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The Fragile Community

By DAVID BROOKS

Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, had moved 37 times by the time he reached his 14th birthday. His mother didn't enroll him in the local schools because, as Raffi Khatchadourian wrote in a [New Yorker profile](#), she feared "that formal education would inculcate an unhealthy respect for authority."

She needn't have worried. As a young computer hacker, he formed a group called International Subversives. As an adult, he wrote "Conspiracy as Governance," a pseudo-intellectual online diatribe. He talks of vast "patronage networks" that constrain the human spirit.

Far from respecting authority, Assange seems to be an old-fashioned anarchist who believes that all ruling institutions are corrupt and public pronouncements are lies.

For someone with his mind-set, the decision to expose secrets is easy. If the hidden world is suspect, then everything should be revealed. As *The New Yorker* reported, WikiLeaks has published technical details about an Army device designed to prevent roadside bombs from detonating. It posted soldiers' Social Security numbers. This week, the group celebrated the release of internal State Department documents with a triumphalist statement claiming that the documents expose the corruption, hypocrisy and venality of U.S. diplomats.

For him, it's easy. But for everyone else, it's hard. My colleagues on the news side of this newspaper do not share Assange's mentality. As the various statements from the editors have made abundantly clear, they face a much thornier set of issues.

As journalists, they have a professional obligation to share information that might help people make informed decisions. That means asking questions like: How does the U.S. government lobby allies? What is the real nature of our relationship with Pakistani intelligence? At the same time, as humans and citizens, my colleagues know they have a moral obligation not to endanger lives or national security.

The Times has thus erected a series of filters between the 250,000 raw documents that WikiLeaks obtained and complete public exposure. The paper has released only a tiny percentage of the cables. Information that might endanger informants has been redacted. Specific cables have been put into context with broader reporting.

Yet it might be useful to consider one more filter. Consider it the World Order filter. The fact that we live our lives amid order and not chaos is the great achievement of civilization. This order should not be taken for granted.

This order is tenuously maintained by brave soldiers but also by talkative leaders and diplomats. Every second of every day, leaders and diplomats are engaged in a never-ending conversation. The leaked cables reveal this conversation. They show diplomats seeking information, cajoling each other and engaging in faux-friendships and petty hypocrisies as they seek to avoid global disasters.

Despite the imaginings of people like Assange, the conversation revealed in the cables is not devious and nefarious. The private conversation is similar to the public conversation, except maybe more admirable. Israeli and Arab diplomats can be seen reacting sympathetically and realistically toward one another. The Americans in the cables are generally savvy and honest. Iran's neighbors are properly alarmed and reaching out.

Some people argue that this diplomatic conversation is based on mechanical calculations about national self-interest, and it won't be affected by public exposure. But this conversation, like all conversations, is built on relationships. The quality of the conversation is determined by the level of trust. Its direction is influenced by persuasion and by feelings about friends and enemies.

The quality of the conversation is damaged by exposure, just as our relationships with our neighbors would be damaged if every private assessment were brought to the light of day. We've seen what happens when conversations deteriorate (look at the U.S. Congress), and it's ugly.

The WikiLeaks dump will probably damage the global conversation. Nations will be less likely to share with the United States. Agencies will be tempted to return to the pre-9/11 silos. World leaders will get their back up when they read what is said about them. Cooperation against Iran may be harder to maintain because Arab leaders feel exposed and boxed in. This fragile international conversation is under threat. It's under threat from WikiLeaks. It's under threat from a Gresham's Law effect, in which the level of public exposure is determined by the biggest leaker and the biggest traitor.

It should be possible to erect a filter that protects not only lives and operations but also international relationships. It should be possible to do articles on specific revelations — Is the U.S. using diplomats to spy on the U.N.? What missile technology did North Korea give to Iran? — without unveiling in a wholesale manner the nuts and bolts of the diplomatic enterprise. We depend on those human conversations for the limited order we enjoy every day.