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THE SECRET SERVICE

Charting history in motion, *The Fifth Estate* follows the fortunes of a man on a mission to win an information war for everyone. Total Film talks to the filmmakers bringing the story of Julian Assange to life.

The First Estate: the clergy and the government

The Second Estate: the wealthy

The Third Estate: the workers

The Fourth Estate: the press

The Fifth Estate: you

Currently holed up in the Ecuadorean embassy in Knightsbridge, London, Julian Assange is a captivating, enigmatic figure, and his whistleblowing website WikiLeaks was – until a couple of years ago – a feared and fiercely debated internet upstart. Only launched in 2006 as a non-profit dedicated to publishing previously secret, potentially incendiary information from anonymous sources protected by cutting-edge cryptography, WikiLeaks was on a mission to

expose government and corporate deception and corruption. It enjoyed a rapid rise and, along with Assange, an equally precipitous fall.

In 2010, WikiLeaks released the largest trove of secret government files ever to see the light of day: the Iraq War Logs. Prior to that, Assange's most attention-grabbing coup had been "Collateral Murder", a video depicting a US military gunship obliterating a group of innocent civilians (including two Reuters journalists). His site had also exposed money laundering in a Swiss bank, a toxic chemical dump in Ivory Coast, banking misconduct in Iceland and massive corruption in Kenya. At his heady peak, Assange was dubbed "the James Bond of journalism" and his publish-and-be-damned ethos had governments and corporations quaking in their boots. But when he took on the might of the US administration, Assange's tiny but powerful empire began to crumble...

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"I was initially interested in the story rather than the messenger," says Benedict Cumberbatch, who portrays Assange in the story of his fall from grace, *The Fifth Estate*. "I was shocked and confounded and fascinated by the revelations of the Afghanistan and Iraq War Logs – none of which were completely out of keeping with what we suspected about the true travesties that occurred on both sides."

Combining elements of biopic, techno-thriller and docu-drama, *The Fifth Estate* charts Assange's rise from Australian hacker-activist to the feared and loathed leader of WikiLeaks, which he launched as a cyber-conduit for social justice. And who better to play the abrasive WikiLeaks founder than Sherlock Holmes himself? The threads between Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Baker Street detective and this 21st century renegade were obvious: high intelligence; ethereal appearance; awkward interpersonal skills...

"He's an extraordinary character, very provocative and divisive," says Cumberbatch. "I would definitely like to meet him at some point. Whether he'd like to meet me anymore is another question." Cumberbatch admits it took a bit of "soul searching" before he decided he was game for the task of portraying Assange. He spent hours poring through

news footage to perfect his softly spoken Australian twang, his slightly plasticised facial expressions and his languid body language. He also donned prosthetics, coloured contact lenses, and a white wig, as well as bleaching his eyebrows, to convince as WikiLeaks' overlord.

Cumberbatch recalls being completely immersed in his iPod listening to an old interview with Assange the first time his *Fifth Estate* make-up and wig were being applied in rehearsals. "When I looked up and saw myself in the mirror, I was like, 'Christ! It works, it does work,'" he says. "I mean, I've got a very different face from him and I can pull our physical differences apart. But there's enough to do an interpretation that is representative without being an impersonation, I hope. It was tricky. That was a hard aspect of the job but you can't get too obsessed by it. Otherwise it would be paralysing."

The more he learned about Assange, the more he empathised with him. "I was just very keen to make him human, to show that there were universal qualities to him," says Cumberbatch. "As a film that's investigating the man behind the frontman for WikiLeaks, it could expose or discuss him without trying to castigate him easily as either good or bad. It's so easy to do that and I think

WIKI-HISTORY

DECEMBER 2006
 WikiLeaks.org launches. Assange calls himself its Editor-In-Chief.

NOVEMBER 2007
 The site scores its first major coup as documents detailing internal procedures at Guantanamo Bay go online.

JANUARY 2008
 Swiss bank Julius Baer files a lawsuit after WikiLeaks publishes internal bank documents allegedly showing evidence of money laundering. The case is swiftly dropped.

JUNE 2009
 WikiLeaks publishes internal documents from the Kaupthing Bank in Iceland that implicate its owners in its collapse.

NOVEMBER 2009
 Half a million pager messages sent on 9/11 are made available on WikiLeaks.

that's what has happened to him. He feared a one-sided attack, but I wanted to make sure that what we portrayed was not that."

AN (UN)WANTED MAN

Before the shoot began, Cumberbatch emailed Assange in the hopes of being able to meet him, only to be told in no uncertain terms that he shouldn't even be playing the role. "With an actor as serious as Benedict Cumberbatch, he becomes the part – he was channelling Julian Assange," says *The Fifth Estate's* director Bill Condon. "But then in his email correspondence with the person he's becoming, he's being told, 'Please would you not play me.' Imagine how odd that is. I felt such compassion for him. It was almost like being a schizophrenic."

"I sort of expected it and his arguments were very strong," says Cumberbatch of Assange's rebuke. "But I had my own very strong counter arguments." Primarily, Assange was furious about *The Fifth Estate's* source material and rebuffed all attempts from the filmmakers to get him involved, or at least to get his blessing.

The film is largely based on Daniel Domscheit-Berg's book, *Inside WikiLeaks: My Time With Julian Assange At The World's*

Estate agents: (main) Benedict Cumberbatch did hours of research to play Julian Assange; (top left) Dan Stevens and Peter Capaldi as *Guardian* Deputy Ian Katz and Editor Alan Rusbridger; (bottom left) Laura Linney and Stanley Tucci discuss the implications for the White House; (right) director Bill Condon and Cumberbatch go over some non-leaked documents.

