

By Jim Romenesko

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Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism faculty and officers tell President Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder that “while we hold varying opinions of Wikileaks’ methods and decisions, we all believe that in publishing diplomatic cables Wikileaks is engaging in journalistic activity protected by the First Amendment” and that “as a historical matter, government overreaction to publication of leaked material in the press has always been more damaging to American democracy than the leaks themselves.”

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Attorney General Eric Holder
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

December 13, 2010

Dear Mr. President and General Holder:

As faculty members and officers of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, we are concerned by recent reports that the Department of Justice is considering criminal charges against Julian Assange or others associated with Wikileaks.

Journalists have a responsibility to exercise careful news judgment when classified documents

are involved, including assessing whether a document is legitimately confidential and whether there may be harm from its publication.

But while we hold varying opinions of Wikileaks' methods and decisions, we all believe that in publishing diplomatic cables Wikileaks is engaging in journalistic activity protected by the First Amendment. Any prosecution of Wikileaks' staff for receiving, possessing or publishing classified materials will set a dangerous precedent for reporters in any publication or medium, potentially chilling investigative journalism and other First Amendment-protected activity.

As a historical matter, government overreaction to publication of leaked material in the press has always been more damaging to American democracy than the leaks themselves.

The U.S. and the First Amendment continue to set a world standard for freedom of the press, encouraging journalists in many nations to take significant risks on behalf of transparency. Prosecution in the Wikileaks case would greatly damage American standing in free-press debates worldwide and would dishearten those journalists looking to this nation for inspiration.

We urge you to pursue a course of prudent restraint in the Wikileaks matter. Please note this letter reflects our individual views, not a position of Columbia University or the Journalism School.

Respectfully,

Emily Bell, Professor of Professional Practice; Director, Tow Center for Digital Journalism

Helen Benedict, Professor

Sheila Coronel, Toni Stabile Professor of Professional Practice in Investigative;
Director, Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism

June Cross, Associate Professor of Journalism

John Dinges, Godfrey Lowell Cabot Professor of Journalism

Joshua Friedman, Director, Maria Moors Cabot Prize for Journalism in the Americas

Todd Gitlin, Professor; Chair, Ph.D. Program

Ari Goldman, Professor

LynNell Hancock, Professor; Director, Spencer Education Journalism Fellowship

Marguerite Holloway, Assistant Professor; Director, Science and Environmental Journalism

David Klatell, Professor of Professional Practice; Chair, International Studies

Nicolas Lemann, Dean; Henry R. Luce Professor

Dale Maharidge, Associate Professor

Arlene Morgan, Associate Dean, Prizes and Programs

Victor S. Navasky, George T. Delacorte Professor in Magazine Journalism; Director,
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Michael Schudson, Professor

Bruce Shapiro, Executive Director, Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma

Alisa Solomon, Associate Professor; Director, Arts Concentration, M.A. Program
Paula Span, Adjunct Professor

Duy Linh Tu, Assistant Professor of Professional Practice; Coordinator, Digital Media Program