

Inside WikiLeaks—an attack from a former supporter

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In mid-February, Econ-Verlag published *Inside WikiLeaks* by Daniel Domscheit-Berg, a former employee of the whistleblower web site WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks has uncovered secret dispatches and documents, contributing to the exposure of imperialist crimes, particularly those of the US. The web site has played a role in revelations that have contributed to the revolutionary uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Since then, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has become the focus of an unprecedented witch-hunt. On the basis of fabricated and politically motivated charges, he faces deportation from the UK to Sweden, and possibly to the United States, where right-wing politicians and the media have publicly demanded the death sentence.

In this situation, Assange's opponents have been bolstered by the publication of *Inside WikiLeaks*. The book's publication was accompanied by a massive media campaign, which included the *Guardian*, Stern TV and the online edition of *Bild* newspaper. In mid-February, less than three months after the first announcement, the book has now appeared in Germany, the United States and twelve other countries. In Germany, Domscheit-Berg was given numerous platforms from which to discredit WikiLeaks and promote his counter-project "OpenLeaks."

Previous reviews have characterized *Inside WikiLeaks* as "in parts garrulous, redundant and too detailed" (*Der Spiegel*), a "book of accusations" (*FAZ*) or even as a "gripping and illuminating document of the times" (*Zeit*). In fact, the view expressed by *Der Spiegel* is confirmed upon reading the book. It takes the form of an autobiographical narrative, peppered with irrelevant details, and the author's beliefs and emotional protestations of his good intentions. Above all, the personality of Julian Assange is described often in a very subjective and sometimes offensive manner.

This is most obvious in the sixth chapter ("Julian visits"), which details the meals, sleep, work and other life habits of Assange. It draws on the experience of a two-month stay of the WikiLeaks founder in Domscheit-Berg's apartment. The author makes a particular issue of Assange's supposed weaknesses, his difficulties of orientation and organization, and points to an alleged dark paranoia. The work of WikiLeaks is placed completely in the background.

Domscheit-Berg came in contact with WikiLeaks and Assange when he offered to become a volunteer in the web site's online chat room. The first meeting took place at a hacker conference of

the Chaos Computer Club, for which Domscheit-Berg had prepared a speech for Assange. According to his own account, Domscheit-Berg worked at WikiLeaks because he believed "in a better world order", and saw the root of all evil in the world in the secrecy of information.

Domscheit-Berg's central message is that as leading figures in WikiLeaks, both Assange and he had held the same principles from the start, but that over time Assange had abandoned these and increasingly assumed dictatorial traits. This was given as the reason for the conflicts which arose over the direction of the web site. However, Domscheit-Berg makes no attempt to go into the content of these differences.

A blog entry dated 31 December, 2006 on the site IQ.org, before Domscheit-Berg had joined WikiLeaks, outlines Assange's rationale and mission for WikiLeaks, and still applies today. It says:

"Hence in a world where leaking is easy, secretive or unjust systems are nonlinearly hit relative to open, just systems. Since unjust systems, by their nature induce opponents, and in many places barely have the upper hand, mass leaking leaves them exquisitely vulnerable to those who seek to replace them with more open forms of governance. Only revealed injustice can be answered; for man to do anything intelligent he has to know what's actually going on."

In contrast, for Domscheit-Berg the guiding principle is not opposition to injustice, but neutrality. He writes: "The fact that we published what we received corresponded to our understanding of transparency. How could it be handled differently? Otherwise we would have been accused of partisanship. Whether it hit the right or the left, nice people, or stupid ones, we published it all."

There was a clash when Assange proposed publishing material first that was more politically explosive. Domscheit-Berg writes: "At this time, we no longer published documents in the order they were received—according to the principle that had actually been firmly agreed—but left the majority to one side and focused on the Big Shots. Julian abandoned the earlier approach. And in spite of intense discussions, he would not change his mind."

He goes on in the same vein regarding the release of the "Collateral Murder" video. This depicts American soldiers shooting from a helicopter and killing defenceless civilians and children. This video, which has come to symbolise the criminal behaviour of US forces in Iraq, was distributed worldwide, and did much to expose the propaganda of the alleged "war on terror."

But Domscheit-Berg does not agree: “The title, ‘Collateral Murder’ may have been a good creation from a literary standpoint. However, we had to listen to a lot of criticism afterwards. We should have taken a neutral position. Because we had edited our own video out of the raw material ... we had become manipulators of public opinion.”

