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## Resistance From a Cage: Julian Assange Speaks to Norwegian Journalist Eirik Vold

3/1/2013

Julian Assange is the itinerant hacker from the Australian Outback who gave the world the biggest leak of secret documents in history. Seven months into his embassy asylum, the cyber crusade for transparency goes on.

This is not the first time that WikiLeaks has come under attack, Assange tells me.

"We had been through a couple of fights. With a commander at the Guantanamo base. We were sued by a Swiss bank. One of my cryptographer friends was ambushed by intelligence agents in a parking lot in Luxembourg. They tried to make him tell them things about WikiLeaks."

A cryptographer friend? Does that sound a bit like having a "hobbit friend" to you? Then let this be a warning: If you are not used to a modern Internet vocabulary, the story of Julian Assange is full of characters that may seem like they are out of a science fiction novel: cryptographer friends with vital secrets looking over their shoulders in order not to get caught; eccentric professors about to conjure up a quantum mechanics machine with the power to destroy all of cyberspace if it falls into the wrong hands; tiny torrent files, floating around in abstract space, unintelligible and meaningless when separated, but powerful information packages able to knock down governments if sewn together the right way and delivered to the masses. And they are all real and alive. Just as real and alive as the Swedish prosecutors and their extradition request for Assange or the CIA agents on a mission to stop WikiLeaks from leaking - as real as the heavy wooden door I just opened on my way into the Ecuadorian embassy in London and then shut carefully behind me. Aside from the will of a controversial South American president, that door is now the

only barrier between Julian Assange and me on the inside, and the police officer from Scotland Yard (London Metropolitan Police) waiting patiently on the outside with handcuffs, a gun and orders to arrest and deport my interviewee.

### Travelers in the Australian Outback

"I do what I do because I saw the opportunity," Assange says. "Because I was born in a Western country, with the necessary education and material resources. And because I care about these issues."

Don't even bother to ask if he became the world's most famous leaker and the West's number-one dissident because of his special family background and childhood in the Australian Outback.

"I really don't like that approach," he says.

But Assange does have a special background. He was born on July 3, 1971, in the medium-sized town of Townsville on the tropical northern coast of Australia. The French-sounding surname, Assange, is said to be an Anglification of the Chinese name Ah Sang. A Taiwanese pirate, it is said, brought that surname to Australia. Assange grew up with his mother. They lived in hiding for about five years due to a conflict over the custody of Julian's half brother and moved about 30 times before Julian was 14.

Some describe Assange as a distrustful person, at times bordering on paranoid. Is that why he started the interview by asking me questions about my Spanish, as he heard me make small talk with someone who I thought was an Ecuadorian embassy employee?

"Where did you learn your Spanish? Why do you speak with a Cuban accent?"

His voice and body language, however, reveal curiosity rather than distrust. Assange has always asked questions - and was always willing to go all the way to get the answers.

### Meet Mendax

It was during his youth that Assange started to take advantage of the opportunities that come from growing up in a First World country: literacy, sufficient money to buy a computer, and access to the Internet. Meet Mendax, the online pseudonym of the 16-year-old hacker Julian Assange. Today Assange is seen by many as the world's first great "ethical hacker." His hacker team, called "the international subversives" had strict rules for their activities: "Don't damage computer systems you break into (including crashing them); don't change the information in those systems (except for altering logs to cover your tracks); and share information." Others believe the pseudonym Mendax, which is Latin for "deceitful," is the most precise way of describing Assange's personality. Everyone, however, seems to agree that he was an extremely talented hacker.

In 2002, Assange entered the university. With his restless nature, he went through two different

universities and jumped between natural sciences, philosophy and neuroscience. The grades he obtained were rather mediocre, but one particular experience proved decisive.

"I became critical of the academy. Mathematics in the university was financed by the US government and military establishment. We had to work with mathematical models that were used to make military bulldozers, such as were deployed in Iraq and employed by Israel to demolish Palestinian homes. There were quantum mechanical models that could be used for mass espionage on the Internet."

