

# The New York Times' Bill Keller on WikiLeaks: A collapse of democratic sensibility

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3 February 2011

The *New York Times* posted a lengthy piece January 26 by Bill Keller, its executive editor, on the subject of the newspaper's relations with WikiLeaks and its co-founder, Julian Assange. The *Times* is one of the media outlets that has published excerpts from WikiLeaks' material on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and its mass of secret US diplomatic cables.

Keller attempts to cover all the bases in his essay, defending himself against accusations that the *Times* has endangered US "national security"—defaming Assange in the process—and making the case for a "responsible" (that is to say, compliant) media, while at the same time hypocritically opposing government prosecution of WikiLeaks.

Whatever he thinks he has done, Mr. Keller has in fact produced a devastating self-exposure. He has offered us a portrait of the journalist as a quasi-state official and propagandist.

Along these lines, Keller boasts about his efforts to vet the WikiLeaks material with the US government, and acknowledges that the *Times* collaborated *on a daily basis* with the State Department after it came into possession of the hundreds of thousands of secret American embassy cables in November 2010.

Above all else, Keller's essay reveals the collapse of democratic consciousness within the American media and political establishment. The most extraordinary feature of his 8,000 word article is the shamelessness with which he spells out that the *Times*' central concern is not enlightening the public, but concealing anything that might damage the US government, its foreign policy and its war aims.

Here is a spokesman for the leading newspaper in the United States who makes clear that he has no commitment to and no understanding of freedom of the press. For Keller and his *Times* colleagues, the freedom to publish means the freedom *not* to publish.

The emergence of *WikiLeaks* has proven an unpleasant turn of events for the *Times* and the American media as a whole. This small organization, with limited resources, has done what the major news outlets should have been doing for years and deliberately refused to do: shed light on the massive criminality of American diplomatic, intelligence and military activity around the globe.

How to respond to the WikiLeaks phenomenon has obviously been a vexing issue for Keller and the *Times*' hierarchy. If they have reacted in part by serving as a conduit for some of the leaked material, it has been in the interests of controlling the exposures as much as possible, limiting their impact and preventing—in Keller's phrase—"a state of information anarchy" (i.e., widespread access to news outside the official channels) from arising.

Moreover, through its numerous attacks on Assange, the *Times* has

sought to divert attention from US war crimes and portray the WikiLeaks leader as the suspicious, if not outright criminal party.

Keller intends to strike a pose of balance and moderation, but crass class interest in the form of hostility toward the WikiLeaks project makes its way into paragraph after paragraph of his essay.

The *Times*' executive editor is unsparing in his personal attacks on Assange. Keller first presents the WikiLeaks co-founder to the reader as "an eccentric former computer hacker of Australian birth and no fixed residence." We learn next that Assange "was elusive, manipulative and volatile (and ultimately openly hostile to *The Times* and *The Guardian*)."

In his chronological account of the *Times*' relations with Assange, Keller quotes the first impressions of Eric Schmitt—from the newspaper's Washington bureau—upon meeting the WikiLeaks founder in London:

"He [Assange] was alert but disheveled, like a bag lady walking in off the street, wearing a dingy, light-colored sport coat and cargo pants, dirty white shirt, beat-up sneakers and filthy white socks that collapsed around his ankles. He smelled as if he hadn't bathed in days."

This is simply a slur, intended to prejudice the delicate reader against Assange. What does it have to do with anything? Keller's later claim to be "impartial in our presentation of the news" is meaningless in the face of such comments.

Keller doesn't let up: "The reporters came to think of Assange as smart and well educated, extremely adept technologically but arrogant, thin-skinned, conspiratorial and oddly credulous. ... Assange was openly contemptuous of the American government and certain that he was a hunted man."

Keller, in keeping with the general line of the liberal-feminist campaign against Assange, chooses to ignore entirely the abusive and violent nature of the threats against the WikiLeaks founder. The CIA and US military no doubt track his every move. He has been denounced as a "terrorist" (including by the vice president of the United States) and calls for his physical elimination proliferate in ultra-right circles in the US.

Instead, Keller (along with Katha Pollitt in the *Nation* and others) finds it useful to paint the WikiLeaks co-founder as a sort of international playboy-adventurer belonging to some imaginary radical-chic milieu (or "a character from a Stieg Larsson thriller," as Keller insightfully claims at one point).

Keller finally recounts how the newspaper's relationship with Assange went from "wary to hostile." First, Assange was rightly angry that the *Times* refused to link its online coverage to the WikiLeaks website. Furthermore, Assange objected to the *Times*' profile of Bradley Manning, the army private suspected of being the source of much of the WikiLeaks material, which essentially attributed Manning's alleged actions to psychological difficulties early in his life.

Finally, there was the scurrilous profile of Assange by John Burns and

Ravi Somaiya published October 24, 2010 (See “New York Times tries character assassination against WikiLeaks founder Assange”.) Keller tells us that “Assange denounced the article to me, and in various public forums, as ‘a smear,’” which it manifestly was.

