

Codes, WikiLeaks and National Security

Snapshot: In this activity, students will learn about the controversy surrounding WikiLeaks and discuss measures governments take to protect information. Additionally, students will compare the government's practice of keeping documents classified to the Union use of coded telegrams during the Civil War. This activity can be completed in one class period (about 30 minutes).

Activity overview for teachers

Begin by having students brainstorm some reasons a government might want to keep information secret. Write ideas on the board or make a word cloud using tools such as www.worditout.com. After this introduction, give students a news article or show them a news video discussing the WikiLeaks controversy (suggested article: <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-10757263>).

Explain to students that the Union Army used encoded telegrams during the Civil War to prevent important military information from ending up in enemy hands. If necessary, elaborate using one of our Explainers (The Telegraph in the Civil War and Cipher in the Civil War).

Have students fill out a Venn diagram comparing the kinds of information governments try to keep secret today to the kinds of information the Lincoln administration wanted to keep secret during the Civil War.

Explain to students that though the Union code was never broken, they are going to pretend that someone on the Union side published the Union code in a newspaper just like WikiLeaks did with classified government information. On a sheet of paper, students should answer the following questions to determine if the offender is guilty of wrongdoing:

1. Should governments be allowed to keep secrets from their enemies?
2. Should governments be allowed to keep secrets from their own people?
3. Is it possible for governments to keep secrets from their enemies without keeping secrets from their own people? Why or why not?
4. The man who published the Union code (in our scenario) argues that the people had the right to know and that the government had no right to hide information from its people. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
5. Is the man guilty? Why or why not?

Lastly, have students vote whether or not to convict the imaginary offender and discuss students' answers to the questions.

Directions for students

Step 1 - Brainstorm: Think about reasons why a government might want to keep information secret.

Step 2 - Compare: Fill out a Venn diagram comparing the kinds of information governments try to keep secret today (using your knowledge of WikiLeaks) to the kinds of information the Lincoln administration wanted to keep secret during the Civil War.

Step 3 - CiviLeaks on trial: Though the Union code was never broken, we are going to pretend that someone on the Union side published the Union code in a newspaper just like WikiLeaks did with classified government information. On a sheet of paper, answer the following questions to determine if the offender is guilty of wrongdoing:

1. Should governments be allowed to keep secrets from their enemies?
2. Should governments be allowed to keep secrets from their own people?
3. Is it possible for governments to keep secrets from their enemies without keeping secrets from their own people? Why or why not?
4. The man who published the Union code (in our scenario) argues that the people had the right to know and that the government had no right to hide information from its people. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
5. Is the man guilty? Why or why not?

Step 4 - Vote on verdict: Vote whether or not to convict the imaginary offender and share your responses to the mock trial questions.