

DID MANNING ZEROFILL HIS COMPUTERS? OR DID THE MILITARY?

Wired has a post on MSNBC's report that "there is apparently no evidence he passed the files directly to [Julian] Assange, or had any direct contact with the controversial WikiLeaks figure." In it, Kim Zetter looks to the chat logs to try to explain why there is no such evidence.

If it's true that investigators have found no evidence linking Manning and Assange, it may be because Manning allegedly erased it from his system. He discussed doing so in his chats with Lamo. Manning noted in the chats that any incriminating evidence of his activities had been "zerofilled", or erased, from his computers:

But that's not precisely what the passage she quotes says. Note, because I've used a different selection of chat log than Zetter, I have bolded the part she included in her selection (though she includes in her post).

(02:13:51 AM) Lamo: Why does your job afford you access?

(02:13:59 AM) Lamo: except for the UN.

(02:14:03 AM) Manning: because i have a workstation

(02:14:15 AM) Lamo: and World Bank.

(02:14:17 AM) Manning: *had*

(02:14:36 AM) Lamo: So you have these stored now?

(02:14:54 AM) Manning: i had two computers... one connected to SIPRNET the other to JWICS...

(02:15:07 AM) Manning: no, they're government laptops

(02:15:18 AM) Manning: they've been zerofilled

(02:15:22 AM) Manning: because of the pullout

(02:15:57 AM) Manning: evidence was destroyed... by the system itself

(02:16:10 AM) Lamo: So how would you deploy the cables? If at all.

(02:16:26 AM) Manning: oh no... cables are reports

(02:16:34 AM) Lamo: ah

(02:16:38 AM) Manning: State Department Cable = a Memorandum

(02:16:48 AM) Lamo: embassy cables?

(02:16:54 AM) Manning: yes

(02:17:00 AM) Manning: 260,000 in all

(02:17:10 AM) Manning: i mentioned this previously

(02:17:14 AM) Lamo: yes

(02:17:31 AM) Lamo: stored locally, or retrieveable?

(02:17:35 AM) Manning: brb latrine =P

(02:17:43 AM) Manning: i dont have a copy anymore

(02:17:59 AM) Lamo: *nod*

(02:18:09 AM) Manning: they were stored on a centralized server...

(02:18:34 AM) Lamo: what's your endgame plan, then?

(02:18:36 AM) Manning: it was vulnerable as fuck

As Zetter correctly notes, in this passage Manning suggests files **had been** zerofilled. But in this passage, he doesn't say he did it.

Now, in a separate section, Manning says he zerofilled the original of the Rejkjavik 13 cable.

(1:48:50 PM) Lamo: give me some bona fides ... yanno? any specifics.

(1:49:40 PM) Manning: this one was a test: Classified cable from US Embassy Reykjavik on Icesave dated 13 Jan 2010

(1:50:30 PM) Manning: the result of that one was that the icelandic ambassador to the US was recalled, and fired

(1:51:02 PM) Manning: thats just one cable...

(1:51:14 PM) Lamo: Anything unreleased?

(1:51:25 PM) Manning: i'd have to ask assange

(1:51:53 PM) Manning: **i zerofilled the original**

(1:51:54 PM) Lamo: why do you answer to him?

(1:52:29 PM) Manning: i dont... i just want the material out there... i dont want to be a part of it [my emphasis]

Contextually, this might suggest that both mentions of zerofilling refer to the same—all 250,000 cables—since they both come in response to Lamo's probing questions about the cables. Indeed, Manning's reference to zerofilling himself, in the context of the Rejkjavik cable, may explain why he no longer has access to any cables he could give Lamo to prove his bona fides. But even if both references both mean to include all the cables, it would remain ambiguous whether Manning zerofilled his computer or someone else did.

And that's significant, because in a third reference, Manning provides a potential alternative explanation for who zerofilled his computers.

(02:38:45 PM) Lamo: What would you do if your role /w Wikileaks seemed in danger of being blown?

(02:38:48 PM) Manning: but i was a part of it... and completely helpless...

(02:39:01 PM) Lamo: sometimes we're all helpless

(02:39:34 PM) Manning: try and figure out how i could get my side of the story out... before everything was twisted around to make me look like Nidal Hassan

(02:40:15 PM) Manning: i dont think its going to happen

(02:40:26 PM) Manning: i mean, i was never noticed

(02:41:10 PM) Manning: regularly ignored... except when i had something essential... then it was back to "bring me coffee, then sweep the floor"

(02:42:24 PM) Manning: i never quite understood that

(02:42:44 PM) Manning: felt like i was an abused work horse...

(02:43:33 PM) Manning: also, theres god awful accountability of IP addresses...

(02:44:47 PM) Manning: the network was upgraded, and patched up so many times... and systems would go down, logs would be lost... **and when moved or upgraded... hard drives were zeroed**

(02:45:12 PM) Manning: its impossible to trace much on these field networks...

(02:46:10 PM) Manning: and who would honestly expect so much information to

be exfiltrated from a field network?

That is, Manning suggests that every time computers were moved, they were zerofilled. And whatever happened to his computer while he still had access to him, it might be safe to assume that the downloaded files got zerofilled routinely when the computers were reassigned (remember, as far as we know, he lost access not because of the alleged leak, but because of an altercation with a colleague).

Mind you, I'm skeptical that Manning zerofilled anything himself. That's because his charging sheet includes multiple references to things he downloaded onto his personal, non-secure computer. Which suggests the most solid evidence they have against Manning comes from that (though they do appear to have evidence he accessed things he did not download onto his computer).

But all that really just ignores the larger point: that none of that evidence—at least given reports—directly connects Manning to Julian Assange.