

Democracy's Napster Moment

A fight to the finish between the culture of the internet and the ancien régime.

[16 comments](#) *Micah White*, 17 Dec 2010

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Twenty-four hours after Julian Assange was arrested in London, a beekeeper in Colorado was [leaked damning evidence](#) that may explain why 29 percent of U.S. honeybee colonies died last winter. The [confidential draft Environmental Protection Agency report](#) suggested a connection between Bayer's bestselling pesticide, clothianidin, and the mysterious die-off of bees. In the following days leaks-- some minor, some significant and all damaging to the status quo--sprung up across the world.

A [leaked meeting agenda](#) suggested the Canadian Health Minister had lied in order to hide from public scrutiny efforts to privatize health care in Alberta; a [divulged internal Thai government report](#) testified that the military was responsible for three civilian deaths during unrest in May,

contradicting earlier claims; a [whistleblower confessed](#) that ten years ago he was paid by the FBI to place a backdoor in OpenBSD, long presumed to be one of the most secure operating systems in the world; and a [lawyer in Pakistan publicly named](#) the undercover CIA station chief responsible for unmanned drone attacks in the country. The unmasked U.S. spy, Jonathan Banks, was forced to flee amidst angry popular protest.

And through it all, Wikileaks continued to supply the world with a daily dose of [secret U.S. State Department cables](#).

Despite nervous assurances by U.S. Secretary of Defense Gates that the cable leaks will have "fairly modest" consequences for American foreign policy, it is growing increasingly clear that the emergence of Wikileaks signals a fundamental geopolitical shift. The memes of transparency and the free flow of information, ideals that underpin the net, are finally beginning to have concrete political consequences. This is truly, as [a commentator at the BBC](#) put it, "democracy's Napster moment." For just as Napster shattered the recording industry, so too does the secrecy spilling movement epitomized by Wikileaks have the potential to destabilize the West's narrative and cultural hegemony.

This is a drama that is still unfolding. Assange may be extradited, disappeared, or murdered. Wikileaks may flourish or it may be the target of a never-before imagined internet crack down. France has already passed an [Internet censorship law](#), and now there is talk that the [UN is working to create a similar initiative](#) on a global scale. In the weeks and months to come, we can expect a fight to the finish between the culture of the internet and the ancien régime. It is too early to know for certain who will come out the victor.

But what of Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks? There has been relatively little discussion of his motivations. Most mainstream media dismiss him as an egoist, but there is something to his self-sacrificing, self-destructive pursuit of Truth that does not seem selfish, or concerned with fame. Could there be another motivation aside from egoism?

A story about Assange's childhood has recently come to light which may help explain the origins of Wikileaks.

The rumor is that Julian Assange was once a talented Australian hacker whose *nom de guerre* was Mendax. If true, this is significant because Assange worked as a researcher on [Underground](#), a 1997 book about the hacker community, in which the story of Mendax figures prominently.

The following excerpt from [Chapter 8 of Underground](#) may be an important clue in unraveling the origins of Wikileaks.

One night in Adelaide, when Mendax was about four, his mother and a friend were returning from a meeting of anti-nuclear protesters. The friend claimed to have scientific evidence that the British had conducted high-yield, above-ground nuclear tests at Maralinga, a desert area in north-west South Australia.

A 1984 Royal Commission subsequently revealed that between 1953 and 1963 the British government

had tested nuclear bombs at the site, forcing more than 5000 Aborigines from their native lands. In December 1993, after years of stalling, the British government agreed to pay [sterling]20 million toward cleaning up the more than 200 square kilometres of contaminated lands. Back in 1968, however, the Menzies government had signed away Britain's responsibility to clean up the site. In the 1970s, the Australian government was still in denial about exactly what had happened at Maralinga.

As Mendax's mother and her friend drove through an Adelaide suburb carrying early evidence of the Maralinga tragedy, they noticed they were being followed by an unmarked car. They tried to lose the tail, without success. The friend, nervous, said he had to get the data to an Adelaide journalist before the police could stop him. Mendax's mother quickly slipped into a back lane and the friend leapt from the car. She drove off, taking the police tail with her.

The plain-clothed police pulled her over shortly after, searched her car and demanded to know where her friend had gone and what had occurred at the meeting. When she was less than helpful, one officer told her, 'You have a child out at 2 in the morning. I think you should get out of politics, lady. It could be said you were an unfit mother'.

A few days after this thinly veiled threat, her friend showed up at Mendax's mother's house, covered in fading bruises. He said the police had beaten him up, then set him up by planting hash on him. 'I'm getting out of politics,' he announced.

For the rest of the story about Assange/Mendax, and a detailed recounting of the many hacks he pulled off, [read Underground for free online](#) or watch the documentary [WikiRebels](#).

—[Micah White](#)