

# Afghan leak: Wikileaks Julian Assange tells all

By Channel 4 News

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**It is one of the biggest security breaches in US military history. As 200,000 secret US military documents go public, Channel 4 News speaks exclusively to founder of Wikileaks Julian Assange about the Afghan war logs.**

**In his own words Julian Assange explains how Wikileaks works and why he decided it was right to leak classified details about the war in Afghanistan.**

## What is [Wikileaks](#)?

It's an international public service that claims it helps whistleblowers or journalists get suppressed information out to the public - and do it safely.

## How did it come about?

A network of human rights activists, technical people and journalists were sick of being censored themselves and also having primary source material that they couldn't publish in their newspaper or online for legal reasons or space constraints.

## How does it work? Where is it based?

Physically Wikileaks does two things - it gets these disclosures from whistleblowers or journalists who can't get their material into the press - and then it also publishes this material and keeps it up in the face of political or legal attack.

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So in the first part that's a matter of protecting the source and there is some sophisticated infrastructure to do that, bouncing our submissions around the world in an encrypted way to lose the trail of surveillance activities and also to pass that information through protective legal jurisdictions like Sweden or Belgium, which have legislation to ensure communications between a journalist and a source are protected.

Then in the second part, the publishing aspect, we have other laws in different jurisdictions that protect the rights of people to communicate in public in different ways. So we have infrastructure situated in New York, Sweden, Iceland to take advantage of that protection.

## Parallels with the 'Pentagon Papers'

The documents have drawn parallels with another major military leak, when in 1971 top secret papers about America's political and military involvement in Vietnam were brought to light in the [New York Times](#).

The study, officially titled United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, became known as the "Pentagon Papers" ([see full text](#)) and detailed the ultimately doomed involvement of the US in the conflict.

Julian Assange, Wikileaks editor, told **Channel 4 News** this new data leak is even more significant.

He said: "There doesn't seem to be an equivalent disclosure made during the course of the war when it might have some effect. The nearest equivalent is perhaps the Pentagon Papers released by Daniel Ellsberg in the 1970s which was about 10,000 papers - but that was already four years old when it was released."

### **What's different about Wikileaks?**

The key difference is that we have a stated commitment to a particular kind of process and objective, and that commitment is to get censored material out and never to take it down. That commitment has driven our technical and legal process and has resulted in sources understanding that we are the most trusted organisation to give material to and we always fight attempted censorship and have always won.

That kind of moral clarity of our position has got us a lot of support - from sources wanting to give us material and from journalists and free press advocates who know that we should be supported because we're the vanguard of an ideal which is that justice comes about as a result of the disclosure of abuse.

### **Is the world different because of Wikileaks?**

Yes it's definitely different in places - but it's too early to say the whole world is different. But we are creating a space behind us for other media and publishing organisations to operate in a safer way and that, I think, will have long term consequences.

We've seen legislative consequences as a result, we've seen changes in governance, ministers being fired and so on. Clear cut outcomes. Other outcomes are more diffuse - for example, how a population feels about the progress of a war. This is something that's not easy to measure. Does it result in concrete policy changes? We know it does, but it's hard to correlate.

### **What have you done now?**

[We have released 91,000 reports about Afghanistan from the US military.](#) It covers 2004-2010 in minute detail. They cover all US military operations, with the exclusion of some special forces operations and the CIA. It covers each civilian kill, each military kill, when and where it happened. It is the most comprehensive history of a war ever to be published during the course of the war.

### **And how significant is that?**

There doesn't seem to be an equivalent disclosure made during the course of the war when it might have some effect. The nearest equivalent is perhaps the Pentagon Papers released by Daniel Ellsberg in the 1970s, which was about 10,000 papers - but that was already four years old when it was released.

### **How many pages are in your report?**

About 200,000 pages in this material. The Pentagon Papers was about 10,000 pages.

### **What can you tell us about the source?**

We know from looking at this material, correlating it with public records and talking to military

sources that this material is true and accurate. As to the specific source, obviously we can't comment.

**There's been publicity about Bradley Manning, a military officer, who claims to be a source for Wikileaks. What can you say about him?**

We have a number of military sources, including ones before Manning joined the army.

**Do you know who the source is?**

No, we don't know who the source is.

**So how does Wikileaks work?**

So other journalists try to verify sources. We don't do that, we verify documents. We don't care where it came from - but we can guess that it probably came from somewhere in the US military or the US government, from someone who is disaffected. Clearly, a heroic act by the whistleblower.

**So the same computer system that protects the source also stops you from knowing that source?**

The system we have deployed to make whistleblowers to us untraceable, also prevents us knowing who they are.

**Whoever it is, the US military will regard him as a traitor.**

Well, we can't speak for the decision of the US military in this case, but it's clear there are a number of people in the US military who have a view that abuses should not occur in war, and we have a number of sources revealing these abuses everyday. It's one of the optimistic things in the course of this war that there is dissent and that there are well intentioned people in the US military.