No academic title came out of Assange's university studies in Canberra and Melbourne. But the typical hacker outlook - rebellious, but apolitical - went through a deep metamorphosis. Faced with what Assange calls "the ivory tower's connections to economic power relations on the ground" and global geopolitics, Mendax merged with the political consciousness of Assange the university student.

The result was WikiLeaks.

In 2006, a year after Assange strolled out of campus for the last time, WikiLeaks was founded in the capital of Iceland, Reykjavik. During WikiLeaks' first years, Assange traveled between international conferences with geeky names like Chaos Communications Congress. WikiLeaks arranged meetings and Assange would talk to the journalists who bothered to listen. Meanwhile, the WikiLeaks staff silently stretched its probing tentacles through cyberspace in its search for secrets. Big secrets.

The Rebel Library

January 8, 2010 - the WikiLeaks Twitter account posts a request for help in decrypting a video about a "U.S. bomb strike on civilians." Three months later, the world witnessed a pristine video recording from 2007 of two Apache artillery helicopters attacking a group of defenseless Iraqis, among them two Reuters press photographers, with 30 millimeter anti-armor ammunition.

"The Collateral Murder video became the iconic video of the Iraq war," says Assange proudly.

But we had seen nothing yet. During 2010, WikiLeaks released three more enormous leaks: The Afghan War Diary, in which US military servicemen provide the naked truth about NATO's killing of Afghan civilians, lies, secrecy and support for a corrupt undemocratic Afghan regime; a similar package from Iraq, called the Iraq War Logs, and finally, Cablegate, a collection of cables sent between Washington and US embassies in 274 countries, dating from 1966 to 2010.

Assange explained how US foreign policy was exposed as violent and dishonest, how the revelations made the ground shake beneath corrupt and oppressive regimes and corporations all over the world and stimulated revolutions, as in Tunisia, and reformist movements in Ghana and Kenya.

WikiLeaks is "a rebel library of Alexandria," Assange declares, making a parallel to the largest known library of classical antiquity.

"With Cablegate, we have provided the largest geopolitical encyclopedia of how the world actually works that ever existed. It's really hard to think of anything in modern times that comes close to this."

Assange paints in grandiose words, but insistently backs them up with numbers. All together, the three releases contain more than 700,000 documents. With its 251,276,536 words, Cablegate alone constitutes the greatest package of classified material ever released.

Has he read all the documents?

"No, but I've read thousands, many thousands."

"It's too much; it's impossible to read it all, or get the full overview of all the revelations. But the impact all over the world is enormous. Every single one of our releases causes thousands of reactions, and they always give people more insight," he says.

The chase begins. Assange has still not revealed how WikiLeaks got the Collateral Murder video decrypted. Presumably, one of his cryptographer friends had something to do with it. But in the Pentagon, eyes turned to a young American soldier on duty in Iraq. On May 26, 2010, Private Bradley Manning was arrested.

"We started to realize that the heat was really coming down on us," Assange says. And it certainly was.

"We were tipped off that we were being followed. Journalists reported about US pressure on different countries - Germany and Australia - to make them prosecute us legally. There were public calls for my assassination from leading American politicians; proposals for laws that WikiLeaks be declared a terrorist organization. The Pentagon announced that it had put together a task force of 120 defense and intelligence personnel. The CIA and the FBI had theirs, too," he says.

In the United States, WikiLeaks' domain name in California was shut down. Bank of America announced that all transactions dealing with WikiLeaks would be blocked. Visa, Mastercard, Paypal, Western Union and Amazon followed. German tax authorities started to investigate WikiLeaks.

"Friends of mine were stopped and interrogated in airports. People who only had remote connections to WikiLeaks started to lose jobs and contracts," he says.

