

The Fifth Estate: A dishonest film about WikiLeaks and Julian Assange

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Director Bill Condon's *The Fifth Estate* is the second major film this year dealing with the whistleblower website WikiLeaks. It is no improvement on the previous risible effort, Alex Gibney's documentary, *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks*. Its failings are not primarily the fault of weaknesses in direction or poor performances. Rather it was commissioned and produced by DreamWorks, with a screenplay by Josh Singer, based on two very dubious books, both hostile to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and the organisation itself.

From this point on the project was unsalvageable as an essentially untruthful work based on politically suspect and prejudiced source material.

Despite claims by the director and others involved that the film was not conceived as an attack on Assange and WikiLeaks, it is a tendentious work promoting a definite agenda.

An honest account of WikiLeaks, an organisation with sworn enemies in the highest echelons of the US establishment, would confront major battles in obtaining decent funding and even getting off the ground. None of these problems were posed to the makers of *The Fifth Estate*, which was allocated an estimated budget of \$30 million by DreamWorks, with Disney leading its distribution.

The story is largely seen through the eyes of a character based on Daniel Domscheit-Berg, a former German WikiLeaks volunteer who was suspended from the organisation in August 2010. His account of his experiences, *Inside WikiLeaks: My Time with Julian Assange at the World's Most Dangerous Website*, was published in 2011 and was praised by the media on the basis of its character assassination of Assange.

The circumstances surrounding Domscheit-Berg's exit from WikiLeaks are peculiar to say the least. His first act was to sabotage and disable WikiLeaks' submission platform, resulting in its being closed down for an

extended period of time. Domscheit-Berg also departed with a trove of unpublished documents, which, according to WikiLeaks, "included evidence of more than 60 women and children being massacred in Afghanistan by US forces."

Domscheit-Berg later admitted that he destroyed 3,000 submissions related to the activities of Bank of America. Shortly afterwards he established his own "OpenLeaks" project, which has never published a single document.

Domscheit-Berg claimed, as does the film, that he became disillusioned with Assange largely because the latter was unwilling to work as part of a team and was being "reckless" regarding the protection of sources. This is disingenuous. The reality is that his departure from WikiLeaks coincided with the unprecedented global witch-hunt of Assange, which began in mid-2010.

By this point, WikiLeaks had already made public the "Collateral Murder" video, showing the US military's aerial killing of innocent civilians in Iraq, and the "Afghan War Logs," documenting civilian killings and violent assaults by US and allied special forces. The ruling elite was united in its determination to stop WikiLeaks and its founder. This was the basis for a politically motivated frame-up of Assange, using false accusations of sexual misconduct, during his trip to Sweden in August 2010.

Domscheit-Berg was suspended from WikiLeaks on August 26, 2010. On August 25, at his instigation, technicians responsible for maintaining the web site had closed down its engine used for publications and changed passwords for the email system and Twitter access. These events occurred just days after two women had lodged complaints against Assange in Sweden on August 20.

Domscheit-Berg told *Der Spiegel* on September 27, 2010 that the legal assault on Assange was "a personal attack against him, but they [the accusations] do not have anything to with WikiLeaks directly."

Domscheit-Berg was expressly hostile to WikiLeaks' exposures of crimes committed by the United States and other major imperialist powers. He told the *Times* the following month, "The aim of the platform when it started in 2006 was to inform intelligent people and supply them with a basis of solid facts for intelligent decisions. But it became a problem as soon as we started to take sides."

The second source for the film, "*WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy*," was published in February 2011 by the *Guardian* and written by journalists David Leigh and Luke Harding. The book crowned the *Guardian's* campaign against Assange, after firstly securing agreement with him to assist in the publication of secret US diplomatic cables, starting in November 2010.

The *Guardian's* support for Assange to be railroaded to Sweden, and its portrayal of him as an ego-maniac, meant the book was rapidly elevated to the status of the "official" WikiLeaks story.

Assange was never approached by anyone at DreamWorks and allowed to give his account. He refused a request by actor Benedict Cumberbatch to meet him in preparation for his portrayal of Assange in the film. As he explained in a lengthy letter to Cumberbatch, "DreamWorks has based its entire production on the two most discredited books on the market ... As justification it will claim to be fiction, but it is not fiction. It is distorted truth about living people doing battle with titanic opponents. It is a work of political opportunism, influence, revenge and, above all, cowardice."

Cumberbatch said Assange's letter at least forced him to ponder his participation, stating, "I wanted to create a three dimensional portrait of a man far more maligned in the tabloid press than he is in our film."

A *Vogue* article noted that after reading an early script, "Cumberbatch realized that some of Assange's fears were justified. 'On a lot of the stage direction, we collided paths because Bill [Condon] did seem to be setting him up as this antisocial megalomaniac.'"

As a drama *The Fifth Estate* lacks coherence. It flits here and there to what is at times a deafening soundtrack.

The vast crimes exposed by WikiLeaks seem largely unimportant to the makers of *The Fifth Estate*, which cuts from the current activities of Assange in various locations to flashbacks to a lonely Assange as a child. One scene falsely claims he was part of a "cult" as a child that "made the kids dye their hair white."

The actual revelations made public by WikiLeaks, particularly from "Collateral Murder" onward, are briefly and haphazardly treated. A number of sub-plots are

introduced, designed to prove, falsely, that WikiLeaks was unnecessarily endangering lives with its leaks.

Toward the end of the film, the Domscheit-Berg character meets with *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies (David Thewlis), the newspaper's original link to Assange.

Davies, a consultant on the film, pontificates about the origins of the free press in Britain and how the "fourth estate"--the mass media--came about on the bones of those who were martyred for it. He tells Domscheit-Berg that the "information revolution" is ushering in a new "fifth estate," hell-bent on "destroying its predecessor." His is a paean on behalf of "responsible," i.e., politically-compromised and pro-establishment journalism--replete with a warning against dangerous Assange-types who need to be sidelined.

"Daniel, you and Julian gave us a glimpse of what the future could be," Davies declares. This is nauseating. Davies did much to legitimise the unprecedented campaign to "get Assange" in order to crush WikiLeaks, with his scurrilous *Guardian* December 2010 article, "10 days in Sweden: the full allegations against Julian Assange."

Assange has, for more than three years, been denied his basic democratic rights, forced to seek refuge in the Ecuadorean embassy in London. His life and freedom remain threatened by immensely powerful enemies. He is the victim, the persecuted. This is simply glossed over. Condon has airbrushed the last three years out of his WikiLeaks story. Everything after Assange's December 2010 detention in London is covered in less than five minutes, reduced to a few title cards, interspersed with the fictional Assange speaking from the Ecuadorian embassy. *The Fifth Estate* is a tawdry project, and everyone involved in it, artistically and financially, should be ashamed of themselves.



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