**So is Wikileaks taking a stand - are you anti war?**

We have a stand about justice and we believe that the way to justice is transparency and we are clear that the end goal is to expose injustices in the world and try to rectify them. Obviously death is a type of injustice, and death during war, especially civilians, is an unjust war. We try to expose them to bring about reform. We don't have a view about whether the war should continue or stop - we do have a view that it should be prosecuted as humanely as possible.

**What do you want to accomplish by putting them out in the open?**

It's important to understand that these records are seven months old, so they do not speak about any immediate ongoing operation - rather they describe the texture and history of this war in Afghanistan.

It's not our function to get people killed, rather it's our function to try and achieve justice and save people's lives. So it's not right to say this material has been classified by the US military because it's perceived that enemies would use it in such and such a way - or that the material just goes into a classified bin.

**But it hasn't been declassified, you're effectively declassifying it.**

Yes, we are declassifying it effectively.

[Read more: Afghan leak - what is Wikileaks?](#)

**What's of interest inside it?**

This is really the entire war and it includes nearly every military event that has occurred. So it includes all the small things that are not normally reported but that actually result in the civilian casualties and the troop kills.

For example, a man is seen digging a road, troops think he is an insurgent placing an IED. They shout, he runs away, they try to shoot him, he runs away, then they fire some mortars. The mortar overshoots, hits a village and kills a five year old boy. The material was full of things like that.

Similarly, troops are in a field, they see some unexploded ordnance. They could leave it alone or shoot it with their guns but for some reason, probably because they're bored, they call in an airstrike. Just a single shell. The bomb comes in, hits a village, 17 people go off to hospital.

Then there are also the big events - so operation Medusa, late 2006. 181 people killed at once, most by an AC 130 gunship - a big airplane with canons fixed on the side, circling and shooting. What is the full story behind that event?

This information gives you the time, the place, the number of killed, the different aircrafts involved. But precisely what happened? It still needs to be discovered by linking up this information with reports on the ground, witnesses if there are any left, by soldiers who were involved.

Another example is Task Force 373 - US Special Forces Assassination Squad. Why this material does not tend to include Special Forces is that sometimes Special Forces work together in tandem with the US regular army. There are many reports discussing the assassination lists that the US military have - with hundreds, maybe thousands of people on these lists.

We can see bungled operations, Special Forces go in to kill an alleged Taliban or Al Qaida, fire off missiles, kill seven children and in fact the target wasn't there.

We can see how these lists are probably abused. There's no judicial process or review. We can see governors, local warlords, unhappy with a competitor and they nominate them to go onto these assassination lists. It's something quite interesting and serious and they are called JPEL - Joint Priority Effects Lists.

**That's the code name for the assassination list?**

Yes, it's JPEL. There's another assassination list - JEL - which is not a priority.

**You've spoken about injustice - but what injustice is actually exposed in this leak?**

So we can see a broad range of suspicious events. 181 people killed, with no proper description of why. On one day, only one person wounded, no captives and only one US soldier killed. Many of these events have a disparity and they need to be investigated. We also see hundreds, and there's probably thousands of a child killed here, a girl killed there, people taken to hospital, lots of corruption by NDS - the Afghan Intelligence agency, and of course Taliban abuses, IEDs and blowing up hotels and so on.

**Thousands of journalists have been to Afghanistan, hundreds of books have been written - will this publication shift our opinion of the war?**

Yes, I think it will. This material is all positioned by time and geography. Precise co-ordinates. It involves every minor and major action undertaken by the US military. So it provides a whole map, if you like, through time, of what has happened during this war. And those books and the other journalism can all be placed on this map.

So it's a cohesive picture of the whole lot and statistical work can be done on this. This is the raw ingredient the US military uses to draw its own statistics. So we can look at things like the ratio of killed to wounded in different provinces and regions. It is an extraordinary body of work for academics, historians, HR investigations, the public and journalists to study.

**What does it tell us about Pakistan and the role of the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence)?**

There is a lot of material in there about Pakistan, about the ISI, crossing over the border, firing over border, firing by US troops from Afghanistan into Pakistan, drones over flights and even a plot by the ISI to assassinate Karzai.

Now a number of these reports, including the assassination plot, could be erroneous. These are informers, they come and say, "I heard this guy is involved in an assassination plot." A lot of these are probably burns and designed to take out a competitor or enemy, it doesn't mean the allegations are true. That's what is true about the material - it reveals how difficult the intelligence environment is when there are incentives to say information for money. As a result, military command can say anything they want about what is happening. There is always a man in Afghanistan or Pakistan who is willing to say the right thing.

**There is an awful amount of material here that you couldn't have looked through personally. Could it cost lives? Is it putting people in danger publishing this?**

We've gone through the material and reviewed it and looked for cases where innocent informers, ie an old man saying next door there is a Taliban, or what he believes is Taliban, so we've looked for those cases and there's a particular type of report that frequently has that - those have been withheld and also the source says they have done some work in doing this as well. So I think it's unlikely that that will happen. We've worked hard to make sure there's not a significant chance of anybody coming to harm.

**But you can't guarantee it?**

Any information can be abused for another purpose so we can't guarantee it. But our understanding of the material is that it's vastly more likely to save lives than cost lives.

