‘What was the nature of the security threat that WikiLeaks presented to the US in 2010?’

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Abstract

The disclosures made by WikiLeaks in 2010 were a polarising issue. Julian Assange, the organisation’s spokesperson was called a “terrorist” but at the same time, comments such as ‘this is nothing we didn’t already know’, or that the disclosures were merely ‘embarrassing’ were also made. How can it be both? A critical, constructivist analysis and in particular the Copenhagen School’s theory of securitisation is used to examine how the main actors sought to securitise the issues and the other actor. In this analysis, identity, values and norms, as well as the audience play a role in how security is determined. WikiLeaks attempted to securitise US foreign policy, providing the US with an unorthodox enemy. The US, with more resources and power, endeavoured to securitise the threat made by WikiLeaks by maximising the discourse of danger, that of ‘cyber threat’, to capitalise on a sense of fear that equates the potential of the Internet with WMDs. A successful securitisation allows the securitising actor to introduce emergency or exceptional measures (such as surveillance or a ‘pause’ on human rights) that would not be acceptable under normal circumstances. In 2010, the powerful images of terrorism and prospective WMDs were still resonant in an insecure United States after the 9/11 attacks. These images assisted in the securitisation of WikiLeaks and in the further introduction of extraordinary measures, including the regulation of on-line information and the re-engineering of the architecture of the Internet. The securitisation of on-line information and a re-engineering of Internet architecture also allows a tangible shift in sovereignty in a period of globalisation where borders tend to be perceived as open.
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