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Most Dangerous Website, recounting what Dan Stevens – on board playing *The Guardian's* then-Deputy Editor Ian Katz – calls “the almost tragic bromance” between the author and his ice-haired subject. A former spokesman for the whistleblowing organisation, Domscheit-Berg now says he turned on Assange because of the hacktivist's lackadaisical attitude towards redacting names in the Iraq War Logs when it came to releasing that huge cache of classified US military and diplomatic docs back in 2010.

Daniel Bruhl, so excellent in Ron Howard's *Rush*, portrays Domscheit-Berg and, as he did with Niki Lauda, got to spend time with the man he's playing. “It's a good thing when you like your character and you believe and trust him,” notes the German actor. “I believe he's a true activist and I love playing roles that I partly envy. I envy that he is such a committed man.”

Yet as flawed and megalomaniacal as Assange may be, it is Domscheit-Berg himself who is the villain to many in the WikiLeaks narrative: the man who crippled the site after instructing its brainiac programmer, ‘The Architect’, to remove all the improvements he'd made – rendering it impossible for sources to submit new material online.

APRIL 2010

WikiLeaks releases ‘Collateral Murder’, footage from a US helicopter strike in 2007 that shows Iraqi civilians being targeted and killed.

MAY 2010

US Army intelligence specialist Bradley Manning (now called Chelsea Manning) is arrested in Iraq in connection with the unauthorised release of ‘Collateral Murder’.

JULY 2010

WikiLeaks works with *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel* to reveal the contents of 91,000 classified US documents from the Afghanistan war.

AUGUST 2010

In Sweden, two women file claims of sexual misconduct against Assange. An arrest warrant is later withdrawn.

OCTOBER 2010

WikiLeaks' media allies publish the Iraq War Logs, the largest military leak in American history.

NOVEMBER 2010

Sweden re-issues its arrest warrant for Assange. He claims he will be extradited to the US if he sets foot in the country.

DECEMBER 2010

In London, Assange turns himself in to police and is placed under house arrest at a supporter's country house.

OCTOBER 2011

WikiLeaks goes in to temporary shutdown after a blockade by major credit card companies cuts off its access to funding.

MAY 2012

Denied leave to remain in the UK, Assange seeks political asylum at the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he remains to this day.

AUGUST 2013

Chelsea Manning is sentenced to 35 years in prison for espionage. She announces her plan to undergo gender reassignment, and requests a pardon from Barack Obama.



“It's so complex,” says Bruhl. “I read so many different perspectives and that was a difficult job in making this movie. I can only tell you that I have no reason not to believe in Daniel's integrity. What he told me made total sense, but there are other truths in this movie and I think it invites you to explore the truth for yourself.”

To craft this oh-so-recent story into a riveting political thriller, the producers turned to screenwriter Josh Singer, best known for his work on *The West Wing*, and Condon, who steered the *Twilight* saga through its final two instalments. Singer's script incorporated his research into Assange's convoluted background, which includes a lonely childhood in which his mother joined an Australian cult known as The Family (the reason for his dyed white hair), as well as his whizz-kid hacking adventures under the name Mendax. Singer met with several insiders, and writing a script laced with paranoia resulted in him being equally spooked. His computer was hacked, he claims, and he was questioned by the FBI.

LAST WORD

As for Condon, he adopts a tech-heavy approach to *The Fifth Estate* that is clearly influenced by David Fincher's take on the founding of another 21st-century internet phenomenon, Facebook. Keeping with the tradition of journalistic thrillers, it's a visceral, fast-paced film, deploying multiple, hand-held cameras on a globe-trotting shoot that covered nine countries, among them Belgium, Germany, Iceland, Kenya and the UK. On a fairly limited budget, shooting in so many places kept Condon on his toes. “We had to find a nomadic way of working,” he says. “But it gave us a great energy that helps give the film the right feel.”

The Fifth Estate ends cleverly with a sequence in which Cumberbatch's Assange is asked what he thinks of the WikiLeaks movie during an interview. “Which one?” he counters mischievously, which Condon acknowledged was his way of giving Assange the last word.

“Those are all things that he said in that interview,” says the director. “I wanted to give Julian the final call to arms and if you go home and look at YouTube, you can see many of the events depicted in this movie in their exact form. You can see him dancing in Iceland, you can see him at the Frontline club... But it's complicated and it's up to people to go and do their own research and make their own mind up. This film is not pretending to be the last word on the subject.”

“It's always interesting when a figure like Assange appears on the international stage,” chips in Dan Stevens, who saw Assange speak before his recent turmoil. “Whatever you make of him, good or ill, he's a fascinating figure to be dropped into our cultural consciousness. I always get excited by those moments in history. As the movie shows, what he's done has massive global implications.”

And everyone involved is hooked on finding out what happens next – not least Cumberbatch. “We're weirdly tied together now,” he muses of his onscreen alter ego. “I'm going to stay a very keen follower because it will be way down the line before history can offer an objective perspective.”

With the recent leak of further US intelligence secrets by Edward Snowden and the ongoing debate about government and corporate transparency, there's no question that recent headlines make Condon's film hyper-pertinent. But the filmmaker is under no illusion about how much *The Fifth Estate* can contribute to a conversation that's just getting started or to the salient point it raises: just who is left to expose injustice as the old media empire disintegrates and investigative journalism enters its death throes? “It may be decades before we understand the full impact of WikiLeaks and how it revolutionised the spread of information,” says Condon. “This film doesn't aim to be the conclusive statement on the topic, merely a drama that exposes the challenges of transparency.” **TF**

The Fifth Estate opens on 11 October.