

WHAT STATE WANTED WITHHELD FROM WIKILEAKS PUBLICATION

There are now four versions of the cooperation between WikiLeaks and its journalistic “partners:” Vanity Fair, NYT, Guardian, and Spiegel. A comparison of them is more instructive than reading any in isolation.

For example, compare how the NYT and Spiegel describe the three things the State Department asked journalistic partners not to publish during the lead-up to publication of the diplomatic cables. The NYT says State asked them not to publish individual sources, “sensitive American programs,” and candid comments about foreign leaders.

The administration’s concerns generally fell into three categories. First was the importance of protecting individuals who had spoken candidly to American diplomats in oppressive countries. We almost always agreed on those and were grateful to the government for pointing out some we overlooked.

“We were all aware of dire stakes for some of the people named in the cables if we failed to obscure their identities,” Shane wrote to me later, recalling the nature of the meetings. Like many of us, Shane has worked in countries where dissent can mean prison or worse. “That sometimes meant not just removing the name but also references to institutions that might give a clue to an identity and sometimes even the dates of conversations, which might be compared with surveillance tapes of an American Embassy to reveal who was visiting the diplomats that day.”

The second category included sensitive American programs, usually related to

intelligence. We agreed to withhold some of this information, like a cable describing an intelligence-sharing program that took years to arrange and might be lost if exposed. In other cases, we went away convinced that publication would cause some embarrassment but no real harm.

The third category consisted of cables that disclosed candid comments by and about foreign officials, including heads of state. The State Department feared publication would strain relations with those countries. We were mostly unconvinced.

Spiegel describes those three things slightly differently. It says State asked them to withhold government sources, cables with security implications, and “cables relating to counterterrorism.”

At first, less than a week before the upcoming publication of the leaked documents, Clinton’s diplomats wanted three things from the participating media organizations. First, they wanted the names of US government sources to be protected if leaks posed a danger to life and limb. This was a policy that all five media organizations involved already pursued. Second, they asked the journalists to exercise restraint when it came to cables with security implications. Third, they asked them to be aware that cables relating to counterterrorism are extremely sensitive.

Now the discrepancy may mean nothing. Both agree State had three categories of information they wanted withheld. Both agree State asked the newspapers to withhold both the names of sources and details on intelligence programs. But since the NYT notes the journalistic partners didn’t

take the third category—candid comments—very seriously, perhaps Spiegel just misremembered what that third category was, or just remembered a particular focus on counterterrorism. Presumably, after all, the counterterrorism programs would be included in category two.

But whatever the cause of the discrepancy, I am intrigued that Spiegel emphasizes counterterrorism programs rather than candid comments about foreign officials, not least because the Spiegel article describes working with US Ambassador to Germany Philip Murphy directly. Consider the two most sensitive revelations pertaining to Germany and counterterrorism. First, there was the news of Philip Murphy personally bad-mouthing the Free Democratic Party's opposition to US vacuuming up European data, particularly as it relates to the SWIFT database. Then there are negotiations about whether Germany would prosecute Americans involved in the rendition of Khalid El-Masri. As I showed, it appears that Condi was telling German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier one thing about a subpoena for those Americans, followed quickly by the American Deputy Chief of Mission "correcting" the US position on it.

That is, on both major disclosures about US counterterrorism cooperation with the Germans, the US has reason to be embarrassed about its two-faced dealing with German officials.

In other words, there may be no discrepancy. It is possible that the third category of information State wanted suppressed has to do not with the substance of our counterterrorism program (after all, both the details of SWIFT and of our rendition program have been widely publicized), but with the degree to which our private diplomacy belies all the public claims we make about counterterrorism.