

## WikiLeaks: It's a judgement call

**Leong Wee Keat**

**Today**, 22 February 2011

While some questioned The Straits Times' (ST) decision to carry leaked US State Department cables that allegedly contained controversial comments by senior Singapore foreign affairs officials on the Republic's neighbours, the newspaper's associate editor said it did so as the story had broken in Australian news reports.

Mr Janadas Devan pointed out the cables' content was leaked exclusively by WikiLeaks to Australia's Fairfax Media group in the South-east Asian region.

Elsewhere, WikiLeaks worked with other newspapers - such as The New York Times, The Guardian and Der Spiegel - to publish simultaneous reports based on a collection of more than 91,000 classified reports on the war in Afghanistan.

The local media's position on dealing with leaked documents - such as the recent WikiLeaks episode which put the Singapore officials under the spotlight - came under scrutiny yesterday during a Singapore Press Club and Asia Journalism Fellowship dialogue.

Asked what would ST do if it obtained leaked official documents, Mr Devan said the newspaper would check with the authorities on its accuracy. The Official Secrets Act (OSA) may apply in such a situation, he added.

Former ST editor Leslie Fong, who moderated yesterday's forum, felt editorial discretion mattered too. "Even if it did not contravene the OSA, I think the editor of the day will have to decide whether publication ... was in the national interest," he added.

With information technology impacting how sensitive government data can be easily communicated, other panellists at yesterday's forum said they expect more leaks to occur.

Thus, media researcher Arun Mahizhnan felt the role of good journalism would be to make sense of the information given by a source. While traditional newspapers could benefit from publishing such classified information - especially when it is "genuine", "relevant" and "of public interest" - the Institute of Policy Studies deputy director cautioned that any publication should also be balanced against endangering others' safety.

The recent WikiLeaks incident was "a field day for newspapers", acknowledged diplomat and director of the Institute of South-east Asian Studies K Kesavapany. "People like sensationalism," he said.

The incident, however, has made Mr Kesavapany "more cautious" about what he says to other diplomats. But he does not think diplomacy will be practised differently following the WikiLeaks episode as diplomats would still turn to missions whose diplomats have "something worthwhile to say".