**So you've actually removed stuff from this leak?**

Yes.

**Is that a first for Wikileaks?**

Sources know when they submit material that we go through a "harm minimisation" process.

That harm minimisation process is not about removing material it's about minimising harm. We have a number of ways to do that. The way we have done it in the past and it's always been effective - notify and delay. Notify the people concerned, and delay the publication as a result. So we have retained some of this material for the harm minimisation process. No, because it's really impossible for us to notify the Afghanis in their villages about this material - we will have to do a redaction of some of it.

**Is that new for you? You're censoring it.**

Yes, that would be new for us. But remember we are an organisation for justice. We have a method, a strong method, but we don't want to let that method interfere with the goal.

**How qualified are you to go through this material?**

This is what we do full time. We've spent four years doing this so, as far as anyone is qualified, we are qualified. It doesn't mean we are infallible, far from it.

**What kind of life do you lead? You have courted controversy.**

We have courted just reform and as a result, abusive organisations push back. We have surveillance events in countries, sometimes we have physical events - two people associated with what we are doing were assassinated in March last year so there are serious issues in different countries.

In relation to this issue, in the US, yes there is significant surveillance. We are not expecting more than surveillance. It could be right as long as it's within the law of the US.

**Surely this a breach of the law to publish secret information?**

No, that's not true. The US constitution gives robust protection to the press. The law is not what a General or CEO says it is. The law is what the Supreme Court says it will be. And so far, it has upheld the right of publishers to reveal this type of information.

**So you don't think you're breaking any laws revealing this?**

No.

**But you have been subject to legal challenges.**

Yes we have, and we've won every legal challenge. The law is not what a General trying to cover abuses says it is, or a bank CEO says, it's what the Supreme Court in the land says it is.

**What will the US reaction be?**

I expect they will see the extensive range of abuses and if they are intelligent, they will say 'This will not happen again, we will put in procedures to stop these abuses, to stop this'.

I'm sure there are elements that will say "We will put in procedures to stop this information coming out again" - but insofar as the US administration goes down that path, rather than addressing the problems in Afghanistan, I think it will be seen as a mistake in history.

**What five reports stick in your mind as the most interesting to do?**

We developed a severity metric - the number of killed, wounded, detained - and from that we can see the most severe according to the internal reporting, which is not always accurate.

So on top of that we see 181 killed and then go down the list. So the top area of that list are serious, and require further investigations. Info about TF 373 - that seems to have got out of control. That is significant, and interesting. There needs to be more. How those lists are maintained, how you get on the lists, how you get off the list - that needs to be investigated.

We also see example of a Polish Mylee massacre - an event where, in one day, the Poles are unhappy with a village, they are receiving fire, so they return the next day and shell it all. But that was reported to the Polish military and they took action. We're not really aware of it in the West.

Similarly, US forces just saw some unexploded ordnance and instead of ignoring it, or shooting it, they called in an airstrike - maybe just for fun - and then a village was hit and 17 people were taken to hospital. We don't know how many lived or died.

Like the road tolls, it's not the bus accidents that kill the most people it's the car accidents. But we don't hear about the cars because they are small and they happen all the time. This material, if you like, reveals all the car accidents of this war. Just a couple of civilians being killed, even 17 now is not reportable. So that totality stands out to my mind. It's just one of these events after another. Again and again and again. Hundreds of them. The totality of all these events that killed civilians and people who it's not clear who they are - I mean this is a civil war.

There are weekend soldiers, men of the family who have a particular allegiance and when their villages are threatened by US forces or the ANA they come out and fight, but it's not right to say they are permanently Taliban, it's just they engage in hostilities in certain circumstances. Really, when you're dealing with a civil war, everyone who is killed is in fact a civilian. The civilians are killed, including the men of the family who decide to take one side or the other.

**Is there anything in there that can threaten national security?**

We have to be extremely careful of this term that has been abused over the years - national security is something that is about the security of the nation. There is nothing in this material that threatens US security. I would go so far as to say there is no information that can currently threaten the security of the US as an entire nation. If you're talking about individuals - soldiers, a company - it's a different story. But we should be careful when we use the term.

**So what are the limits of Wikileaks? This is enormous, but more could come in.**

We go through the harm minimisation process.

**CIA reports?**

Yes. As long as we go through the harm minimisation process.

**Locations of weapons?**

Absolutely.

**Nuclear launch codes?**

Well, we would have to go through a harm minimisation process.

**Well, that would be quite a big harm.**

Well, after they've been changed - the launch codes - then we could publish it. That would reveal that the process of securing these things are a big problem and as we all should know nuclear war, while quite distant, is still technically possible.

**Can we assume that the Chinese, Iranians, Soviets have got this information?**

From what my intelligence sources tell me we can assume the Russians and Chinese have this. This is only secret information, there's no top secret information. Many soldiers can access this material.

**But not download it all?**

Well, if they're smart they can download it all.

### **More on this story**

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#### **External Sites**

- [wikileaks.org](http://wikileaks.org)

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