

# WikiLeaks: A Small NGO on a Global Stage

by the editors

**T**HE WIKILEAKS STORY—OR PERHAPS we might say *phenomenon*—is fast moving and long lasting. A small foreign-based “not-for-profit,” as opposed to a domestic U.S. 501(c)(3) public charity or a 501(c)(4) social-welfare organization, WikiLeaks has organized two high-profile releases of previously classified U.S. government documents. One concerns the U.S. military’s operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; the other involves 250,000 secret cables issued by ambassadors and staff of the Department of State commenting on relationships and negotiations with foreign leaders. At its core, this is a story about a nonprofit of limited size and resources generating a disproportionately large social and political impact around the nation.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has been alternately vilified and lionized around the world. Depending on the speaker, he is either an avatar of virulent anti-American hostility or the hero of the movement for global transparency. The WikiLeaks releases will either cause the American government and international diplomacy great damage, including jeopardizing human lives, or expose the lies and manipulations of the most powerful institutions today.

The controversies concerning WikiLeaks won’t be resolved anytime soon. The alleged leaker of the military documents, a young Oklahoma-born

Army private first class (PFC), sits in solitary confinement awaiting legal action. At the time of this writing, Assange is out on bail after having been arrested in London in connection with sexual assault charges in Sweden. He promises more revelations, including a treasure trove on major banks reportedly, including Bank of America.

In *NPQ*’s online Nonprofit Newswire, the WikiLeaks-as-a-Nonprofit story burgeoned, particularly at year’s end. Assembling Nonprofit Newswire commentaries on WikiLeaks reveals as much about new and emerging roles for nonprofits in the international arena as it does about what the information WikiLeaks uncovered concerning U.S.-caused civilian casualties in Afghanistan or American diplomats’ insights into the hard-partying ways of Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi.



## WikiLeaks: Big Waves around a Small Nonprofit

WikiLeaks describes itself as “a not-for-profit media organization . . . that has grown very quickly relying on a network of dedicated volunteers around the globe.” In a way, the volunteer-based structure of WikiLeaks is integral to the nonprofit ethos. The volunteer network of WikiLeaks demonstrated its power as a traditional young nonprofit. When the intermediaries that processed financial contributions to WikiLeaks—PayPal, MasterCard, Visa, and others—ceased servicing WikiLeaks, tens of thousands of “hacktivists” countered with denial-of-service

cyberattacks that at least temporarily shut down these money-processing sites.



## Details of WikiLeaks Budget to be Revealed

The odd anomaly in the nonprofit existence of WikiLeaks is its discomfort with its core mission of transparency, at least as applied to its own finances. Donations to WikiLeaks come through the little-known, volunteer-based Wau Holland Foundation in Berlin, Germany. But how much money is going through Wau Holland, and how much does it take to operate WikiLeaks? Reportedly, WikiLeaks raised \$1 million this past year, but is that the amount it takes to keep WikiLeaks in operation? In the past, WikiLeaks said its operating costs were a very low \$200,000, but if staff salaries are included, the annual budget might be more like \$600,000. Assange says that some of the organization’s budget might pay for the defense of the Army PFC charged with illegally giving WikiLeaks the secret military documents.

**WikiLeaks App Pulled from Apple Store:** Financial processing sites are not the only venues that have pulled the plug on WikiLeaks. Apple pulled an application from its digital shelves that would allow users to make donations to WikiLeaks on their iPhones. Did Apple own up to its true reason: to keep charity and controversy out of its stores? The app’s developer, one Igor Barinov, says that Apple gave a murkier explanation: the app violated an Apple regulation that prohibits apps that are “defamatory, offensive, mean-spirited, or likely to place the targeted

individual or group in harm's way." Apple also told the press that all apps "must comply with all local laws," but was the app in violation of the Espionage Act?



### WikiLeaks: A Breakthrough Nonprofit

**Innovation:** Before its announced release of tranches of State Department cables, WikiLeaks released 90,000 classified documents about the war in Afghanistan. Advocates of transparency applauded WikiLeaks as a breakthrough social innovation. But ultimately positive innovations (the jury is still out on WikiLeaks) can be uncomfortable and contentious. Prior to its release of military documents, WikiLeaks had been active for three years, publishing the operating procedures manuals from the U.S. base at Guantanamo, the "Climategate" e-mails from the University of East Anglia, and the contents of Sarah Palin's private Yahoo e-mail account.

