

Wikileaks: a library issue? Information Policy Committee Virtual Salon

By Heather Morrison

On Wednesday, April 20, BCLA's Information Policy Committee held its first-ever virtual salon, featuring Al Kagan of the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table. The topic was *Wikileaks: a library issue?* This article is based largely on Al's speaking notes, which he generously shared with us for this purpose.

About ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table

The Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) is one of 8 ALA round tables. SRRT has an Action Council (governing body) and 6 task forces: Alternative Media; Environment; Feminist; Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty; International Responsibilities; and Martin Luther King, Jr. SRRT elects a representative to sit on ALA Council (governing body). It was encouraging to hear that the work and leadership of BCLA and the Information Policy Committee is highly esteemed by SRRT!

Why ALA?

Librarianship is about access to information, and ALA has a high profile on free expression issues, through the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom. ALA supported Daniel Ellsberg when he leaked the Pentagon Papers to the NYT and Washington Post. Daniel Ellsberg will be speaking at ALA this year. Wikileaks covers a number of areas of importance to libraries and ALA, such a lack of government transparency, and restricted access to government information.

The Wikileaks issue touches on three of ALA's 11 "core values" of Access, Democracy, The Public Good, and Social Responsibility. The SRRT was very disappointed in ALA's response to the U.S. government's reaction to wikileaks, as detailed in Al Kagan's article in *American Libraries* Feb. 2011, *Midwinter's Wikileaks Letdown* <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/columns/my-mind/midwinter-s-wikileaks-letdown>. In brief, SRRT presented a resolution to Council which was tabled without discussion, and another resolution was passed which neither supported Wikileaks nor critiqued the U.S. government.

The SRRT Resolutions

SRRT developed two resolutions: The Resolution on Wikileaks and Federal Agencies basically calls for some common sense in the approach to Wikileaks, such as not attempting to prevent people from accessing public information.

The *Resolution in Support of WikiLeaks* resolved 5 points:

- Support for WikiLeaks to publish the materials
- Commended WikiLeaks for expunging names and other information harmful to innocent people
- Commended WikiLeaks for making these important documents available
- Urged librarians to link to their website
- Condemned harassment of WikiLeaks and their volunteers

Why support Wikileaks?

Al noted a few points underscoring the importance of supporting Wikileaks and similar initiatives, from an article by Micah Sifry article, *The Nation*, March 21, 2011, p. 17-22. The more information flows freely, the stronger the society, as government is accountable to the people. The U.S. government has focused on the potential of the internet to challenge governments elsewhere, but not in the U.S. Lying to the U.S. public about foreign and military policy is damaging to inter relations. "The threat of massive leaks will persist as long as there are massive secrets." Max Frankel (NYT)/ When people think what they are doing is subject to public view, their behavior generally improves.

There are many new similar sites: BrusselsLeaks (EU), IndoLeaks (Indonesia), Rospil.info (Russia), GreenLeaks, OpenLeaks, and Al-Jazeera Transparency Unit (Palestinian Authority)

Al presented a few examples of Wikileaks disclosures: Shows all European governments disbelieve that Afghanistan could become a credible nation in the medium term.

- U.S. Government contactor, DynCorp, paid for child prostitution in Afghanistan

- The U.S. Government ignored reports of torture in Iraq
- Corruption in Tunisia, helped spark overthrow of president
- Vote buying in India
- Kickbacks in British arms trade to Saudi Arabia
- U.S. spying on Ban Ki-moon and other top UN officials

Closer to home

Michael Geist's blog has some great examples of how Wikileaks Canada Cables have provided some important information that I would argue Canadians really ought to know, such as this post:

Wikileaks Cables show massive U.S. effort to establish Canadian DMCA

<http://www.michaelgeist.ca/content/view/5765/125/>

For more, often on issues relating to copyright/intellectual property, see the Wikileaks Cables Canada section on the upper left-hand side of Michael Geists' blog

<http://www.michaelgeist.ca>.

So what does this have to do with us?

One might well ask how the reaction of the ALA to the U.S. government's reaction to Wikileaks is relevant to BCLA. Isn't this an American issue? Yes, of course it is, and when I attended ALA Midwinter this January it was very heartening to see that a number of ALA committees were working on resolutions on WikiLeaks. Clearly, though, it was also heartening for people at ALA when I spoke at a discussion on this topic, saying that I was there because the BCLA Intellectual Freedom Committee and Information Policy Committee were very interested in the issue, and looking to ALA for leadership on this topic.

When an individual or local group is seeking to suppress information, it generally suffices for local library groups to speak out for intellectual freedom. But when it's a government, support from outside the country may be really, really helpful – or even necessary, as we saw in recent months when the Egyptian government's early reaction to the spring uprising was to work to shut down the internet.

Some Reflections

Regardless of what we might think of Wikileaks as an organization or the information that has been leaked, something that concerns me a great deal is what feels like suppression of discussion about the issue. Aside from the leaked material, this is a great opportunity to talk about things like access to government information, what is being classified and whether secrecy is really necessary, or whether openness would make more sense.

In recent years, there has been considerable changes in our news-making businesses, and we should be questioning whether WikiLeaks reflects a lack of investigative reporting, and if so, what other solutions might exist. There are also the issues of leaking and whistleblowing, important matters that we should be talking about – at our meetings, conferences, classrooms – and even Facebook and Twitter – without fear. Finally, it was good to see AI's article refer to the 11 core values of librarianship as articulated by ALA – something that I would like to return to in future issues of the Browser.

Heather Morrison is a Project Coordinator with BC Electronic Library Network, BCLA's Second Vice President 2011 - 2013, and IPC member.