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# WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange: What does he want?

The aims of Julian Assange seem to shift with each WikiLeaks release. Is he anticorruption? Antiwar? The inconsistency suggests that anti-secrecy may be his only guiding principle.



A woman reads a confidential diplomat's dispatch on the WikiLeaks website in Schwerin, Germany, Tuesday, while a second screen shows the face of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

(Newscom)

By Peter Grier, Staff writer

posted November 30, 2010 at 6:57 pm EST

Washington —

Julian Assange has certainly grabbed the world's attention. The WikiLeaks founder has masterminded publication of vast troves of secret US military and diplomatic material, infuriating and embarrassing governments around the globe. Now he's vowing to go after private enterprise as well. A big US bank will be the target of his next megaleak, he told Forbes in a just-published interview.

But do Mr. Assange and WikiLeaks have a theory of operations for what they do? What is he hoping to accomplish? In the end, what does Julian Assange want?

"I'm not sure," said Assange when a Forbes reporter asked him what he wanted to be the result of his promised forthcoming release of bank records.

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Assange appears to be a very complicated person. The child of footloose Australian parents, he had little formal childhood education, living as a sort of new age Tom Sawyer, he told a New Yorker writer in a lengthy profile published earlier this year. According to Assange, he moved 37 times before the age of 14, in part to avoid an allegedly abusive stepfather. He was a teenage computer hacker with famous skills who narrowly escaped prison, and also a teenage father. He later had a scarring tour through Australian courts in an effort to gain custody of his child.

He remains so intense that he forgets whether he has purchased plane tickets, and asks to get his hair cut while he's working on a computer, to save time.

He has said that today he is an adherent of no political or economic philosophy, but if anything he is close to libertarianism in an American sense. He appears to be obsessed with rooting out institutional corruption. For instance, he told Forbes that by exposing bad

behavior among corporations he could help ethical corporations thrive.

WikiLeaks aims to create “a reputational tax on unethical companies,” he said.

On its website, WikiLeaks says that as an organization it exists to create transparency.

“This transparency creates a better society for all people,” says WikiLeaks in an online mission statement of sorts. “Better scrutiny leads to reduced corruption and stronger democracies in all society’s institutions, including government, corporations and other organizations.”

But WikiLeaks itself may be turning into just the sort of opaque entity it criticizes. Its hierarchy is unknown, its funders are unclear, and its plans are unverifiable. It reserves the right to decide whether it is in the public interest to disclose the information it obtains (as do many mainstream media outlets). Those who feel victimized by its actions – such as, say, Afghans who work with the US and didn’t want their names known to the Taliban – don’t get to argue the case for continued secrecy before damage is done.

For these and other reasons, Steven Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists, argues that WikiLeaks is more than anything an assault on the concept of secrecy itself. All secrecy, in any form.

“If WikiLeaks were most concerned about whistle-blowing, it would focus on revealing corruption. If it were concerned with historical truth, it would emphasize the discovery of verifiably true facts. If it were antiwar, it would safeguard, not disrupt, the conduct of diplomatic communications,” wrote Mr. Aftergood on his blog “Secrecy News” on Monday.

But WikiLeaks has done none of those things, Aftergood argues. Instead, it has simply published a “vast potpourri” of records – some dazzling, some revelatory, some questionable, some simply embarrassing or routine – whose only common feature is that they are secrets.

If secrecy has any legitimate role to play in the conduct of a nation’s business, then a more measured approach than that taken by WikiLeaks is more appropriate, argues Aftergood.

However, Aftergood and other experts note that WikiLeaks has undertaken to do this in a context where government secrecy has gone too far. The US produces over 16 million new classified secrets per year, according to a Project on Government Secrecy estimate. The age of atomic weaponry began at the end of World War II, but only this year has the US for the first time released an official number of US nuclear warheads. Similarly, only recently did US intelligence agencies begin revealing the size of their budgets.

“Overclassification is a perennial problem in government,” says Roger Pilon, vice president for legal affairs at the libertarian-oriented Cato Institute, “and correcting that problem would go far toward more open government better able to protect classified material.”

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