

The Guardian's hatchet job on Julian Assange

By Robert Stevens
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WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy, by David Leigh and Luke Harding, published by the *Guardian* newspaper, is now being paraded as the "official" account of WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange. It is in reality a politically-motivated hatchet job aimed at discrediting Assange and facilitating his persecution by the Obama administration and its allies in the UK and Sweden.

The *Guardian* was the first of the five print media partners WikiLeaks worked with to assist in the publication of secret US diplomatic cables, beginning in late November of last year.

Within a month of their initial publication, the newspaper had broken off relations with Assange. The new book by Leigh and Harding is in line with the *Guardian's* campaign of character assassination against Assange, including its public declaration in favour of his extradition to Sweden. The campaign began publicly with the December 17 editorial "WikiLeaks: the man and the idea".

The editorial made clear that the *Guardian* had only agreed to publish "a small number of cables" to control the political fall-out from the details of murder, torture, espionage and corruption they revealed and give it the opportunity of "editing, contextualising, explanation and redaction".

But the main purpose of the editorial was to support Assange's extradition to Sweden on trumped-up allegations of sexual misconduct.

"It is impossible to make judgments about what happened in private circumstances: that will be for the Swedish courts eventually to decide. But it is wrong that the notion that the allegations are simply a conspiracy or smear should go unexamined", it stressed.

A feature of the Leigh-Harding work is its constant distortion of what Assange and WikiLeaks represent. The authors invoke a stream of shoddy and sensationalist descriptions to describe Assange, who is depicted on the cover as "one of the strangest figures ever to become a worldwide celebrity".

"Was he an internet messiah or a cyber terrorist? Information freedom fighter or sex criminal?" it asks. Elsewhere in the book he is likened to "a rock star with his entourage".

The first two and half pages of the chapter dealing with the background of Assange reproduce a profile it says he placed on a dating web site. "Assange had a striking and, some critics would say, a damaged personality", it declares. [p. 33.]

Assange, we learn from the new book, had made contact with the *Guardian* in 2008, several years prior to the release of the US diplomatic cables. It was offered access "to a leaked copy of the UK 2007 counter-insurgency manual", but turned it down. [p. 60.]

Assange is quoted as saying, "I suggest the UK press has lost its way ... provided all are equally emasculated, all are equally profitable.

It is time to break this cartel of timidity". [p. 60.]

"He seemed unable to accept that sometimes his leaks might just not be that interesting", is all the *Guardian* offers up in its defence. [p. 60.]

Commenting on how the *Guardian's* future coverage would need to "visualise" the Afghan war logs, the authors state, "it was a tricky task to produce statistics that could be claimed to have real value". This problem "highlighted once again the inescapable limitations of the purist WikiLeaks ideology. *The material that resided in leaked documents, no matter how voluminous, was not 'the truth'. It was often just a signpost pointing to some of the truth, requiring careful interpretation*". [Emphasis added] [p. 108.]

This "careful interpretation" essentially consisted of what should be taken out of the leaked documents, not what should be published, as far as the *Guardian* was concerned.

Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger states in the introduction in relation to the US military documents and diplomatic cables, "The final piece of the journalistic heavy lifting was to introduce a redaction process so that nothing we published could imperil any vulnerable sources or compromise active special operations". [p. 5.]

Leigh and Harding write of the Afghan war logs, "The papers planned only to publish a relatively small number of significant stories, and with them the text of the handful of relevant logs. WikiLeaks on the other hand, intended simultaneously to unleash the lot. But many of the entries, particularly the 'threat reports' derived from intelligence, mentioned the name of informants or those who had collaborated with US troops". [pp. 110/111]

Guardian reporter Nick Davies had been studying the role of Task Force 373—a US-run special-forces death squad that has operated secretly in Afghanistan. Its main role is to assassinate Taliban forces opposed to the US occupation. The book describes how Davies, "was dismayed by the difficulty of persuading Assange to make redactions". On this basis, say the authors, "One war log was especially troubling". [p. 112.]

Davies said he was concerned that one of the informants of the US occupation, who was assisting a Task Force 373 operation to have someone targeted, could himself have been killed, along with a relative, if the log was published without redaction.

Davies remarks of Assange, "He comes from a simplistic ideology, or at that stage he did, that all information has to be published, that all information is good". [p. 112.] The sophisticated ideology of the *Guardian* is that the grisly details of Special Forces murder operations should be concealed.

Referring to one of the Iraq war logs about the killing of more people by the same helicopter unit that massacred civilians in the

infamous “Collateral Murder” footage published by WikiLeaks, the *Guardian* notes that the two people being pursued had signalled to surrender.

