

“We Steal Secrets”: A Masterclass in Propaganda. The Assassination of Julian Assange

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Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

I have just watched We Steal Secrets, Alex Gibney's documentary about Wikileaks and Julian Assange. One useful thing I learnt is the difference between a hatchet job and character assassination. Gibney is too clever for a hatchet job, and his propaganda is all the more effective for it.

The film's contention is that Assange is a natural-born egotist and, however noble his initial project, Wikileaks ended up not only feeding his vanity but also accentuating in him the very qualities — secretiveness, manipulativeness, dishonesty and a hunger for power — he so despises in the global forces he has taken on.

This could have made for an intriguing, and possibly plausible, thesis had Gibney approached the subject-matter more honestly and fairly. But two major flaws discredit the whole enterprise.

The first is that he grievously misrepresents the facts in the Swedish case against Assange of rape and sexual molestation to the point that his motives in making the film are brought into question.

To shore up his central argument about Assange's moral failings, he needs to make a persuasive case that these defects are not only discernible in Assange's public work but in his private life too.

We thus get an extremely partial account of what occurred in Sweden, mostly through the eyes of A, one of his two accusers. She is interviewed in heavy disguise.

Gibney avoids referring to significant aspects of the case that would have cast doubt in the audience's mind about A and her testimony. He does not, for example, mention that A refused on Assange's behalf offers made by her friends at a dinner party to put up the Wikileaks leader in their home — a short time after she says the sexual assault took place.

The film also ignores the prior close relationship between A and the police interviewer and its possible bearing on the fact that the other complainant, S, refused to sign her police statement, suggesting that she did not believe it represented her view of what had happened.

But the most damning evidence against Gibney is his focus on a torn condom submitted by A to the police, unquestioningly accepting its significance as proof of the assault. The film repeatedly shows a black and white image of the damaged prophylactic.

Gibney even allows a theory establishing a central personality flaw in Assange to be built around the condom. According to this view, Assange tore it because, imprisoned in his digital world, he wanted to spawn flesh-and-blood babies to give his life more concrete and permanent meaning.

The problem is that investigators have admitted that no DNA from Assange was found on the condom. In fact, A's DNA was not found on it either. The condom, far from making A a more credible witness, suggests that she may have planted evidence to bolster a case so weak that the original prosecutors dropped it.

There is no way Gibney could not have known these well-publicised concerns about the condom. So the question is why would he choose to mislead the audience?

Without A, the film's case against Assange relates solely to his struggle through Wikileaks to release secrets from the inner sanctums of the US security state. And this is where the film's second major flaw reveals itself.

Gibney is careful to bring up most of the major issues concerning Assange and Wikileaks, making it harder to accuse him of distorting the record. Outside the rape allegations, however, his dishonesty relates not to an avoidance of facts and evidence but to his choice of emphasis.

The job of a good documentarist is to weigh the available material and then present as honest a record of what it reveals as is possible. Anything less is at best polemic, if it sides with those who are silenced and weak, and at worst propaganda, if it sides with those who wield power.

Gibney's film treats Assange as if he and the US corporate-military behemoth were engaged in a simple game of cat and mouse, two players trying to outsmart each other. He offers little sense of the vast forces ranged against Assange and Wikileaks.

The Swedish allegations are viewed only in so far as they question Assange's moral character. No serious effort is made to highlight the enormous resources the US security state has been marshalling to shape public opinion, most notably through the media. The hate campaign against Assange, and the Swedish affair's role in stoking it, are ignored.

None of this is too surprising. Were Gibney to have highlighted Washington's efforts to demonise Assange it might have hinted to us, his audience, Gibney's own place in supporting this matrix of misinformation.

This is a shame because there is probably a good case to make that anyone who takes on the might of the modern surveillance and security empire the US has become must to some degree mirror its moral failings.

How is it possible to remain transparent, open, honest — even sane — when every electronic device you possess is probably bugged, when your every move is recorded, when your loved ones are under threat, when the best legal minds are plotting your downfall, when your words are distorted and spun by the media to turn you into an official enemy?

Assange is not alone in this plight. Bradley Manning, the source of Wikileaks' most important disclosures, necessarily lied to his superiors in the military and used subterfuge to get hold of the secret documents that revealed to us the horrors being unleashed in Iraq and

Afghanistan in our names.

Since he was caught, he has faced torture in jail and is currently in the midst of a show trial.

Another of the great whistleblowers of the age, Edward Snowden, was no more honest with his employers, contractors for the US surveillance state, as he accumulated more and more incriminating evidence of the illegal spying operations undertaken by the National Security Agency and others.

Now he is holed up in a Russian airport trying to find an escape from permanent incarceration or death. Should he succeed, as he did earlier in fleeing Hong Kong, it will probably be because of secrecy and deceit.

This documentary could have been a fascinating study of the moral quandaries faced by whistleblowers in the age of the surveillance super-state. Instead Gibney chose the easy course and made a film that sides with the problem rather than the solution.

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