The Guardian’s hatchet job on Julian Assange

By Robert Stevens

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 the opportunity of “editing, contextualising, explanation and reduction”.

But the main purpose of the editorial was to support Assange’s extradition to Sweden on trumped-up sex charges.

“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 in the cover as “one of the strangest figures ever to become a worldwide celebrity.”

“We have an internet messiah or a cyber terrorist? Information freedom fighter or sex criminal?” 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 was placed on a dating web site. “Assange had a striking and, some critics would say, a damaged personality”, it declares.

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.

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.”

“He seemed unable to accept that sometimes his peaks might just not be that interesting,” it all the Guardian’s editorial “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? Is it a sign of respect for legal forms that the base lawyer was immediately on hand, ready to be consulted?” Emphasis added

“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 to the US military documents and diplomatic cables, “The first pieces of the monumental heavy lifting was to introduce a reduction process so that nothing we published could imperil any vulnerable sources or compromise active special operations”. Leigh and Harding write of the Afghan war logs, “The papers planned only to publish a relatively small number of logs had already seen that the text of the handful of relevant logs. WikiLeaks on the other hand, intended simultaneously to unleash the whole of the entries, particularly the ‘threat reports’ derived from intelligence, mentioned the name of informants or those who had collaborated with US troops.”

Guardian reporter Nick Davies had been studying the role of Task Force 373—a US-run special-forces death squad that had operated secretly in Afghanistan. Its main role was 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, the authors say, “One war log was especially troubling.”

Davies said he was concerned “that one of the informants of the US occupation, who was assisting a Task Force 373 special forces death squad 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”. 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 states 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 of the US Army’s “respect for legal forms” reads, “The controller signalled back: ‘Lawyer, you cannot surrender to aircraft and are still valid targets.’” The book ends, “So the helicopter crew killed the men, as they were attempting to surrender.”

By the time of the Leigh-Harding book’s publication, the Guardian had 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 biologist 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 the original WikiLeaks”. This detailed sections of the Swedish police report, thereby serving to legitimise his questioning in Sweden and the call for his extradition.

It was the signal for the Guardian and its Sunday Observer partner to open their pages to various feminist columnists to interrogate the idea of Assange being pursued by Sweden, as it was all about women’s rights and had nothing to do with the secret documents released by WikiLeaks.

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