The authors write, “the helicopter crew signalled back to base, asking for advice. What were they to do? *It is a sign of respect for legal forms that the base lawyer was immediately on hand, ready to be consulted*”. [Emphasis added]

The sentence following this praise for the US Army’s “respect for legal forms” reads, “The controller signalled back: ‘Lawyer states they cannot surrender to aircraft and are still valid targets.’ So the helicopter crew killed the men, as they were attempting to surrender”. [p. 133.]

By the time of the Leigh-Harding book’s publication, the *Guardian* had already editorialised that it was in favour of Assange being hauled before the Swedish courts to answer allegations “at the heart of a rape case”, as the newspaper put it.

In the same December 17 issue, the *Guardian* published a scurrilous article by Nick Davies headlined, “10 days in Sweden: the full allegations against Julian Assange”. This detailed sections of the Swedish police report, thereby serving to legitimise his questioning in Sweden and the calls for his extradition.

It was the signal for the *Guardian* and its Sunday *Observer* partner to open their pages to various feminist columnists to insist the case against Assange had to be pursued, as it was all about women’s rights and had nothing to do with the secret documents released by WikiLeaks.

The chapter in the new book introducing the allegations against Assange by the two Swedish women admits that “on present evidence Julian Assange is absolutely not a rapist as the term is understood by many”, and then continues, “But during his time in London, Assange did often seem to have a restlessly predatory attitude towards women”. [p. 145.]

In a passage in the same chapter the authors state, “This single night he spent with Katrin is the basis of the rape charge against Assange. To have sex with a sleeping or unconscious woman is a crime, both in Sweden and Britain”. [Katrin Weiss is the *Guardian*’s assumed identity for the second Swedish woman]. [p. 155.]

The *Guardian* is well aware that Assange’s legal team has consistently denied this accusation and that no charge has been made against him.

At the conclusion of the chapter, the authors ridicule any notion that the unrelenting attempt to get Assange to Sweden has anything to do with role of WikiLeaks in exposing numerous crimes of the imperialist powers.

“Subsequently, he [Assange] circulated the idea that the resultant demand for his extradition was the result of covert pressure from the US government, who wanted to get their hands on him for the WikiLeaks exploits”, they state. “No concrete evidence has yet surfaced to support this theory, although the US has threatened repeatedly that it will seek to bring its own indictment against Assange for information crimes”. [p. 163.]

Leading figures within the US political and media establishment have described Assange as a “terrorist” and have routinely called for his killing. Yet the *Guardian* blithely dismisses claims that pressure from the US government and intelligence services is behind the demand for his extradition.

The authors dismiss the support given to Assange by figures including filmmaker Ken Loach and journalist John Pilger with the sneering comment, “For a certain kind of radical, Assange had

extraordinary appeal: he was brave, uncompromising and dangerous. Did Pilger and Loach, perhaps, see in Assange the ghosts of their own revolutionary youth? Assange’s targets were those that the original 60s radicals had themselves struggled against—chiefly US imperialism, then in Vietnam, but now in Afghanistan and Iraq. There were other secret abuses Assange had revealed, too: the callousness of the US military, and the widespread use of torture”. [p.p. 230/231]

On the evening of February 24, the same day that Judge Howard Riddle ruled that Assange could be extradited to Sweden, Leigh described the decision as based on a “reasoned 28-page ruling”. He ridiculed Assange’s, “familiar harangue against those trying to extradite him to Sweden”.

Assange described the court’s proceedings as a “rubber stamping process” and the “result of a European arrest warrant system run amok”.

Such fundamental questions, based on a denial of basic democratic rights, are of little concern to Leigh, who stated that Assange, “is scarcely well placed to be a disinterested advocate of British legal reform, while he is himself frantically trying to avoid facing the music in Sweden. Nor do his pious remarks about ‘our system of justice’ make much sense when they come from a peripatetic Australian citizen who has made a virtue out of a nomadic, virtually stateless, existence that circumvented traditional systems of justice”.

Through such bile is the denial of justice to Assange sanctioned.

Taking hypocrisy to new depths, Leigh concludes with the boast, “Meanwhile the night before the Belmarsh verdict, the editors of the five international publications involved in the leaks gathered in Madrid. The *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *El País*, *Der Spiegel* and *Le Monde* debated before an audience, but with much less fanfare, the real issues thrown up by the pioneering work of WikiLeaks”.

So says someone who, with or without “fanfare”, is personally unfit to debate the genuine achievements of Assange and WikiLeaks and who works for a publication that is functioning as a brazen apologist for the witch-hunt being waged by the US, Britain and Sweden.

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