But the FBI may have been closer than Assange imagined. In 2011, the Bureau sent a group of agents in a private jet to Iceland. Without the knowledge of the government of Iceland, the FBI agents hunted down suspected WikiLeaks allies and brought them to the US embassy in Reykjavik for interrogation.

## They Can't Stop Us

During the two-and-a-half hour interview, only once did Assange display his characteristic impatience when he thinks a journalist says something stupid. The occasion was my interruption of a long argument about how powerful elites trick potential opponents into passivity by giving the impression that they have a greater capacity to harm than they actually have. "But you are afraid," I ask - or, rather, I state.

"That's a silly statement," Assange responds.

A short awkward silence follows.

"So you believe that those who are after you exaggerate their ability to harm you?"

"Those who want to harm WikiLeaks constantly exaggerate their ability to harm us. They are mostly incompetent people."

Is this the cocky Mendax, talking about helpless old policemen in their clumsy hunt for an agile young hacker in cyberspace? Has Assange forgotten that he's entering his seventh month holed up in a 50-square-meter embassy out of fear of ending up like Bradley Manning?

"This isn't about me. What happens to me is not important, beyond the practical difficulties it might create for WikiLeaks."

Assange goes back to a televised Pentagon press conference from 2010 to explain what he means.

"They demanded that WikiLeaks hand over all the documents, eliminate all the copies and cut off all contact with whistleblowers in the US military. Or else they would, and I quote, 'compel us to do so.'"

But WikiLeaks didn't obey.

"Yes, they put great pressure on us, financial and legal measures that are still ongoing. But we haven't removed a single thing," says Assange.

He thinks the Pentagon has lost face, that their threats are degraded after WikiLeaks ignored their demands and continued publishing.

"The first time we took it seriously, but when they repeated the same demand afterwards, we just laughed about it. They might be able to take revenge on WikiLeaks, but they couldn't stop us."

## The WikiLeaks Philosophy

"The left? The left is still stuck in the 1960s," Assange states drily. Ideologically, he is closer to

the free market, even though he says markets always tend to evolve into monopolies unless they are forced to work freely.

Assange might not be afraid, but he is clearly taking a huge personal risk with his disclosure activities. There must be a driving force within him, and it is definitely not a political ideology.

Assange takes a deep breath.

"I can answer long and theoretically, or short, depending on your audience."

Assange is service-oriented now. Or just very eager to be correctly understood when he is about to answer why a world full of freely competing news media, political movements and research institutions really needs publishers of secret material like him. Assange wants to make a deeper point. WikiLeaks, he says, is about more than just scandalous revelations and splashy headlines.

"In the same way that the ability to solve physical problems is limited by our understanding of physical laws, the ability to solve societal problems depends on our insight into human institutions. All political theories on how the world is and how it should be are built on such an understanding."

By "institutions" Assange means governments, private companies and other networks of power groups. The problem, he explains, is that while institutions constantly change as they absorb new technology and make old theories outdated, the information about how they actually work is concealed, kept secret.

"Much of what we are being presented, and upon which we build our understanding of the world, is designed to make these institutions palatable for the outside world."

"This is why only by knowing the internal communications of these institutions can we understand how they really work. So, if we want to make the world more just, if we want humanity to reach its heights and not its lows, then the first step is to get access to that information," he says.

"And then there's the media."

### Mainstream Media Disappoints

From high theoretical spheres, Assange brings the discussion down to earth again. Or rather down into the mud, to what was to become a dirty conflict between WikiLeaks and the mainstream media.

But it started as a sweet tango. WikiLeaks did the initial work; The New York Times, Der Spiegel and other leading news publications provided their best writers and huge readerships, maximizing the global impact of the revelations.

"I was quite impressed by their work and what we achieved together in the beginning," Assange

admits.

Then it all went downhill.

