

New York Times defends its coverage of WikiLeaks exposures

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Last Sunday, one week after it published a front-page smear against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, the *New York Times* ran a self-serving column defending its coverage of the nearly 400,000 classified military logs exposing US war crimes in Iraq released October 22 by the Internet whistle-blower.

The column by the *Times*' public editor, Arthur S. Brisbane, was chiefly aimed at answering those within the US establishment who have criticized the *Times* for agreeing to review the documents in advance of their release by WikiLeaks and publish any account of their content. The *Times* was one of a number of media outlets, including the British *Guardian*, Germany's *Der Spiegel*, France's *Le Monde* and al Jazeera, which made similar agreements with WikiLeaks and published extensive reports on the documents.

Brisbane argues self-righteously that the *Times* had a journalistic and civic responsibility to review the WikiLeaks documents and report on them, despite the supposedly dubious character of the source. The basic premise of the piece is that Assange and WikiLeaks represent journalistically illegitimate, if not criminal, elements, but that the documents were sufficiently newsworthy to compel the *Times* to sully its hands and deal with Assange and company.

The reality is the opposite. Assange is a genuine hero of journalism who has risked his career, his freedom and his very life to break through the wall of silence on imperialist crimes committed in Iraq and Afghanistan and present to the public a portion of the horrific reality of the colonial occupations of the two countries.

The *Times*, the newspaper of record of the American liberal establishment, has played a criminal role in maintaining the cover-up of war crimes—mass killings, detentions, torture—by suppressing news, spreading misinformation and, in general, serving as an adjunct of the US military and intelligence apparatus, the State Department and the White House.

Brisbane begins his piece by citing the exercise in yellow journalism co-authored by veteran *Times* reporter John F. Burns and published October 24. (See “New York Times tries character assassination against WikiLeaks Founder Assange”)

He writes: “The two stories stood side by side: one said that Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, was on the run, in fear of Western intelligence agencies and seen by some colleagues as ‘delusional,’ ‘erratic’ and ‘imperious.’ The other story? A chilling account of war in Iraq, for which Mr. Assange and his organization were the primary source.”

He goes on to write of the supposed dilemma facing the *Times* deciding how to report on the WikiLeaks exposures: “The case for reporting on nearly 400,000 classified documents was compelling, while the character of its primary source appeared increasingly sketchy.”

Not bothering to conceal the newspaper's allegiance to the US state and its support for American imperialist interests, Brisbane elaborates: “[T]he newspaper had to conduct a cost-benefit analysis that asked: Does the public interest in having this information outweigh the risks to coalition forces and intelligence-gathering in the war zones?”

He continues: “Whether or not Julian Assange is a rogue with a political agenda, what matters most is that the *Times* authenticates the information.” In the same vein, he quotes *Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller as saying “the documents deserved attention, ‘whatever you think of WikiLeaks as an organization.’”

Brisbane further cites an email message from Keller in which the executive editor notes, “We chose the documents that struck us as most interesting. We did our own analysis of the material. We decided what to write.”

The meaning of this becomes more clear when, in summing up the case for the *Times*' decision to deal with WikiLeaks, Brisbane writes: “So the *Times*' choice was whether to use its resources to organize and filter material that was going public, one way or another.”

Precisely! The damning documents would reach the public anyway—via the other media outlets contacted by WikiLeaks and the web site's own postings—and it was therefore incumbent on the *Times* to “filter” and present the material in such a way as to minimize the damage to the US government and selectively feature information that could be used to further Washington's military and geopolitical aims in the Middle East.

The *Times* was guided, in its coverage of both the Iraq documents and some 92,000 Afghanistan war logs released last July by WikiLeaks, entirely by the military and political interests of the American ruling class and not the people's right to know. This is amply demonstrated by the character of the *Times*' reporting.

Unlike the non-US media, which emphasized the killings of civilians, torture and other war crimes and the systematic government lying exposed by the documents, the *Times* downplayed these facts, declaring that the war logs added nothing new to what was already known about the war and occupation. It

buried, for example, the news that the United Nations chief investigator for torture had publicly called on President Obama to launch an investigation into evidence that the American military handed over prisoners to Iraqi jailers for torture and execution. Indeed, the *Times* assiduously avoided using the word “torture” in its coverage of the documents.

