



Julian Assange: A Modern Day Hero? Inside the World of WikiLeaks

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By **Jose Solís Mayén**

In the weeks following the release of classified American diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks, comedy show *Saturday Night Live* started using its chief editor Julian Assange as one of its characters. Played by Bill Hader (who completely nailed the accent and voice tone) he showed up by suddenly interrupting other broadcasts, mostly of the political kind.

We would see him sitting down, usually holding a drink, and staring seductively at the camera as he began revealing his messages. In the fashion of a James Bond villain, he would talk and then laugh maniacally as he delivered his punchlines. He would address matters of political interest in the style of celebrity gossip site TMZ and would point out the ridiculous in current news stories.

When discussing why Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg, was chosen as *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year" over Assange, he expressed how the only thing he liked about the social networking site was its "What *Sex and the City* Character Are You?", to which he added "I'm a Samantha, but if the Swedish police ask, I'm a Charlotte."

This comedic portrayal of Assange pretty much defined the way in which he was being perceived by the public: to some he was a smug charmer who could get away with anything in the name of "freedom of expression"; to others he was a jackass who had no respect whatsoever for the law, government security or democracy.

People's personal perceptions of Assange are usually predisposed and shaped by their political filiations and nationalities. This is why a title like *Julian Assange: A Modern Day Hero? Inside The World of WikiLeaks* feels like it has defined its appeal in advance.

The truth is that this documentary shouldn't even include the question mark in its title when it has already decided what it thinks of Assange. Each of the chapters in the feature are separated by a title card containing a picture of Assange and the words "courage is contagious" underneath. There is of course nothing wrong with actively supporting WikiLeaks and its controversial creator, but this film's title and its overall purpose remains rather unclear.

The documentary consists of roughly three hours of practically unedited material meant to provide audiences with an encompassing portrait of Julian Assange (as the description in the packaging suggests). As the movie begins we are introduced to Assange and see him hard at work in a hotel room as he is interviewed by an unspecified journalist (this film has no credited directors, either).

Watching the energetic Assange pack the entire contents of his room (including a desktop computer) into a small suitcase, brims with the promise of international intrigue and we can see he seems to enjoy this aura of glamorous spy that surrounds him. "Leaking is an anarchist act," he says, and you half expect him to pull out a cape and vanish in the middle of a smoke cloud.

The film then travels back and forth between repetitive interviews in which Assange and his colleagues discuss the same issues over and over. We get at least four definitions of what WikiLeaks is and by the third time this comes up, it becomes quite clear that we aren't really in the presence of an actual "documentary", but of an unfinished product which reunited random information about Assange and threw it together without any direction.

Some of these "chapters", as they are called, discuss fascinating topics like the Collateral murder event in Afghanistan: which controversially shows American military forces murdering civilians and journalists in an unjustified attack. Listening to Assange passionately defend the release of these tapes in the name of creating legitimate democracies, is nothing short of inspiring and provides this film with one of its few truly poignant moments.

As he talks about the way in which he was creating "the most detailed history of any war" you can't help but try to empathize with him and see that to him WikiLeaks isn't some sort of mindless whistle blowing project, but actual journalism and history writing. "There is nothing new in this world, other than the history you don't know yet" he says as he discusses the implications of releasing classified documents.

It's a shame that moments of brilliance get lost in what turns out to be a truly sloppy DVD, which lacks efficient menus (chapter names would have been helpful), lacks structure, and feels unprofessional. About two hours of the running time consist of taped conferences given by Assange. These have not been properly edited (you can even see people leaving the room) and are quite exhausting to watch given that they repeat material we've heard before, have extremely low image resolution and most of the time you can't even see Assange clearly.

Julian Assange: A Modern Day Hero? Inside the World of WikiLeaks could have been better produced, edited and presented. As it is, it feels like a rushed product made not for the sake of sharing information but to make an easy dime on a hot topic. If you're interested in Assange, you might be better off Wiki-ing him.

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