Its track record makes for a controversial flashpoint. As a "stateless" organization, with a director and founder who apparently wanders the world sleeping in airports and on friends' couches, critics might wonder whose interests WikiLeaks serves and to whom it is loyal and responsible. Perhaps its stateless nonprofit *modus operandi* is the essence of the WikiLeaks innovation.



### WikiLeaks Wants You To Know Everything, Except Where Its Money Comes

**From:** WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange explains the organization's secrecy as "not [being] an operational concern, [therefore] it can't be sued for doing anything. So the donors' money is protected, in other words, from lawsuits." He justifies the secrecy because of a fear that governments and others will sue or take additional means to stop the flow of money. "It's very hard work to run an organization, let alone one that's constantly being spied upon and sued," he says. "Judicial decisions can have an effect on an organization's operation. . . . We can't have our cash flow constrained entirely." WikiLeaks cloaks its funding in other ways, including being registered as a library in Australia, a foundation in France, and a newspaper in Sweden.



### WikiLeaks Dump Undercuts Clinton: In

the press, the critics charge that WikiLeaks and Assange will have "blood on their hands" as people outed in formerly secret documents are targeted by terrorist or Taliban operatives as collaborators with the Americans. That doesn't seem to have happened, but the WikiLeaks release of State Department cables may have undermined the intentions of Hillary Clinton to reorganize and prioritize American development aid to the South. Nonprofits had welcomed the Clinton agenda, particularly since nonprofits play major roles in carrying forward development aid programs. But the embarrassment of the Department of State by WikiLeaks's distribution of 250,000 secret cables could harm Clinton's credibility and ultimately her ability to convince a Republican Congress to maintain, if not increase, foreign aid, much of which is delivered by domestic charities.



### WikiLeaks Founder Arrested—What's Next?

While facing arrest and charges in the United States and Sweden, Assange isn't out of options, and neither is WikiLeaks. Not only did the organization lose some donation-processing intermediaries such as PayPal (a subsidiary of eBay whose board chair is the head of the Omidyar Network, which has made grants to groups promoting and protecting journalism and transparency); but also it found itself without domain hosts. Hit with a flood of denial-of-service attacks, the [wikileaks.org](http://wikileaks.org) domain name was terminated by EveryDNS.net, but WikiLeaks stayed in operation by moving to other domains such as [wikileaks.ch](http://wikileaks.ch) (Switzerland), [wikileaks.de](http://wikileaks.de) (Germany), and [wikileaks.fi](http://wikileaks.fi) (Finland).

Similarly, PayPal and others terminated their service to WikiLeaks, as PayPal's stated, "due to a violation of the PayPal Acceptable Use Policy, which states that our payment service cannot be used for any activities that encourage, promote, facilitate or instruct others to engage in illegal activity." But WikiLeaks has maintained access to other Web-based donation-processing sites.

Is this the frontier for nonprofits? In the WikiLeaks case, a small nonprofit, minimally capitalized, connecting to an international network of loosely affiliated volunteers, has challenged and hugely discomfited business and government. In reaction, financial institutions have tried to cut the group's access to nonprofit capital markets, and various Internet controllers have tried to limit its access to the World Wide Web. In both cases, these efforts disrupted but did not undo WikiLeaks operations. An anonymous 16-year-old Dutch boy is seemingly the only person arrested in connection with pro-WikiLeaks denial-of-service forays, and the supporters of WikiLeaks have emulated the organization's "crowd sourcing" model of information gathering by carrying out counterattacks against the financial intermediaries and even governmental agencies (in Sweden and the United Kingdom).

Regardless of where one stands on the societal benefits of WikiLeaks, there is little question that the organization represents something new in the nonprofit sector. With little money and a low-cost business model, this tiny nonprofit—which is perhaps smaller than 90 percent of funded, operating nonprofits in the United States—has managed to create a disproportionate impact that has shaken governments and multinational corporations to their roots. All it seems to have required is some IT savvy, a network of friends and allies, and a couple of people willing to share hundreds of thousands of sometimes salacious, sometimes unnerving, secret documents.

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