

WILL WIKILEAKS BE THE INTERNET'S TITANIC?

❌ Back in the early days of radio, there was a great amateur radio culture that in key ways resembled early internet culture: it was predominantly male, highly competent, espousing a belief that this new technology could democratize the world.

And in spite of the amateur radio community's offer to set up an alternative communication system in the country—one that would provide a horizontal communication network in case the more centralized one failed in time of crisis—the powers that be were none too comfortable with the radio guys. Partly, it was just about decentralization of power. Partly, it was that the amateur operators were technically more skilled than the radio operators in the employ of the Navy.

And then the Titanic happened.

And in spite of the fact that the disaster had a lot more to do with hubris and incompetence and negligence, the amateur operators provided a handy scapegoat, based on the weak claim that amateur operators had hogged bandwidth that rescuers might have used. More importantly, the amateurs offered not only a convenient scapegoat, but the Titanic provided a wonderful opportunity to go after the radio guys, the fearmongering excuse to curtail the power of the operators, which the government did with bandwidth restrictions and a national regime covering broadcast, among other measures. Which launched the process that resulted in the top-down broadcast model offered by Westinghouse and CBS rather than the democratized horizontal network of people speaking in their own voices that might have been.

I've been waiting for our Titanic moment—the moment when the government would use some convenient excuse to shut down the imperfect but

still better than broadcast model of the Internet. The moment when—as the government did with the Titanic and its demand for Navy hegemony of the airwaves—the government could sow fears about national security to shut down citizen media.

And as I was reading this post from Ian Welsh...

Let's just state the obvious here: we're seeing the end of the open internet with what is being done to WikiLeaks. It's one thing for Amazon to toss them, it's another thing entirely to refuse to propagate their domain information. This has been coming for quite some time, and WikiLeaks is not the first domain to be shut down in the US, it is merely the highest profile. Combined with the attempt to make Netflix pay a surcharge or lose access to customers, this spells the end of the free internet.

The absurdity, the sheer Orwellian stupidity of this is epitomized by Hilary Clinton telling students at elite colleges not to read the leaks, or they won't get jobs at State. As if anyone who isn't curious to read what is in the leaks, who doesn't want to know how diplomacy actually works, is anyone State should hire. In a sane world, the reaction would be the opposite: no one who hadn't read them would be hired.

This is reminiscent of the way the old Soviet Union worked, with everyone being forced to pretend they don't know what they absolutely do know, and blind conformity prized over ability.

And as I contemplate Federal Communications Commission Chairman Julius Genachowski's fake net neutrality proposal, and as I read news of MasterCard and Visa both freezing Julian Assange's funds, I can't help but think this is

the Titanic moment I've been expecting for years.

Sure, the crackdown—which puts our counterterrorism efforts to shame—is a response to the scope of this latest leak. Sure, it's an attempt to prevent the next leak, on Bank of America.

But just as much, it's about creating the excuse they need—the government and the legacy media protecting their turf—to undercut the power of the Internet.