Assange speaks with indignation about Western news media turning an American document about an Iranian missile purchase into "fear propaganda" by censoring the expert assessment in the same document which showed that the purchase did not constitute any threat, about Der Spiegel choosing not to publish information that shed some unfortunate light on Angela Merkel, about the terrible accounts of Task Force 373 and their killing of innocent Afghans - which The New York Times refused to publish - and about what Assange considers an intentional personal smear that reached its low point in August last year, when The New York Times wrote that he refused to flush the toilet.

"Media organizations start off small. But when they grow, they are invited to sit down with the powerful. Then they become part of the same powerful elite that they are supposed to be critically monitoring," he explains.

"It's shameful," Assange says, "that a handful of activists in WikiLeaks have published more secret documents than the entire establishment press, with all its billion-dollar budgets, technical competence and human resources, all together."

#### A South American Savior

June 19, 2012: Ecuador's government announced that Assange had sought refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London and requested political asylum in Ecuador. Swedish prosecutors want him extradited to Sweden to question him about sexual assault allegations from two Swedish women. Both said they had voluntary sex with Assange in August 2010, but one claim, among other things, is that Assange ripped off a condom and continued intercourse without consent. So far, the closest prosecutors have come to presenting evidence in the cases is a torn-up condom that later turned out not to have any trace DNA from Assange.[1] Assange has offered to answer questions by telephone, or to go to Sweden, provided that that country guarantees that he will not be extradited to the United States, where alleged whistleblower Manning has been held under conditions that the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture deemed "cruel and inhuman." The Swedes rejected the offer.

So, why did Assange choose to apply for political asylum in a country popularly known as the "banana republic" par excellence of South America?

"Ecuador's president Rafael Correa is really a special person," Assange says, his voice filled with admiration.

"He belongs to a new generation of leaders. People like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela have also achieved impressive things, but he is still a military leader. Correa is a US-educated PhD economist. A nationalist in the good sense of the word and a social reformer. This is a very interesting combination."

On August 15 last year, however, a lot of people doubted that this lifeline would be enough to save Assange. In response to Ecuador's granting political asylum to Assange the day before, the British government sent a letter wherein it threatened to revoke the diplomatic immunity of the embassy and go in to arrest Assange. International media described warnings about economic sanctions with catastrophic consequences for Ecuador if Assange was not sacrificed. Most analysts seemed to believe Ecuador would give in. Correa reacted by gathering the entire South American continent behind a declaration that unanimously condemned the threat and scared the British government into a humiliating retreat.

Assange smiles when asked what happened to the pale, hunched up and morally defeated refugee that I had read about in the British press lately. Life as a persecuted person may be rough, but Assange also has a lot of friends. The British movie director Ken Loach donated a running machine, and a former British intelligence agent gives Assange martial arts training at the embassy.

"I'm improving my boxing too, now," Assange says.

The mysterious boxing trainer - Assange does not provide his name - is not the only former intelligence agent who has sided with the Australian "rebel librarian." A recent letter to the British newspaper The Guardian in support of Assange was signed by an impressive list of former CIA agents and former colleagues from other agencies. On January 25, the CIA officer John Kiriakou was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for blowing the whistle on waterboarding torture by the US military, while the torturers continue to go free. These are hard times for talkative military and intelligence personnel in the US, and many see Assange and WikiLeaks as their voice.

In addition, a broad spectrum of intellectuals, musicians, politicians from the left and right, hackers and even celebrity feminist Naomi Klein have thrown their support behind Assange and demand that he get free passage to Ecuador. The EU parliament voted against the US-imposed banking blockade against WikiLeaks. Last week, Iceland's interior minister Ogmundur Jonasson revealed that he told the FBI agents to get out of Iceland when he found out about the illegal interrogations in the US embassy.

"We have support from all over the world. But the level of support is found in countries that have toppled bad governments in the past, and where the internal archives of the fallen regimes have been central elements in the public debate afterward," Assange explains, pointing to countries like the former apartheid regime of South Africa and former East Germany.

