

Could WikiLeaks survive without Julian Assange?

LONDON (AP) -- Its founder is a wanted man, its systems are under attack, it is condemned from the capitals of the world.

But although the future is uncertain for WikiLeaks, the website dedicated to releasing classified information has opened a Pandora's Box of secret-spilling that will be difficult to reverse.

WikiLeaks, which has triggered global governmental alarm by releasing reams of classified U.S. diplomatic cables, is facing attacks in cyberspace and in the legal sphere. The site is assailed by hackers and has been booted from its U.S. server. Frontman Julian Assange is in hiding and faces allegations of sexual misconduct.

"Whatever happens to the domain name and the actual organization, the idea unleashed by WikLeaks is going to continue," said Joshua Benton, director of the Nieman Journalism Lab.

Ben Laurie, a data security expert who advised WikiLeaks before it launched in 2006, agreed.

"The concept is not going to die. It's really hard to keep things shut down if they want to stay up," he said. "Look at everything else people would like not to happen online - phishing, spam, porn. It's all still there."

Little is known about the day-to-day functioning of WikiLeaks. It has no headquarters, few if any paid staff - but a famous public face in Assange, a wiry 39-year-old Australian computer hacker with no permanent address.

He's on the cover of newspapers and magazines around the world, but he has not appeared in public for a month.

Assange, who is somewhere in Britain, is the subject of a European arrest warrant issued by authorities in Sweden, where he is accused of rape, sexual molestation and unlawful coercion.

If British police arrest him, he will likely be caught up in a lengthy legal fight against extradition and could be jailed, his ability to operate as the face of WikiLeaks curtailed even further.

Assange denies the Swedish charges, which his British lawyer, Mark Stephens, has said stem from a "dispute over consensual but unprotected sex." He said Assange was happy to speak to Swedish prosecutors and had provided his contact details to authorities there and in Britain.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

Assange also has made powerful enemies in the United States, especially since WikiLeaks released thousands of secret logs from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan earlier this year. With the latest leaks, U.S. politicians have called for him to be prosecuted for espionage - or worse. Former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin asked on Facebook: "Why was he not pursued with the same urgency we pursue al-Qaida and Taliban leaders?"

Assange acknowledged Friday that "I have become the lightning rod."

"In the end, someone must be responsible to the public and only a leadership that is willing to be publicly courageous can genuinely suggest that sources take risks for the greater good," he said during a question-and-answer session on The Guardian newspaper's website.

"I get undue attacks on every aspect of my life, but then I also get undue credit as some kind of balancing force."

It's not just governments and the law with whom Assange conflicts. He is a divisive figure who has been accused of overshadowing WikiLeaks' work and appears to have fallen out with several former colleagues.

They include WikiLeaks' former German spokesman Daniel Schmitt, who has written a soon-to-be-published book about his time at the website.

In September, German magazine Der Spiegel quoted Schmitt as saying that Assange "reacted to any criticism with the allegation that I was disobedient to him and disloyal to the project."

Yet those who have worked with Assange say his charisma and passion are evident.

"You kind of get the feeling that you are talking to a persona from the 'Matrix' movies," said Icelandic legislator Robert Marshall, who met Assange while preparing legislation that aims to turn the island nation into a haven of media freedom. "But his enthusiasm toward freedom of expression and the rights of journalists was very real to me."

Laurie recalled Assange as "fairly geeky, very smart, extremely interesting to talk to."

"I know a lot of geeks and I certainly know weirder people than him," Laurie said.

As WikiLeaks released the first few hundred of what it says are a quarter of a million secret diplomatic cables this week, pressure on the site grew.

Amazon.com Inc., which had provided WikiLeaks with use of its servers, evicted it on Wednesday saying the website had violated its terms of service. The site remains on the servers of its Swedish provider, Bahnhof AB.

The next day, WikiLeaks' American domain name system provider withdrew service

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to the wikileaks.org name after it came under concerted cyber-attack. Service provider everyDNS said the attacks threatened the rest of its network. WikiLeaks responded by moving to a Swiss domain name, wikileaks.ch. On Friday, the French government moved to ban WikiLeaks from servers in that country.

Chased from one country to the next, WikiLeaks also appears perennially cash-strapped, appealing on its website and Twitter for donations to "keep us strong."

Recently it seems to have taken steps to put itself on a firmer footing. Last month it set up a private limited company in Iceland as part of a move to restructure its global operations. The organization is also establishing legal entities in Sweden and France, spokesman Kristinn Hrafnsson said, as bases from which to carry out tasks such as opening bank accounts.

The Icelandic government recently passed a resolution in favor of a bill that aims to turn the tiny nation into a journalistic haven by granting high-level protection to investigative journalists and their sources. Backers hope the initiative, partly driven by Assange, will become law next year. Such a law could provide protection to a site like WikiLeaks.

Assange said in Friday's online chat that WikiLeaks had taken steps to make sure it was not silenced, sending the "Cablegate" material and other secret documents in encrypted form "to over 100,000 people."

"If something happens to us, the key parts will be released automatically," he said. "History will win."

Whatever happens to Wikileaks, the anti-secrecy cat may be out of the bag. Schmitt, the former WikiLeaks spokesman, has said he wants to set up a rival secret-spilling site, and others may follow.

"I think the basic concept has a future," said Steven Aftergood, who works on government secrecy policy for the Federation of American Scientists. "Anonymous disclosure of restricted records is easier than it has ever been. The virtues of transparency and government accountability are more widely recognized than they have ever been. Those two factors together provide a foundation for this kind of activity.

"Whether it will be Julian Assange's WikiLeaks or the new German spinoff or another initiative remains to be seen," he said.

Benton, director of the Nieman Lab, said that means governments will have to develop a response beyond condemnation and legal threats. He compared it to music file-sharing, which was greeted with hostility by a music industry that soon realized it had to develop ways to make money from downloads.

"They can't think, 'This is an opponent we need to defeat,'" he said. "They have to think about how they are going to deal with it."

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