

A society of fear: The Case of Julian Assange (Deep Dive)



What about Julian Assange? For this first chapter of our deep dive into “A society of fear”, that is a good starting point. Perhaps you’ve read the [message](#) I posted on his birthday. It explained a bit about the influence Julian had and still has in regards to building a new kind of independent press and how the establishment responded to it. It’s time to look into why platforms like Wikileaks are so much more effective than regular press outlets in disseminating the truth. What exactly makes it “special”. Why did Julian Assange and Wikileaks become a target?

Right now I’m still busy writing a piece about different methods of propaganda. But this specific article will focus on the “fear appeal”, part of the “special appeals” method in propaganda (More about the different methods can be found at the [PBS classroom materials](#)).

First some history.

Wikileaks.org was registered on the 4th of October 2006 and the website published its first document two months later. Wikileaks is usually represented in public by Julian Assange, described by some as “the heart and soul of the organisation,

its founder, philosopher, spokesperson, original coder, organizer, financier, and all the rest". Daniel Domscheit-Berg, Kristinn Hrafnsson, Sarah Harrison and Joseph Farrell are other publicly known associates and former associates of Julian Assange, involved with the website.

The Wikileaks platform was established with a "Wiki" communal publication method, which was terminated in May 2010. The original founders and volunteers were a mixture of dissidents, journalists, mathematicians and other activists and technologists from Australia, Europe, South Africa, Taiwan and the United States. In June 2009 the website had over 1200 registered volunteers. In a 2013 resolution the International Federation of Journalists called Wikileaks a "*new breed of media organisation*" that "*offers important opportunities for media organisations*". Harvard professor Yochai Benkler praised Wikileaks as a new form of journalistic enterprise. He testified at the court martial of Chelsea Manning, stating that "*Wikileaks serves a particular journalistic function,*" and that the "*range of the journalist's privilege is a hard line to draw*".

Delivering important news and information to the public is the primary goal of Wikileaks, according to the website. "*One of our most important activities is to publish original source material alongside our news stories so readers and historians alike can see evidence of the truth.*" Another goal is to ensure that journalists and whistleblowers are not prosecuted for emailing sensitive or classified documents. The online "drop box" is described by Wikileaks as "*an innovative, secure and anonymous way for sources to leak information to Wikileaks journalists*". On 26 September 2018 it was announced that Julian Assange had appointed Kristinn Hrafnsson as editor-in-chief of Wikileaks while Assange remained as its publisher.

In 2010, current United States president Joe Biden compared Julian Assange to a high tech terrorist. In that same year, Interpol, an organization that is comprised of 96 countries

including Russia and the United States, issued an official arrest warrant against the journalist.



The president of the United States made the following statements:

"I would argue it's closer to being a high tech terrorist than the Pentagon Papers."

"This guy has done things that have damaged and put in jeopardy the lives and occupations of people in other parts of the world."

Famous United States politician Hillary Clinton wrote:

"He's a tool of Russian intelligence, and if he's such a ... martyr of free speech, why doesn't Wikileaks ever publish anything coming out of Russia?"

"He claims to be a champion of transparency, but for many years, he's been helpful to Putin, one of the most repressive and least transparent autocrats in the world."

These last statements, by Hillary Clinton, happened around the United States elections, where the so called "Russian scare" was being used and claims were made that Russia attempted to hack the elections. Of course none of these statements about Julian Assange or Wikileaks have got anything to do with the

truth. Wikileaks cables openly characterized Russia as a [“mafia state,”](#) named then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev the [“Robin to Putin’s Batman”](#) and said Russian intelligence “masterminded” [a shadow war in Georgia](#). Not exactly the most flattering publications. Julian Assange and Wikileaks never denied the horrible situation in Russia. It might be confusing to some, but when you speak out about an authoritarian regime, you don’t necessarily have to support another authoritarian regime at all.

But the power of fear is real.

“The streets of our country are in turmoil. Universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. Dangerous communists are seeking to destroy our country. Enemies threaten us with all their might, the United States are in danger. From within and from the outside. We need law and order! Without it our nation can’t survive.”

“Our meeting occurs at a moment of crisis for our nation. The attacks on our police and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life. Any politician who does not grasp this danger is not fit to lead.”

