

Technology

Is Wikileaks sell-off a sellout?

Whistle-blower site's fundraising auction could damage its reputation

By Joseph Wilson

Hugo Chavez must be pissed off. Last month, an archive containing three years of e-mails between the president of Venezuela and one of his top aides was leaked from his office. The documents, allegedly containing sensitive information on Chavez's leadership and on CIA activity in Venezuela, are being tightly held by whistle-blower site Wikileaks.

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Wikileaks, like its better-known cousin Wikipedia, relies on users to provide content. Its purpose is to give a platform to would-be whistle-blowers to post – anonymously – sensitive information about misconduct by high-level officials in the government, military and corporate world.

For the past two years, Wikileaks has been free, relying on a network of anonymous volunteers to keep the site afloat. However, as costs mounted, the site began to look elsewhere for funding. Enter a cash cow in the form of Chavez's e-mail archive. Instead of posting it for free as usual, Wikileaks is auctioning off the e-mails to the highest bidder.

The move has split the online community; some praise Wikileaks for its innovative fundraising, others decry the site for immorality and opportunism. The mainstream media have a strict rule never to pay sources for sensitive information. The sale certainly looks like a mercenary move, something Wikileaks always claimed it was above.

But when it comes to protecting the anonymity of the people posting stuff to the site, Wikileaks maintains a high moral standard. Last year, Swiss banking firm Julius Baer sued Wikileaks for posting documents revealing money-laundering schemes at its Cayman Island location. The suit eventually failed, and increased Wikileaks' popularity for defending the rights of whistle-blowers.

The Church of Scientology has recently tried to force the site to remove copyrighted documents, but U.S. courts lack jurisdiction over Wikileaks' server in Sweden. The domain name itself is registered in Kenya, and several mirror sites have been set up across the world in case one site goes down.

To protect the identity of sources, Wikileaks employs an "onion router" that bounces a document through hundreds of servers at random, obscuring its origin. The exact location of the main server is publicly unknown, and the technicians who run things keep no logs and use military-grade encryption.

All of this takes money, of course, which is why Wikileaks is changing its business model by selling off documents.

The site would have earned a hefty sum for the operational procedures from Guantanamo Bay posted for free last November. A pop culture enthusiast would gladly have paid for the pre-release script of Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull.

While Wikileaks has a legitimate purpose in revealing corruption anonymously, whether it has the right to make a profit from information is another matter. Last year, one of its first posted documents contained allegations of corruption by former Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi that led to an upset in the presidential elections.

More recently, Wikileaks has been forced by the people it's pissed off to focus less on disrupting elections and more on paying its legal bills.

Those of us who value Wikileaks need to find a way to ensure it is adequately funded.

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