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WikiLeaks' Money Trail: How It's Raising Money for Snowden & Assange

Julian Assange has acknowledged the irony: a group dedicated to transparency has truly murky finances. Caitlin Dickson and Eliza Shapiro report on how it's getting funding for Snowden and more.

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| July 9, 2013 4:45 AM EDT

It's not cheap to maintain the lifestyles of two international fugitives.



Anthony Devlin/AFP/Getty Images, Corbis

Thankfully for WikiLeaks, its latest cause célèbre, Edward Snowden, is raking in some

much-needed cash for the whistle-blowing organization. Snowden sympathizers have been donating generously since [WikiLeaks decided to take on the NSA leaker's case \(/articles/2013/06/19/assange-to-the-rescue-wikileaks-founder-brokering-asylum-for-snowden.html\)](/articles/2013/06/19/assange-to-the-rescue-wikileaks-founder-brokering-asylum-for-snowden.html)—and the organization desperately needs every dollar it can raise to stay in the black and pay for the legal fees and living costs of founder Julian Assange and now Snowden.

The money WikiLeaks has raised—nearly \$90,000 in 2012, with about \$1,300 coming in each day since it took Snowden under its wing—comes from people around the world, some of whom give just a few dollars to do their part in making the world a more transparent place.

Assange and his team still say they need a lot more than they raise, and the organization always seems to be [in the red \(http://money.cnn.com/2012/07/18/technology/wikileaks-donations/index.htm\)](http://money.cnn.com/2012/07/18/technology/wikileaks-donations/index.htm). WikiLeaks's operating budget was \$510,197 in 2012, which is serious money, considering it is a simple .org with a staff of three paid software developers.

A look into how WikiLeaks is funded and how its money is spent reveals an irony that Assange has acknowledged: an organization dedicated to uncovering the truth keeps its finances intentionally complicated, and it's next to impossible for donors to find out how their money is processed and where it goes.

Giving to WikiLeaks isn't like donating to PBS, where the process is, well, transparent. It might mean sending a personal check to a post office box in Melbourne, Australia, [transferring Bitcoins over cyberspace \(/articles/2013/06/25/how-to-help-pay-for-snowden-s-getaway-without-being-caught-bitcoins.html\)](/articles/2013/06/25/how-to-help-pay-for-snowden-s-getaway-without-being-caught-bitcoins.html), or buying a T-shirt from a website that promises some proceeds will go to WikiLeaks.

Fundraising for the perpetually cash-strapped organization is becoming all the more urgent as WikiLeaks seems to be transitioning from an online hub of leaked documents to a global crisis firm that specializes in celebrity clients.

In addition to Assange and [Snowden \(/articles/2013/06/24/wikileaks-foots-the-bill-for-snowden-s-global-escapades.html\)](/articles/2013/06/24/wikileaks-foots-the-bill-for-snowden-s-global-escapades.html), the group is helping to raise money for Bradley Manning, the U.S. soldier accused of passing classified government documents to WikiLeaks. But for an organization that has been banned by Visa, PayPal, Western Union, Bank of America, and—[until last week \(http://wikileaks.org/MasterCard-breaks-ranks-in.html\)](http://wikileaks.org/MasterCard-breaks-ranks-in.html)—MasterCard from collecting donations directly, backing such causes has meant bringing in money through a variety of channels.

The main artery funneling WikiLeaks' donations through cyberspace is [Wau Holland \(http://wauland.de/en/\)](http://wauland.de/en/), a Berlin-based hacker organization that manages WikiLeaks' finances, at least publicly.

“We don't know who these people are,” Fix said. “We are not the NSA, you know. People can donate anonymously.”

The Wau Holland Foundation was created in 2001 by members of the German Chaos Computer Club, one of the world's oldest hacker groups, and started official operations in 2003. That was three years before WikiLeaks was founded, but even then Julian Assange was in contact with the foundation's members, said Bernd Fix, a founding member of Wau Holland.

“Julian is still a hacker, and hackers do know each other,” he said. “We decided in 2009 that WikiLeaks was a good thing, so we made it our project to collect donations to support WikiLeaks.”

That's exactly what Wau Holland does, collecting money on behalf of projects that further its missions, such as "information freedom and informational self-determination, which is a European legal expression meaning that you are the sole owner of your data," Fix explained.

Finding out how much money Wau Holland has raised on behalf of WikiLeaks is easy, but finding out who donated that money is less so.

"We don't know who these people are," Fix said. "We are not the NSA, you know. People can donate anonymously."

While Fix said the typical donation is small, around \$20, Wau Holland also has received some serious piles of cash. The biggest bundle it's taken in for WikiLeaks was \$50,000, from an American donor. Fix knows who it was but isn't telling.

Fix has watched donations go from an average of 20,000 euros a month from just PayPal alone in 2010, following the major U.S. diplomatic cable dump and subsequent hunt for Assange, to 2,000 to 3,000 euros a month total—"not enough to run a significant operation," he said.