Instead, the *Times* military reporter, Michael Gordon, penned a front-page article arguing that the WikiLeaks documents exposed extensive Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs.

This followed the pattern established last July, when the *Times* gave only the most vague and cursory account of US military logs detailing killings of civilians and other war crimes in Afghanistan, and instead played up certain information in the documents in order to charge Pakistan with aiding anti-US insurgents. This was in line with US efforts to increase pressure on the Pakistani regime to expand its counterinsurgency operations in the tribal regions that border Afghanistan.

In both cases, the *Times* acknowledged having vetted its reporting with the government. The article which first appeared on the Internet on October 22 stated: “The *New York Times* told the Pentagon which specific documents it planned to post and showed how they had been redacted.”

In July, the *Times* Washington bureau chief, Dean Baquet, told Yahoo News, “I did in fact go to the White House and lay out for them what we had,” adding that the White House “praised us for the way we handled it ... and for being responsible.”

In a blog answering questions from readers, Keller boasted in July that White House officials “thanked us for handling the documents with care,” and added that the *Times* had agreed to relay to WikiLeaks the US government demand that it “withhold information that could cost lives”—a qualification so vague and broad as to proscribe virtually any document.

As one *Times* reader wrote on the question-and-answer blog at the time: “The difference between the *Guardian* and NY *Times* reporting of the Afghanistan War Logs documents is absolutely astounding. The information in the documents relating to civilian deaths is hardly mentioned in the NY *Times* reporting, and this is shameful.”

The malice of the *Times* toward WikiLeaks is not new. Last April, after the web site posted a video showing the cold-blooded killing in July 2007 of 10 to 15 Iraqis, including two Reuters journalists, by a US helicopter gunship in Baghdad, the *Times* published an article portraying WikiLeaks as a dangerous source of opposition and suggesting that it should be shut down.

Nor is the *Times*’ self-censorship and manipulation of the news of recent vintage. In 2004, Keller met personally with George W. Bush in the Oval Office after the White House urged the *Times* to quash plans to publish an exposé of the National Security Agency’s secret and illegal program of domestic eavesdropping on telephone and electronic communications. Keller agreed to delay the report until after that year’s presidential election, withholding from the American people information about a massive assault on their democratic rights by the Republican candidate.

In October of 2006, the *Times* buried news of a study carried out by Johns Hopkins University and published in the prestigious

British medical journal the *Lancet* concluding that more than 665,000 Iraqis had died as a result of the US invasion and occupation of the country.

This was a continuation of the *Times*’ promotion of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, including the publication of articles by current and former reporters, such as Judith Miller, Michael Gordon and John F. Burns, backing the Bush administration’s lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and its supposed ties to Al Qaeda. Then the newspaper had no qualms using the most disreputable and biased sources for their pro-war propaganda, including long-time CIA and Pentagon assets such as Ahmad Chalabi.

In a speech at the University of Michigan shortly after the appearance of the *Lancet* article, Keller defended the *Times* against attacks by the Bush administration and the Republican right on the grounds that it and the rest of the establishment press played a vital role for the government in suppressing state secrets and serving as a firewall against “irresponsible” Internet media.

“Legions of Internet journalists,” Keller said, “include at least a few who would feel no compunction about disclosing life-threatening information. If a blogger hostile to the Bush administration managed to document sensitive secrets about the war on terror, would he stop to weigh the consequences of making them public?...”

“So while the mainstream press might not enjoy the hegemony it held before the Internet, we have not yet fallen into information anarchy. Most of what the country knows about the secret activities of the government, it knows thanks to serious organizations that still take their responsibilities seriously.”

Of course, the far greater portion of state secrets not known to the public remains undisclosed because of the complicity of the self-same “serious” mainstream press, led by the *Times*.

One cannot even speak of people like Keller, Burns and the like in the same breath as Assange. The latter is a principled opponent of war crimes and defender of the right of the people to know. The former are propagandists for colonial wars and accomplices in the crimes that inevitably accompany such ventures. The *Times* has long functioned and continues to function to suppress the news and distort it whenever required to defend the interests of the American ruling elite.



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