

Book Review: Julian Assange: The Unauthorised Biography

Released by his publishers without consent, Julian Assange's autobiography provides readers with most authentic portrait of the Wikileaks founder, reviewed by [Charlie Beckett](#).

Julian Assange: The Unauthorised Biography. Julian Assange. [Canongate Books](#). September 2011.

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Julian Assange may be paranoid, but they are out to get him. The release of *The Unauthorised Biography* by Canongate delivers no new facts, but the tone of this accidental memoir speaks volumes about the personality of the man.

WikiLeaks is a [profound challenge](#) to the status quo in journalism and politics. It has achieved the biggest disclosure of classified information in modern history. In [my forthcoming book](#) I look at whether it is a one-off freak or a model for the future of political communications. But this latest volume – and because of its [controversial genesis](#) it should be treated with caution as evidence – gives us the voice of the man behind the most sensational media adventure of the digital age.

It is clear that Assange, like most of us, was shaped by his upbringing. He tells a story of a socially marginal, disrupted family life. He asserts that it was happy and creative but with threads of violence and constant upheaval. Computer hacking with all its online camaraderie and the almost infinite potential power it offers for subverting authority becomes his early adult world, replacing reality.

His world-view is extremely simplistic. He describes a universal conspiracy of power that denies justice. As an internet geek obsessed by breaking in, it's not surprising that he sees information disclosure as the way to destroy these structures of iniquity.

But it's clear that he's not a politician. As he describes how WikiLeaks began its task of bringing secrets into daylight, it's obvious he has no sense of how people or institutions actually work.

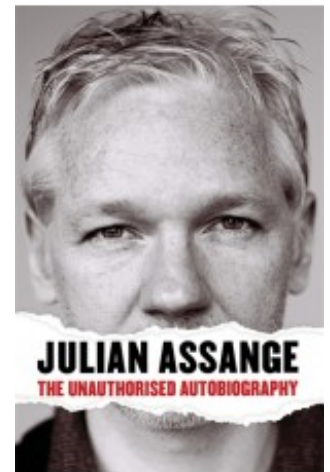
His goal is the release of information with little interest or understanding of its effects. The only baggage he carries is stuffed into a rucksack with no room left for moral scruples, tactical considerations or accountability.

He blunders into Africa, then the Middle East with limited knowledge and almost no self-awareness. He rarely leaves his ever-changing accommodation and his eyes are always glued to his lap-top screen. Assange gives no reason for why he's doing this beyond an abstract sense that he is fighting a lonely, pure battle against Power.

Of course, that is why WikiLeaks was so successful. Firstly, it had created a secure system for uploading classified documents. Secondly, it was beyond the reach of any normal legal sanction thanks to its global mirrored servers. But it was Assange's disregard for the usual journalistic checks, context and balance that really gave it the ability to challenge mainstream media and some of the most powerful nations in the world. That and one extraordinary massive leak of information, allegedly from a private in the US army.

Amazingly, just about everyone he works with falls out with him. But this is all their fault. Always. Nowhere in the book does he accept responsibility in any real sense. He is so obsessed by the process of what he does and feels so justified by his lofty aims that he doesn't or can't cope with the impact on people or politics.

That's not so unusual, of course. Most great investigative journalists are weird and often vicious, despite their claims to moral, professional and political superiority. Some of the other hacks he bumps into such as John Pilger, Heather Brooke or David Leigh are also 'colourful' characters. These kind of 'outsider' journalists are more political, campaigning or critical than the average news hound and that sometimes expresses itself in a temperament that is also more aggressive, confrontational or egotistical.



Tone here is important. Assange may be a computing genius but he comes across as a half-baked intellect that has picked stuff up as he goes along without putting anything together coherently or critically.

He associates himself with literary giants. Wilde, Dickens, Solzhenitsyn, Orwell, Burns, Horace, Shakespeare and even Milton all get name-checks. And inevitably the Messiah complex emerges, especially in the passages where he rages against his arch-nemesis Bill Keller of the New York Times.

His style is quaint. It's not his fault, let alone that of his ghost-writer Andrew O'Hagan, that this rough draft has emerged without the benefit of proper editing of what is, at times, a dull, hectoring, somewhat pompous monologue. All memoirs are by their nature, self-justifying.

But perhaps this is the authentic Assange voice. The register moves from a stilted, self-consciously old-fashioned rhetoric to blind, almost biblical rage.

It's not surprising that such a showman sees his life as a drama. Assange is right that people have described WikiLeaks according to their own prejudices. Many have attacked him out of fear rather than any real love of freedom. His project has been assaulted by corporations, governments and the intelligence services. And now, of course, there is the personal legal threat from the Swedish sex crime allegations. Rival mainstream media have been happy to feed off the leaks but then delight in his self-destructive mistakes.

In the end WikiLeaks itself might be a journalistic Yellow Brick Road that travels no further because Assange as the Wizard of Oz is a brilliant manipulator rather than someone capable of building a sustainable institution. But that, of course, is also its strength. Its counter-cultural image has enormous resonance amongst a sceptical global public. And if WikiLeaks doesn't have a proper organisation then that makes it all the harder to take down.

It doesn't appear from this book that Assange is particularly prone to real reflection. WikiLeaks will continue but let's hope better disruptive journalism emerges elsewhere. It would be a tragic waste if we don't learn the [lessons of WikiLeaks](#) and seize the opportunities for a new kind of more transparent politics in the networked era.

'WikiLeaks: News In The Networked Era' by Charlie Beckett with James Ball is published by Polity Press in December 2012

A version of this review first appeared on [Huffington Post UK](#).