

Professional judgment needed in post-Wikileaks world

By Bhavan Jaipragas

The rise of Wikileaks seems to herald a new era, where the gatekeeping power of news organisations is increasingly challenged. But this does not diminish the important role that mainstream journalists play in making sense of the information explosion, according to panelists at a dialogue jointly organised by the Singapore Press Club and the Asia Journalism Fellowship. The Wikileaks revelations still needed professional journalists to deal with complex issues and uphold values such as accountability and integrity, they said.

Speaking to an audience mainly made up of media professionals at SPH News Centre on February 21, the panel of insiders and experts provided insights on the impact of the whistleblower website's release of American diplomatic cables since last year. Some of the cables embarrassed not only the United States State Department but also other governments whose confidential statements were mentioned in the US cables.

Despite Wikileaks' reputation as a revolutionary force, Assistant Professor Marko Skoric from Nanyang Technological University noted that the website relied on traditional media to fact-check the raw data it had received.

According to Dr Skoric, who specialises in new media and social change, Wikileaks chose publications such as the New York Times, The Guardian and Der Spiegel as its official partners because of their capacity to process large amounts of data and their well established reputation for authoritative journalism.

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ASST PROF MARKO SKORIC

Independent bloggers on the other hand, neither had the resources nor the time needed to check Wikileaks' huge amount of raw data and make sense of it, he said. The lack of transparency surrounding bloggers' business interests was also a cause for concern. “Most bloggers will publish anything if you give them five hundred bucks. That's how it works,” said Dr Skoric.

Deputy Director of the Institute of Policy Studies Arun Mahizhnan concurred with Dr Skoric, but also noted that governments and mainstream media tended to have a natural aversion

to new players such as Wikileaks. He said that fears about the damage that could be caused by leaked information were overplayed. The widespread circulation of documents such as the diplomatic cables would allow for community moderation that would dispel untruths, he added.

Mr Mahizhnan, who is also an adjunct professor at NTU, said that those who wanted to control information would have to accept that leakages would become a norm in what he termed “a new world information order”.

In Singapore, however, the publication of official documents would be subject to the Official Secrets Act (OSA), noted another panelist, The Straits Times' associate editor Janadas Devan. Responding to a question from a member of the audience, Mr Devan said the newspaper would check with the authorities the veracity of any leaked documents it received.

Former editor of the Straits Times Leslie Fong, who chaired the forum, also weighed in on the issue, saying that deciding whether to publish sensitive information was a dilemma he had grappled with in the pre-Wikileaks era. “Even if you did not contravene the OSA, the editor of the day will have to decide if publication is in the national interest,” said Mr Fong.

Veteran diplomat K. Kesavapany, who is now director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, noted that while the leaked cables had caused a sensation, the “sky has not fallen”. Diplomats would probably be more cautious with their communication now, he said.

Wikileaks: views from the AJF network

By Terence Lee

Although Julian Assange and Wikileaks have drawn the ire of many government officials, journalists are more divided about what to make of their sensational leaks. On the one hand, whistleblowers are an important source of

information for the public. On the other, indiscriminate releasing of secrets can cause harm.

“What about ethics, morals and discretion?” asks Shifan Ahmed from the AJF Class of 2010. “I've heard and read of documents being published in large bundles without filtering certain information such as names and other personal data which have no bearing on the issues at hand.”

Shifan, who is a director and producer with Sri Lanka's Young Asia Television, hopes that journalists and Wikileaks will think more deeply about how to use the ▶

▶ information they possess to serve the public interest. Otherwise, individuals implicated in the documents could face life-threatening situations.

Leaks as such are nothing new, as Madhumita Datta (2010) points out. In India, the prominent news magazine *Tehelka* (www.tehelka.com) is well known for investigative pieces that rely heavily on whistleblowers. It even has a page on its website (link: <http://www.tehelka.com/Participate/Whistle.asp>) that encourages the public to become a "Tehelka Whistleblower".

Datta, a senior journalist with the Kolkata-based *AAJKAAL*, says that Indians understand the power of the media and are not afraid to divulge any irregularities to the newspapers. For example, much of the information that was used to indict former communications minister A. Raja for graft came from a former staff. The Indian government is also working on a new whistleblower bill that would include provisions punishing those who reveal a whistleblower's identity.

The environment is drastically different in Sri Lanka, notes Shifan. While there are many cases of whistleblowing, reprisals are also common. Last year, a law student who filed a police report about a leakage of an examination paper in his college received threatening phone calls in return. He was forced to go into hiding.

Faced with such an environment, Shifan believes that any attempt to set up a Wikileaks-like site in the country

would be impossible for the foreseeable future. "Anything critical and challenging those in power has proven consequences. Yet the bold and outspoken who are a minority continue doing what they think is best," he says.

