

The curious case of Wikileaks and Julian Assange

Secret documents, conspiracy theories, celebrities, computer hackers, and English stately homes. Read on as writer Charlotte Mountford plunges into the bizarre case of Wikileaks and Julian Assange.

“It’s as if a Swedish thriller script begun by Stieg Larsson, was taken and finished by English writer Julian Fellowes of Gosford Park,” said editor-in-chief of the Guardian newspaper, Alan Rusbridger.

He was talking about the Wikileaks affair and its leader, Julian Assange, an ex-computer hacker who has recently been at the center of global news with a story that is so strange it could be fiction.

It began with Wikileaks - Assange’s website that leaks secret and highly confidential documents, belonging to governments and other organizations, onto the internet for anyone to see.

Anyone can upload documents anonymously to Wikileaks, where they have advanced cryptographic and legal techniques to keep the sources secret. A panel of volunteers from the mainstream press, journalists, and the Wikileaks staff then decide what will be published and what will not.

The site has leaked thousands of secret U.S. military documents onto the internet about

procedures in Guantanamo Bay, and operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. And perhaps most famously, Wikileaks posted a video showing a U.S. helicopter killing several people in Baghdad in 2007, including two journalists from Reuters.

Opinion over Wikileaks has been divided. Some say it is the future of investigative journalism, and that making the shady dealings of various governments transparent for all to see is essential and a duty.

Others, like Hilary Clinton, say it is dangerous to make such documents public, and that Wikileaks risks lives by releasing the secret information.

“As the argument against Wikileaks goes, identities of informants could be compromised, spies exposed, and the safety of human rights activists, journalists and dissidents jeopardized when information of their activities is made public,” explains the BBC.

However it remains very difficult to actually prove direct links between the leaks and any loss of life. Some argue the U.S. government has protested



not because lives were directly at risk, but because they were simply embarrassed by the leaks.

Wikileaks has faced many lawsuits. In 2008, the website published hundreds of documents about the offshore activities of the private Swiss bank, Julius Baer Group. Julius Baer initially won the court case against Wikileaks when they tried to block the website, but this ruling was later overturned and Wikileaks won.

The U.S. government has been trying to arrest Assange, accusing him of espionage. However, more recent allegations against Assange have focused around his personal life and have come from Sweden.

These recent allegations against Assange are of a sexual nature. Assange has been accused of the molestation and rape of two women in Sweden. He was arrested in London on December 7, 2010 and is facing extradition to Sweden, which he is currently fighting against in the U.K. courts.

Assange and his lawyers argue that the sexual allegations are part of a politically motivated conspiracy or smear campaign against him, and that the two Swedish women in question, who he had brief affairs with, consented to have sex with him.

Presently, he is living under strict bail conditions in the enormous country Gosford Park-style estate of a wealthy friend in the U.K., as he fights the extradition

request to Sweden. The final ruling was on February 24, 2011 in favor of Assange's extradition. However, the case continues to drag on with an extradition appeal set to begin on July 12, 2011.

Assange made an appearance at the end of his two-day trial on February 11, 2011. Many celebrities were in attendance, including Bianca Jagger, socialite Jemima Khan, and Tony Benn.

"At his trial, the Wikileaks founder and self-styled cyber warrior extraordinaire gave the impression that he was practicing for a role as himself in an American blockbuster movie," said Nathalie Rothschild, commissioning editor for Spiked.

Whatever the truth about Assange and however the trials end, Wikileaks and Assange have changed the face of journalism. No doubt a film will be soon to follow.

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