When a propagandist warns the audience that disaster will result if they do not follow a particular course of action, the propagandist is using the “fear appeal”. By playing on the audience’s deep seated fears, practitioners of this technique hope to redirect attention away from the merits of a particular proposal and toward steps that can be taken to reduce the fear.

During World War 2, Nazi leader Hermann Göring said:

“The people don’t want war, but they can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. This is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and for exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country.”



This technique can be highly effective when wielded by an authoritarian regime, but it is typically used in less dramatic ways. Consider the following:

A television commercial shows a horrible car accident (the fear appeal) and reminds viewers to wear their seat belts (the fear-reducing behavior). Or a pamphlet from an insurance company includes pictures of houses destroyed by floods (the fear appeal) and follows up with details about home owners insurance (the fear-reducing behavior). Perhaps a letter from a pro gun organization begins by describing a lawless America in which only criminals own guns (the fear appeal) and concludes by asking readers to oppose a ban on background checks (the fear-reducing behavior). Then a letter from an anti gun organization lists the names of people who have died in school shootings (the fear appeal) and concludes by asking readers to boycott stores that sell assault rifles (the fear-reducing behavior).

According to evolutionary psychology, humans have a strong impulse to pay attention to danger because awareness of dangers has been important for survival throughout our history. Since the end of the Second World War, social psychologists and communication scholars have been conducting studies in order to learn more about the effectiveness of fear appeals. Some criticized the studies in general, others have found fault with the experimental methods used. However, the general conclusions are worth considering.

- *“All other things being equal, the more frightened a person is by a communication, the more likely her or she is to take positive preventive action.”* – Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson in the book *Age of propaganda: The everyday use and abuse of persuasion*.
- Fear appeals will not succeed in altering behavior if the audience feels powerless to change the situation.
- Fear appeals are more likely to succeed in changing behavior if they contain specific recommendations for reducing the threat that the audience believes are both effective and doable.

There are four elements to a successful fear appeal:

1: A threat.

2: A specific recommendation about how the audience should behave.

3: Audience perception that the recommendation will be effective in addressing the threat.

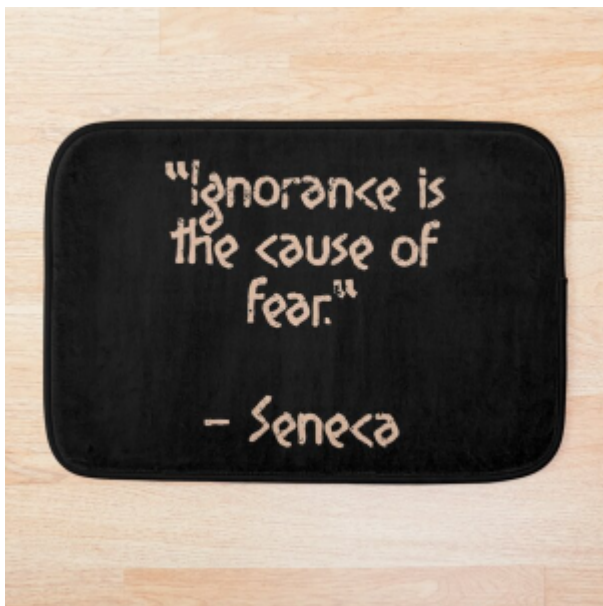
4: Audience perception that they are capable of performing the recommended behavior.

As an example in popular culture, fear is utilized as an effective propaganda technique in order to oppress and control the animals in George Orwell's book *“Animal Farm”*. Initially, Mr. Jones ruthlessly wields his authority by oppressing and intimidating the animals. Mr. Jones and his men use whips, prods, and harnesses to punish and control the animals. As a result of his intimidating presence and the threat of violence, the animals fear Mr. Jones. They passively submit to his authority.

Aldous Huxley stated the following as part of *Brave New World* revisited: *“The principles underlying propaganda are extremely simple. Find some common desire, some widespread unconscious fear or anxiety; think out some way to relate this wish or*

fear to the product you have to sell; then build a bridge of verbal or pictorial symbols over which your customer can pass from fact to compensatory dream, and from the dream to the illusion that your product, when purchased, will make the dream come true."