### The “responsible” *New York Times*

That part of Keller’s essay not devoted to abusing Assange and WikiLeaks is largely directed toward proving how “responsibly” the *New York Times* has acted throughout this entire episode. One of the most revealing sections deals with the *Times*’ collaboration with US officials once the newspaper came into possession of the secret embassy cables.

The *Times* informed the White House about the cables on November 19, 2010 and on November 23, reports Keller, three representatives of the newspaper held a “tense” meeting with White House, State Department, Pentagon, CIA and FBI officials. “Subsequent meetings,” he notes, “which soon gave way to daily conference calls, were more businesslike.” No wonder.

This is the remarkable process Keller describes: “Before each discussion [with government officials], our Washington bureau sent over a batch of specific cables that we intended to use in the coming days. They were circulated to regional specialists, who funneled their reactions to a small group at State, who came to our daily conversations with a list of priorities and arguments to back them up. We relayed the government’s concerns, and our own decisions regarding them, to the other news outlets.”

Keller asserts that the *Times* rejected some of the concerns and agreed on others. In regard to “sensitive American programs, usually related to intelligence,” he explains, “We agreed to withhold some of this information, like a cable describing an intelligence-sharing program that took years to arrange and might be lost if exposed.”

Keller takes for granted the legitimacy of US intelligence operations, whose primary purpose, the historical record shows, is to shore up repressive regimes around the globe.

The *Times* executive editor also brags about the newspaper’s relations with the Obama White House, observing that “the relevant government agencies actually engaged with us in an attempt to prevent the release of material genuinely damaging to innocent individuals or to the national interest.”

There is no hint here that the role of the press in a nominally democratic society is to inform the public. A considerable portion of Keller’s labor seems focused on what *does not* go into the *Times*.

Toward the end of his piece, Keller spells out his political thinking a bit more openly. He writes: “Although it is our aim to be impartial in our presentation of the news, our attitude toward these issues is far from indifferent. The journalists at *The Times* have a large and personal stake in the country’s security. We live and work in a city that has been tragically marked as a favorite terrorist target, and in the wake of 9/11 our journalists plunged into the ruins to tell the story of what happened here.”

To begin with, the tone of self-pity and self-aggrandizement is unpleasant and inappropriate. Keller, as always, can only think of American suffering, and, more especially, his own personal discomfort. As a city, Baghdad has suffered many, many times the death and destruction inflicted on New York since the US seriously set its sights on plundering Iraqi oil reserves through the first Gulf war in 1990.

Of course, along with the US media as a whole, Keller, in his demagogic references to the terrorist attacks leaves out the decades-long history of American imperialism’s tragic and bloody encounter with the populations of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The *Times* editor goes on: “We are invested in the struggle against

murderous extremism in another sense. The virulent hatred espoused by terrorists, judging by their literature, is directed not just against our people and our buildings but also at our values and at our faith in the self-government of an informed electorate. If the freedom of the press makes some Americans uneasy, it is anathema to the ideologists of terror.”

This is filthy nonsense, worthy of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. The WikiLeaks exposures have demonstrated that official US propaganda about democracy and human rights and self-government is a fraud. Washington backs and arms dictatorial regimes, regimes that torture and murder, in every part of the globe.

The anti-democratic implications of Keller’s essay render his supposed opposition to the prosecution of WikiLeaks quite unconvincing. In fact, the *Times* has worked assiduously to discredit and isolate Assange and WikiLeaks, making government prosecution more likely.

Keller’s real aim is to make the case that “gatekeepers” such as the *Times* are important and necessary to control the information-news stream and forestall the “state of information anarchy” that he finds so threatening.

He comes closest to making this explicit when he comments on the *Times*’ obligation “as an independent news organization [independent of whom?] ... to verify the material, to supply context, to exercise responsible judgment about what to publish and what not to publish and to make sense of it.”

Keller assigns himself the responsibility, along with the administration in power, of ensuring that the population does not know too much. He clearly sees the *Times* as a central instrument of official propaganda and conceives of his editing as an integral part of the war effort.

The US has a controlled, entirely tamed mass media. State censorship is largely unnecessary, the major news outlets carry it out themselves. Were a military-police dictatorship to be established in America, what serious changes, if any, would have to be made in the personnel of the *New York Times*?

In the 1975 film *Three Days of the Condor*, directed by Sydney Pollack, a low-level CIA researcher stumbles upon a secret plan by “rogue” elements within the agency to seize Middle East oilfields. Having survived various attempts on his life, the central character (played by Robert Redford) finally arranges to meet a CIA deputy director outside the offices of the *New York Times* in Manhattan and informs the latter, significantly, that he has told the press “a story.” We are meant to be reassured by the fact that the *Times* alone has the “story.” No one in his politically right mind would take the same course of action today.

That the liberal newspaper of record has become little more than an organ of state propaganda speaks to the crisis and decline of American capitalism, on the one hand, and the increasingly favorable conditions for the development of an avowedly socialist and revolutionary political current, on the other.



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