But the rape allegations, whether rooted in reality [2] or not, have stuck to Assange's name now, it seems, and have undermined his support in some parts of Europe.

"You are not very popular in Sweden, are you?"

"Not in the media, but polls show that I have the support of about 55 percent of the Swedish



people. That is right in the middle compared to other countries, and better than in the US and Great Britain," he says.

### A Way Out

A lady whom I had first thought was an Ecuadorian embassy employee turns out to be part of the team of the world's possibly most famous judge, Baltazar Garzón, who has taken on the task of leading Assange's legal defense.

Garzón has already confronted Great Britain in another high-profile extradition case in the past. In 1998, the former military dictator of Chile, Augusto Pinochet, was arrested in London on the orders of Interpol. Garzón wanted him extradited to Spain to have him prosecuted for murder, torture and kidnappings committed during his 17-year dictatorship. The British government, however, released Pinochet and let him return to Chile as a free man. Now Garzón is trying to convince the British government that Assange is innocent and does not deserve a harsher treatment - so far, in vain.

Nevertheless, Assange is still optimistic.

"We are many people working hard to make the US drop persecution of WikiLeaks," he says, and seems to believe that the accusations from Sweden will also disappear if the US gives up its goal of crushing WikiLeaks.

"But right now, it does not really seem that the cases against you and WikiLeaks are about to disappear. Don't you have another plan to get out of here?"

I ask the question while peeking out from the tiny gap between the old-fashioned curtains in the room. It is no more than two meters from the window to the ground beneath, and it looks dark and abandoned. Earlier speculations had it that the Ecuadorians would attempt to smuggle Assange out in a diplomatic bag and into a speed boat waiting in the river Thames a good kilometer south of the embassy, and then into international waters.

Assange has a different escape route planned. It goes via the upcoming parliamentary elections in Australia. He will be a candidate for the newly founded WikiLeaks party.

"25 percent of the electorate says it will vote for me. I have supporters from the social democrats, the conservatives and the Green Party. And the support is uniform all over the country," says Assange.

And the election campaign has not even started. The Australian police has said Assange's legal problems abroad do not impede him from being a candidate in Australia.

Still, escape "in a British police car" is the option with the lowest odds, only 1.38, at the Irish bookmaker site Paddy Power, which takes bets on how the celebrity refugee will leave the embassy in the end. A seat in the Australian senate stands at 3.5.

As the bets keep rolling in, Assange makes the best out of life on 50 square meters. Meanwhile, WikiLeaks continues pumping out secret documents. In spite of mutual distrust, smearing and accusations of censorship, WikiLeaks and the establishment media hold on tight to each other. It still takes two to tango. WikiLeaks needs access to the public and newspapers need splashy headlines. According to Assange's most recent numbers, there is a WikiLeaks-based article in almost every second issue of The New York Times. The tones might have soured, but neither can afford to stop dancing.

Notes:

1. Perhaps notably, one of Assange's attorneys said at his 2011 extradition hearing that he would not challenge that the women "found Mr. Assange's sexual behavior in these encounters disreputable, discourteous, disturbing or even pushing towards the boundaries of what they were comfortable with." Also of note is that rape laws vary from country to country. -Truthout editors

2. In fact, some progressive leaders' assessments of the allegations' validity have cast a disturbing light on the way in which rape is viewed by large contingents of the left, at least when one of their own is accused. Some have dismissed the allegations immediately - perhaps calling into question their underlying assumptions about women and rape. In a news analysis about the Assange situation earlier this year, Truthout's Alissa Bohling quotes Claudia Garcia-Rojas, a journalist who spent three years at the Chicago Task Force on Violence Against Girls and Young Women: "Just because the men in the quote-unquote, like, 'the movement,' are involved in social justice work, this doesn't mean that they can't participate in the patriarchy, in some of the more horrid crimes." -Truthout editors

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