Indonesia is another leak-friendly environment, reports Feby Indirani (2010), a reporter with *Business Week Indonesia*. "In Indonesia, you can have so many leaked stories spread out in our media, from print, TV, radio, Internet, it's enough to make everyone beyond crazy!" she says. Many of these are trivial matters like celebrity porn videos.

Indeed, with so many leaks, the challenge is often distinguish between real whistleblowers and people with vested political and economic interests. "For some figures, perhaps they want to get attention and win the public's heart," she says.

One issue raised by the Wikileaks phenomenon is whether news organisations are losing control of the agenda. Agnes Lam (2010) calls it a "wake-up call for journalists". Wikileaks and similar platforms make it possible for readers to scrutinise documents directly and make their own judgments. While it may be daunting to trawl through and make sense of the thousands of documents, the silver lining for readers is that it eliminates the gatekeeper. Professional journalists would have to think harder about how to remain relevant, says Lam, who now works for the Hong Kong government.

2011 Fellowship under way



Exploring Singapore

"I'm constantly amazed by the beauty of this little island city. Today marks our one month stay in Singapore. So much to explore, so much to do and so much to learn. Thanks to Asia Journalism Fellowship!"

AJF 2011 Fellow Imelda Abano, in a Facebook posting, March 5.

CATCHING UP WITH PAST FELLOWS

Karen Yap (Class of 2009)

Extended her contract as a business writer with *China Daily*. "I have decided to move out of the workers' apartment, which is next to the *China Daily* office, to a cosy two-bedroom apartment to experience 'normality' in a different part of Beijing."

Kieu Thi Ngoc Lan (Class of 2010)

Studying in Sweden, where she due to finish her second Master degree by June. From July, she is will be on a two-year advanced programme in digital communication in Australia, on a full scholarship from the Australian government.

Do you have news to share? Please email news@ajf.sg.



Elections: Which way will the needle fall?

By P. N. BALJI

This commentary has its genesis in a cryptic text message I received a week ago. Why not do a comment that looks at the three issues for the voters to consider, the sender asked. After giving the topic some thought, I concluded that is something I should leave to the politicians to grapple with.

Then a friend suggested: Why not turn it around and ask what the voters are likely to consider as they get ready to go to the ballot box? Even for a country that has just above 2 million voters at the last count on February last year and a generally predictable population, there are so many strands in society that make a subject like this an uphill climb.

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew identifies these different strands this way in his new book, *Hard Truths*: working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, the entrepreneurs and the very wealthy. Then there are a myriad of sub-divisions: singles, older people, younger people, new citizens....

Despite these diverse divisions, by observing what is being said in newspaper reports, blogs and conversations, three groups emerge as those who are likely to make a statement at the polls.

THE PAT-ON-THE-BACK GROUP

This is the group that believes in the PAP system and its track record. They have benefitted from a political and economic management of a country that have even taken some critics by surprise. Some in this group feel somewhat stifled occasionally and may not agree with every government action (like the decision to open up the floodgates to foreigners), but they know which side their bread is buttered.

This group is strengthened by a growing group of foreigners who are taking up Singapore citizenship. I refer to them as born again citizens. Having experienced life elsewhere, they see the Singapore grass is definitely greener. It is much safer, much more comfortable, much easier to make money and it is much easier to feel at home here.

And they are rabidly pro-Singapore, more so than the born-and-bred citizens. You don't have to guess what they will consider when it comes to deciding who they should vote for.

THE DOWN-IN-THE-DUMP GROUP

They are the ones most affected by the forces of

globalisation. Despite various efforts by the government to give them a leg-up, they are struggling to make ends meet. The last recession and the influx of foreigners have made their lot worse.

Dysfunctional families, those with aged and mentally-ill relatives to take care of and those caught in a hopeless trap of a money-not-enough situation look for instant help, not delayed help. Imagine what voters caught in this edge-of-the-cliff plight will do when they go to vote. The chances of emotion over-riding reason will be high.

THE PIN-PRICK GROUP

They are educated, have choices and expect zero-defect from their Ministers, MPs and civil servants. Many of them are single-issue voters. I asked one such voter, a 40-something carefree single what are the election issues she has at the back of her mind. "I am fed up with the over-crowding I see nearly everywhere. The trains, the markets, the gym, the cinema halls... they are all crowded. There are days when I just don't feel like going out."

Another single voter wants zero defect from her government. She gave the example of a grassroots problem that has cropped up in her estate. She was very thankful that her MP is trying very hard to settle the issue but added: "The problem should not have happened at all. It shows that the government agencies involved failed to anticipate the residents' unhappiness early enough and solve it."