That is, until Assange decided to take on Edward Snowden's legal problems.

"The Snowden case brought WikiLeaks to the focus of the people," said Fix. "The level of donation rises whenever the organization is in the press. Now we have roughly 1,000 euros a day, which compared to what it was before is a lot but still small compared to what went on in 2010."

While Wau Holland also faces the same credit card ban as WikiLeaks, Fix said his group has set up a new PayPal account that has gone undetected by U.S. authorities, at least for now.

Assange and company have hardly put all of their fundraising eggs in one basket, however.

Donors seeking to give to WikiLeaks in the U.S. can write a personal check to the Foundation for National Progress, the fiscal sponsor of the [Freedom of the Press Foundation](https://pressfreedomfoundation.org/) (<https://pressfreedomfoundation.org/>), which counts John Cusack and Glenn Greenwald among its board members.

The foundation has been in existence for just six months but has already raised about \$300,000, about 40 percent of which has gone directly to WikiLeaks, according to Trevor Timm, the foundation's executive director.

The average donation to the Freedom of the Press Foundation is about \$100, Timm said, although Cusack pledged to match each donation up to \$10,000 given during the foundation's most recent fundraising campaign. George Soros's [Open Society Foundations](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/) (<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>) also has donated money to the foundation, though not specifically to WikiLeaks. Now the Freedom of the Press Foundation is crowd-funding money to hire stenographers to publish transcripts from the Bradley Manning trial.

For an even more roundabout way of fattening WikiLeaks' wallet, supporters can buy a T-shirt adorned with a WikiLeaks logo on [Spreadshirt](http://wikileaks.spreadshirt.com/) (<http://wikileaks.spreadshirt.com/>), an online merchandise store.

On the site, supporters can use their Visas freely to buy WikiLeaks merch, as the transaction is handled by a third party. WikiLeaks fans can buy T-shirts reading "Free Assange" and "CyberPunk" in black, gray, and purple.

Some of WikiLeaks' money sources, like the Bradley Manning Defense Fund—which has [raised \\$1,289,972](http://couragetoresist.org/images/stories/manning/manning-fiscal.jpg) (<http://couragetoresist.org/images/stories/manning/manning-fiscal.jpg>) since June 2010 for the Army private-turned-leaker's legal fees and other expenses—are explicitly focused on a single project or cause. The Defense Fund is managed by an Oakland, Calif.–based group called Courage to Resist in conjunction with the larger Bradley Manning Support Network.

Not unlike Wau Holland, Courage to Resist spokesman Jeff Paterson said the average donation to Bradley Manning is about \$35, with the occasional whopper. The largest donation it has received for the Defense Fund was \$75,000 from a Ron Paul supporter who wished to remain anonymous, Paterson said.

“Our typical donor is typical to the nonprofit sector,” he said. “Usually someone at least 40 to 50 years old who remembers the turmoil of the 1960s and is donating because they are against the Iraq war, the Afghan war. We've also had major contributions from people who identify themselves as libertarians, people who are simply transparency advocates who believe the government is too closed.”

While Courage to Resist supports other so-called war resisters or conscientious objectors on its site, Paterson said about “\$4 out of \$5 in the last year has gone to Bradley Manning, more than any other objector.”

Donating to WikiLeaks is a major headache, so it's no wonder truth-seeking supporters want to know how their money is spent.

The organization's outgoing expenses in 2012 trumped the donations the organization received—WikiLeaks spent about five and a half times as much money as it brought in through donations.

WikiLeaks' operating budget ([PDF \(http://wauland.de/files/2012_Transparenzbericht-Projekt04_en.pdf\)](http://wauland.de/files/2012_Transparenzbericht-Projekt04_en.pdf)) is split among keeping its servers up and running, PR and planning for its new leaks, and legal fees. Assange has an international network of lawyers and legal advisers, many of whom work on a pro bono basis. His U.S. lawyer, Michael Ratner at the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York, works for free.

“We do all our work pro bono based on the principles at stake, and the the only time money is involved is with court awards or settlements,” said Jen Nessel, a spokeswoman for the [Center for Constitutional Rights](http://ccrjustice.org/) (<http://ccrjustice.org/>).

There is no fee for the numerous asylum applications Assange and Snowden have submitted.

“Putting up financial obstacles would subvert the right to seek asylum,” said Widney Brown, senior director of international law and policy at Amnesty International. And while most countries provide legal assistance to those without financial resources, anyone who has money could pay up to several hundred dollars an hour for an expert in asylum law to represent them. That is, Brown noted, unless the asylum seeker's case has garnered international media attention.

“The truth is Snowden's case is interesting enough that any asylum expert who wants to be known would try to get the case and probably do it for free,” she said.

Editor's note: This story has been updated in order to clarify the Freedom of the Press Foundation's relationship to WikiLeaks. It is a fiscal sponsor of WikiLeaks, not a fundraising arm. Money given to the foundation can be donated to the institution as a whole or directed to WikiLeaks specifically.

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