What clearly emerges here is that Domscheit-Berg fails to appreciate the real content and explosiveness of the material, in contrast to Assange, who staked everything on bringing this out as clearly as possible, and made publishing politically explosive material the priority.

Over many pages, Domscheit-Berg describes secondary or absurdly subjective organizational conflicts, as in one incident where Assange preferred to “strike up profound discussions about the state of the world” rather than sell t-shirts to raise money. These trivialities are clearly supposed to serve as a justification for his own behaviour.

In the summer of 2010, Domscheit-Berg carried out a real act of sabotage, leading to the break with WikiLeaks. On August 25, at his instigation, the technicians responsible for maintaining the web site closed down the wiki engine used for the publications and changed passwords for the e-mail system and Twitter access.

Shortly afterwards, a *Newsweek* blogger published a report citing an internal source. He described WikiLeaks internal deliberations in which the founder, Assange, was asked to voluntarily resign, or if necessary, be deposed by force. Assange suspected Domscheit-Berg of being the source of the news report and suspended him for a month from the staff of WikiLeaks.

These maneuvers among team members around Domscheit-Berg were a cowardly response to the fabricated rape allegations made against Assange in Sweden. Domscheit-Berg writes: “A spokesman for an organization against whom such charges are made damages the reputation of the projects that he represents. Whether one likes it or whether it appears just is another matter. Not only I but many others asked him to back away a little.”

Thus Domscheit-Berg virtually takes the side of those who seek to oppose and silence Assange by means of the accusation of sexual misconduct. In this case, the investigation of Assange in Sweden was halted in August 2010 because there was “no evidence that he committed a rape,” as the Swedish chief prosecutor said.

But this was still not enough. Domscheit-Berg took this opportunity to conduct a general reckoning with Assange: “It has been clear for a while now that WL [WikiLeaks] was developing in the wrong direction and we too had to change. [...] Through a separation of powers, we wanted to offer a neutral submission platform, which was purely technological. And not to act as a political agitator, with a Twitter account as a propaganda channel.”

The group around Domscheit-Berg announced they were pulling out and summarily removed parts of the software developed by WikiLeaks. Along with this “deconstruction”, which left behind a damaged system, the clique also took material that was stored on the Submission System, which Domscheit-Berg justified with reference to problems over security and a lack of protection of sources. The material was supposedly to be returned when the security of WikiLeaks had been restored.

Those who had left WikiLeaks then founded their “alternative platform” called “OpenLeaks”. One significant change compared to WikiLeaks is that it completely refuses to publish any material submitted. A source hands over material to OpenLeaks and proposes who is to publish it. OpenLeaks then passes it on. This could be to conventional media such as newspapers, or to trade unions and NGOs, which, Domscheit-Berg claims, “are particularly well suited to this”.

However, the power of WikiLeaks lies precisely in the fact that material that is of interest to the public is published without censorship, and against the will of the powers that be and the corporations. In this respect, the bourgeois press and the trade unions play a miserable role.

Domscheit-Berg knows this perfectly well, describing elsewhere how newspapers publish selectively and sometimes falsify material. Especially with regard to the documents on Afghanistan and the Iraq war, or the embassy dispatches, the *New York Times* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* explicitly called for censorship.

It is striking that the media not only supported the book *Inside WikiLeaks* when it was published but also when it was being prepared. When Domscheit-Berg was suspended, *Der Spiegel* journalists immediately surfaced with a request for an interview. The publication of the book was announced widely in the bourgeois press.

The publisher, Econ-Verlag, is part of the Swedish publishing group Bonnier, which also includes the Swedish daily newspaper *Expressen*. This paper had reported the charges against Julian Assange before he had even heard about them himself.

The timing of Domscheit-Berg’s allegations of “political agitation” by Assange is significant. Regardless of Domscheit-Berg’s personal motives and intentions, his public break with WikiLeaks coincided with the active efforts of the US government to silence Assange.

As the hacker group “Anonymous” has revealed, American security firms in cooperation with the US Department of Defense developed a plan to target WikiLeaks. A presentation looking at how to defame, destroy and destabilize WikiLeaks mentions a Daniel “Schmitt”, the alias for Daniel Domscheit-Berg, who is identified as being “disgruntled” inside WikiLeaks. (See: “US security firms planned smear campaign against WikiLeaks”)

Those who left WikiLeaks with Domscheit-Berg have caused damage to WikiLeaks in several ways. On the one hand, they sabotaged the web site technically and with regard to its staff. By contributing to *Inside WikiLeaks*, they are aiding the already broad front of mainstream media, whose aim is to silence Assange and WikiLeaks.



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