Both want the PAP in power, but if they get a chance to vote and if they think the opposition has a credible set of candidates in their GRCs, they will be prepared to give them a chance.

How many voters are there in these three groups, how they are spread out in which areas, how many actually get a chance to vote and where will the pin fall?

There are other imponderables. The last elections in 2006 showed up two: The dangling of carrots (Hougang and Potong Pasir) and the incessant attack on a political figure (James Gomez in Aljunied) put off many and they showed their opposition at the ballot box.

Both instances reveal that even in Oasis Singapore, you can never know what issue will catch fire during the heat of the hustings and how voters will react.

SINGAPORE UPDATE

With Singapore enjoying double-digit growth and a generous Budget announced in February, it's looking like a good time for Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to call a general election. The speculation is that it could be in late April or May. Opposition parties have been more active than in the past, when many seats were uncontested.

This time, it is possible that every seat will be contested, for the first time in decades. In this issue of our newsletter, AJF director P. N. Balji comments on the different types of voters who may make an impact at the polls.

P. N. Balji is the director of AJF. This column first appeared in the TODAY newspaper.

2011: Year of the Media App

By Jeremy Wagstaff

I predict this year that we'll settle on a way to make people pay for stuff they so far have proven reluctant to pay for—namely information. This won't be done by pay walls, exactly, but by what we're now calling apps. Apps are applications that people seem very willing to pay for when they're doing it from a device that isn't a desktop computer.

So people are buying these things because what's a buck when you know you can get to hurl Angry Birds onto flimsy structures sheltering evil pigs on your device in a couple of seconds? Or listen to Yesterday on your iPod Touch a few seconds after buying it?

Compare this with the laborious process of signing up for an online subscription, or having to download, install and pay for some software and then have to enter a serial number longer than most emails you've written.

Others are now trying this route. Google has the Android Marketplace, which lets you do more or less the same thing. In fact, it's even easier—you don't get prompted for your password when you buy something. And now they're trying something on your computer: their own browser, Chrome, now have apps which you can buy or get for free. (Google's own operating system, Chrome OS, will revolve around these apps.)

In fact these aren't really anything new—they're what we might call web-services which are accessible via a website, rather than by downloading software. But by packaging them up as apps Google make it easier for us to get at them and, crucially, break down our resistance to buying something online.

This is how we'll pay for news in the future. Smart companies like The Economist will give the print edition away free with the iPad version, or vice versa, since we'll start resisting the idea that we have to pay twice for the same information, whether it's all glitzy and interactive or not. We will expect to be rewarded for paying for something we know we can get from somewhere else if we tried hard enough. If you're a news organization use whatever lure you can think of to get the reader back into the paying habit again.

This is the point of the payment process. It has to be easier than getting the information/music/entertainment/book through another means. If I find a book for my Kindle

ereader on Amazon I'll check to see whether there's a cheaper version—which there quite often is. If it's under ten bucks I'll buy it. If not, I'll read the reviews below to see whether there is a free version somewhere—which is sometimes possible. If there isn't, I'll check out Google books to see whether the chapters I'm interested in are there.

OK, I'm a cheapskate. But my thinking is basically this: \$10 is my threshold for an eBook. It might be more if I got access to a physical version, or was able to clip bits from it and store it somewhere else. But I'm not, so I won't pay more than that. Moreover, I don't want to be the mug who pays for something others get for free.

Everyone else has their own logic, but they're probably not dissimilar to mine. We pay for things if we think the price is right for the convenience, and if we think that we're not being suckered—which means that other people aren't shelling out for it.

This is basically micropayments. It's what we'd been hoping would happen for some time, and it took Apple's megalomania and micromanagement to get us there. Now we're nearly there, but we could still mess up. Some newspapers try to charge us for single articles, for example, misunderstanding that micropayment doesn't mean microproduct. I don't want to pay every time I visit your site: I want to pay for something that gets me seamless access to your product.

In other words, we're paying for not having to pay (or register, or download, or enter codes, or any of that kind of nonsense.) This is why the term pay wall is so revealing—and why it's doomed as a concept. We're not buying information with our iPhone or Android app, we're buying frictionless access to something—an icon on our display that may be a shortcut to a web page, or open an application, we don't care. All we care about is that it gets us to where we want to go, when we want to go there.

We've some ways to go before this works well. I can't stand the idea that my Kindle book doesn't belong to me in the way a real book does, and I refuse to buy any music that I can't move around as I wish. I succumbed to buying some apps for an iPad I borrowed but Steve Jobs will rue the day if I can't easily move them onto another iDevice if I ever end up getting one.

But the good thing is that we've found a way to make this palatable to people, and I am optimistic that the media, booksellers, music sellers and web developers can turn this into revenue streams that keep them going.

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KEEP IN TOUCH

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