But behind fear is often ignorance.



The Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born in Spain, more than 2000 years ago. He came to Rome as an outsider but worked his way up so close to the center of power that he is seen as a threat. First sentenced to death, he is then reprieved, sentenced to death again but sent into exile instead, brought back to tutor young Nero, suspected of a plot to assassinate his former pupil, then again sentenced once more to death. Through it all, Seneca remains calm, refusing to infuse his life with fear. When his friends weep and rage over the order that he has to commit suicide, he says: "Where are your maxims of philosophy, or the preparation of so many years of study against evils to come?"

When we again look at George Orwell's "Animal Farm", following the successful rebellion, Snowball, Napoleon, and the other leading pigs use the fear of Mr. Jones's return to motivate the animals into accepting the principles of Animalism and

following their directives. The animals submit to the ruling pigs's policies because they fear Mr. Jones will return and brutally oppress them. Once again, fear is the essential element needed to motivate the animals into obeying the pigs. But in this case it is ignorance among the animals that allows the pigs to use the fear. The other animals don't know if Mr. Jones will return, the pigs claim they do and they use that lie to keep the other animals obedient.

Knowing and understanding things reassures us, while ignorance puts us in a state of alert. In today's world we are constantly surrounded by very serious unknown dangers, like so called public "insecurity". In certain areas and countries, when you go out there's no way of knowing what will happen to you. If someone tells you that a certain street is dangerous, you'll be afraid when you cross it, even if it appears to be safe.

And the same goes for the phenomenon called "terrorism". It causes terror due to the fact that we don't know when, where or how it will happen. As terrorism isn't limited to a certain area, in essence it is supposedly everywhere. It becomes an omnipresent threat that gives rise to constant fear. In this case, as in the previous one, fear and ignorance, or a lack of knowledge, are a deadly cocktail. The impossibility of foreseeing a threat that we know exists, or at least that we suspect does, causes our warning mechanisms to jump into action.

Just as primitive people feared lightning because they didn't know what it was or how to defend themselves from it, in the same way modern human beings have a fear of where or when danger may strike them. We have this fear because we know it can harm us without warning, giving us no time to flee from the danger. The behavior of these phenomena is unpredictable, because we do not have the information, nor the knowledge that allows us to organize a coherent response. All these "global threats" make us anxious to a greater or lesser degree, and

this leads to us trusting those in power. They represent the control that we do not have. We sometimes feel they are there to save us from these uncertainties when faced with danger, and from fear and ignorance.

In the past, people invented false gods in order to obtain protection, nowadays we trust in the extraordinary qualities given to some leaders who promise to ward off danger. In this way, just as knowledge frees us and makes us more able to function correctly, ignorance condemns us to the bondage of fear.



“You can either be informed and your own rulers, or you can be ignorant and have someone else, who is not ignorant, rule over you.”

Julian Assange

Wikileaks destroys ignorance that feeds the “fear appeal” method of Propaganda, with simple facts.

Julian Assange didn't focus on writing articles or making videos about certain subjects, like most other journalists do. Instead he published documents provided by leakers and whistleblowers. Raw information that directly came from inside the establishment, in some cases only redacted to protect certain innocent individuals. That same establishment that attempts to use ignorance to create a fear campaign and keep people in line was being exposed for what it was, from the inside. The information was then disseminated by normal people. The focus was on the documents, 100% verified as true, not on the story. No preconceived opinions, no fancy words to spin anything.

Wikileaks dismantled ignorance in a way that was never before seen in the media landscape. That ignorance that, as I explained in this article, is the basis behind most of our fears.

Right now, by keeping Julian Assange locked up for what he did, this establishment continues with their fear campaign. In fact it switched it into a higher gear. Because this time it's also aimed at other journalists, by showing them what can happen to them if they attempt to seriously stop the wheels of this Propaganda machine from turning around. And by doing this, the establishment assumes these journalists stick to making their not so threatening articles and videos. It expects to have put enough fear in their minds to make sure that they would never even dare of making the moves Julian and his Wikileaks made.

But I am convinced that reality will soon prove them very wrong.

"The great revolution in the history of man, past, present and future, is the revolution of those determined to be free."

– John F. Kennedy