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INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY AND WIKILEAKSA: before and an after?

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Wikileaks, more than anything else, is a great dilemma or, if one prefers, a great subject of social debate on the global scale. This is its tremendous success, which will certainly ensure that the phenomenon will take pride of place in the news-of-the-year anthologies, round-ups or other such dossiers that the different branches of the mass media publish before the end of December. In particular, this case reveals, in all its crudeness, the double-edged sword of the media today: they have to combine the traditional formats (newspapers and weeklies on paper, radio, television, and so on) with their respective versions on Internet. These digital versions are “free-to-air” and, unlike the former, are fertile terrain for all kinds of comments, insults and expression at rather dodgy levels. In other words, the Wikileaks situation brings out with great clarity the nexuses of continuity, but also of rupture, with its most famous precedent: the Pentagon Papers, which Daniel Ellsberg brought to light in *The New York Times* in 1971, thus putting the Nixon presidency up against the ropes over the Vietnam War.

There is a second, unpalatable, element and this is that, at the beginning of December, Tuesday 7th, to be specific, at the behest of Sweden, the British police arrested the Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, thus dragging out the saga and in a direction of suspect taste. However, as the daily-appearing two hundred and sixty thousand documents are yielding less, the media system/market is spinning out the main chance by centring on the key player and his ostensibly strange, baffling flings in the sexual domain. In fact, the media should be focusing its attention (and making inquiries in this direction) on the Swedish Prosecution Authority with regard to this string of coincidences. Yet it should also be stressed that, while there is evidently some relationship between the two, the detention and legal vicissitudes of Mr Assange are rather different from the significance (or not-so-great significance) of the famous leaked documents.

It is interesting, for example, to see the confusion, which one should assume is involuntary, between what the documents are, what they really say, and what some specialists, analysts and media outlets claim they say. They are real telegrams sent by United States diplomats to their capital, Washington. In this regard, the Russian President Medvedev was right when he remarked at the beginning of December, not without irony, that it’s not such a big deal and that if

we could see his own “telegrams” we’d be in for some surprises. Many analysts and journalists have erred in asserting that, with these telegrams, it is demonstrated that such-and-such a country, Spain for example, has or has not done such-and-such a thing, and this is applicable to the cases of the CIA flights, the death of the journalist José Couso in Iraq, or what this or that minister did or said. The reality, in the strict sense, is that these telegrams (the authenticity of which the United States Administration has never made any attempt to deny) say that Ambassador X or Y (for example Eduardo Aguirre, former US ambassador to Spain) states that the minister, prosecutor or judge X, Y or Z has said he or she will do, or will not do, one thing or another.

The most elementary manual for fledgling journalists insists on the need for verifying, confirming with the other party and reconfirming information through independent sources. Has this been done? Again, there is the obviousness of some examples. The United States Government spied on Ban Ki-moon. Such things are not done or, if they are done, it is not said they are done and, if they come to light, they are denied. Yet, moreover, it is well enough known – but never admitted – that when the United Nations Secretary General is to be changed there is a formal process of selection, approval and naming as specified in the organisation’s rules, and there is also a real, material, behind-the-scenes process that might be summed up thus: if any one of the five permanent members of the Security Council says no, the proposal will not prosper. They wheel and deal among themselves with both appointments and retirements. If the previous one shone too brightly or was too autonomous (for example, Kofi Annan) the next one will be of more low-key profile. Again, it is also necessary to be informed in order to avoid awkward problems. Kurt Waldheim, after being elected and occupying the position of Secretary General, ended up admitting that, during the Second World War, he hadn’t been studying Medicine in Vienna after all but was a Waffen-SS lieutenant and very active in the Balkans. It had slipped his mind. The Arab governments are asking for an end to the Iranian nuclear threat. This is the official position of all of them and, in theory, of all governments that are signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (which is to say all except India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea).

As noted above, there are many such examples and it is striking that, at least until 8th December, the response of the Spanish Partido Popular (the opposition People’s Party) has been deafening silence.

If everything is of such import, one should be looking at what is, in the last instance, essential. Any massive phenomenon on the Web basically consolidates its media impact and credibility when it is endorsed and authenticated by the traditional media, especially the written press. Daniel Ellsberg, without Internet, demonstrated this with the Pentagon Papers scandal in 1971 when he disclosed to the public much more secret and serious matters pertaining to the Vietnam War.

Second, the different branches of the media, if they wish to be responsible – and their credibility depends on that – really must suppress, in what they are publishing, the names and specific data of people who might be subject to irreparable damage, because information is one thing and delation or jeopardising people by exposure is quite another. Embassies send telegrams. Everybody knows that but it’s like a role game. Diplomacy is based on written rules and unwritten rules, on international law and what might be called “customary” law. It is not difficult to see that John le Carré and Graham Greene were both of the profession.

Wikileaks may have made its mark, though it would seem clear that this episode does not mark a before and an after in the tried-and-tested workings of diplomacy. The United States Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates, puts it crudely:

“The fact is, governments deal with the United States because it’s in their interest, not because they like us, not because they trust us, and not because they believe we can keep secrets. Many governments deal with us because they fear us, some because they respect us, most because they need us. We are still essentially, as has been said before, the indispensable nation. So other nations will continue to deal with us.”

This is one of the clearest, bluntest confirmations that the principles of realism still hold sway (and will do so for a long time to come) in international relations. The good news is that that their bedrock – national interest, the relationship between being feared and respected, et cetera – was all formulated a long time ago with consummate talent and enduring relevance by a famous intellectual of his day: Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli. Internet produces few novelties. More than anything else it is a huge multiplier of whatever might be going on out there.