Yemeni officials agreed to cover up the fact that the U.S. military has made multiple strikes on terrorist targets in Yemen by claiming responsibility for the strikes themselves.

As the State Department leaks went public, the WikiLeaks site itself was brought down by a sustained distributed denial-of-service cyberattack. A hacker or group of hackers calling themselves “the Jester” claimed responsibility for the attack, and said they were targeting WikiLeaks for endangering U.S. troops. The site was functioning again within a day, but was knocked out again by “the Jester” on December 2nd. Julian Assange blamed the U.S. government for the attacks.

In the wake of the diplomatic documents leak, several major corporations cut ties with WikiLeaks, including Amazon and Paypal. MasterCard and Visa also stopped allowing payments to WikiLeaks, effectively cutting off funding for the site from donors. The French Industry Minister attempted to block WikiLeaks from operating in France, where some servers used by the site were located. On December 9, 2010 the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, expressed concern that Assange’s right to free expression was being violated through an effort to shut down WikiLeaks’ servers and cut off the site’s legitimate avenues of funding. WikiLeaks supporters, meanwhile, launched cyberattacks of their own on organizations they view as hostile to WikiLeaks, such as Amazon and Paypal.

Also on December 9th, Assange surrendered to British authorities carrying out a Swedish arrest warrant. Two Swedish women accused Assange of sexual misconduct; he was wanted for questioning in Sweden in connection with the case. Assange has repeatedly denied the accusations, claiming that they are part of a smear campaign against him and his site.

## Criticism and Praise

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The main criticism of WikiLeaks is that the site reveals information that damages the ability of nations to protect their own interests as well as their citizens. Some, including Homeland Security Committee chairman Peter King, have gone so far as to accuse WikiLeaks of being a terrorist organization, stating that it engages in or encourages acts of espionage. One conservative Canadian political advisor even publicly called for Assange to be assassinated in November 2010. Countries condemning WikiLeaks range from Iran and China, both known for a history of censorship, to nations famous for free-speech protection such as the United States and France.

Some organizations that applaud the site’s efforts to expose corruption and human rights violations remain critical of its editorial oversight. Amnesty International, for example, was among those that condemned WikiLeaks in 2010 for releasing the names of Afghans who worked as informants for the U.S. military. Assange

has maintained in interviews that he does not know of a single case where information published on WikiLeaks was responsible for an individual being harmed. Referring to the diplomatic cables leak in November 2010, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called the matter embarrassing, but dismissed criticisms that the leak had seriously damaged American foreign policy efforts.

Supporters of WikiLeaks and Assange, much like their critics, often make for strange bedfellows. Republican Congressman Ron Paul and famously liberal filmmaker Michael Moore both support the site and its creator, as do Russian president Dmitry Medvedev and political activist Noam Chomsky. A Facebook page created for the site has earned more than one million fans, and in December 2010, Assange was the overwhelming winner in *Time* magazine's Reader's Choice for Person of the Year.

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