

Inside WikiLeaks

My Time with
JULIAN ASSANGE
at the World's Most
Dangerous Website

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TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY JEFFERSON CHASE



Financing WikiLeaks

SUCCESSFUL leaks that had attracted a lot of media coverage made themselves directly felt in our accounts. By 2008, we had three different PayPal accounts that people could use to make donations. For example, on March 1, 2008, as the leak appeared about Julius Bär, we had 1,900 euros in our main PayPal account. By March 3, that had already risen to 3,700, and by March 11, we had 5,000 euros.

Then, in June 2009, our only remaining active PayPal account was frozen. Money could still be paid into it, but we couldn't get any out.

We hadn't paid any attention to the account for months. It was only when PayPal informed us that we would no longer be able to withdraw money that we took a look at what had been paid in.

"You won't believe it," I wrote Julian in August 2009. "There are almost thirty-five thousand dollars in the account."

I was determined to unfreeze the account. Julian didn't think this was a priority and didn't see why we should bother with it.

PayPal wanted us to supply them with a certain document. We were registered as a nonprofit organization, but we had

never officially applied for that status and were not qualified as a 501(c)(3) organization under US tax laws. Googling the term revealed that we weren't the first nonprofit organization to face this problem. PayPal regularly pestered its clients for this document. We registered as a business. That cost fees, but it saved a lot of time and energy. Even changing a comma in a PayPal contract is more trouble than it's worth. Life is too short.

I must have called the hotline thirty times and sent lots of e-mails back and forth. At a certain point I realized that PayPal wasn't a company with real flesh-and-blood employees. It was a machine. Admittedly, if you waited long enough on the hotline, you would end up speaking to real people at some point. But the Indian subcontractors, or whoever did these jobs for PayPal, could only tell you that you should please use the online system.

I think that PayPal's staff were just as much at the mercy of their own software as their clients. And this machinery neither knew pity nor recognized exceptional circumstances. The art of filling out the right fields remained a kind of arcane knowledge I would never be initiated into.

The system unfroze our assets briefly after we had turned the account into a business one and agreed to pay fees. For twenty-four hours, to be precise. Then the whole nonsense started again from the beginning. Once more a piece of information was missing. Once more it wasn't clear where this information had to be sent. Once more I got nowhere with the online system.

The dispute also created another problem. We weren't the only ones affected. All our accounts were maintained by volunteer supporters. For instance, a journalist had registered the frozen PayPal account for us. The contact person was a man in his late fifties

from the Midwest in the United States—a down-to-earth guy who worked as a reporter for a local newspaper. At some point in the year, he had contacted us and asked if he could do anything to help. Because he hadn't suggested handling our finances, we gave him the job with the account. That was our logic at the time. Whoever wasn't interested in accounts was the best person to manage them. Whoever wasn't interested in personally influencing public opinion managed our chat room, and so on.

Our volunteer had no idea what to do, or where exactly the problem lay. It was all too much for him.

In September 2009, Julian got the “nanny” involved. The nanny was brought in whenever there was a job that Julian couldn't be bothered with or couldn't do himself. She sometimes arrived just before conferences to write his speeches. After other people and I left WikiLeaks, she was also the one who ended up traveling the world mediating between Julian and us and asking us not to damage the project by publicly criticizing it.

The nanny was an old friend of Julian's and was around forty—a pleasant but very resolute sort of person. For personal reasons I don't want to go into here, she would never want to talk about her contact with WL. That was likely a particular advantage she offered from Julian's perspective.

At any rate, the nanny had our American volunteer at his wit's end. What made the matter worse was that the time zones in which the two of them lived were so far apart that communication was only possible for one during the potential deep-sleep phase of the other. In addition, our poor volunteer was sick of describing the whole problem over again. In the end a journalist I knew from the *New York Times* came to the rescue. In the third

week of September she went through official channels, getting in touch with PayPal directly and asking them why a project being supported by the *New York Times* had been frozen. Abracadabra! The account was released.

Things really turned nasty at that point. All of a sudden we had a bundle of money. But Julian and I had very different ideas about what to do with it.

I wanted to buy hardware—and not just because I really knew my way around that area. I wanted to get our infrastructure up to speed. This was desperately needed. As a result, breakdowns and security risks were inevitable. It made it far too easy for our adversaries. As long as everything was run on a single server, it would have been easy to break into WikiLeaks. That wouldn't have been so bad, but our documents were also on the server.

Julian had other plans, a lot more ostentatious plans. He talked about creating companies to better protect our donations from outside intervention. He said that it would set us back \$15,000 in lawyers' fees just to register the companies in the United States.

Julian also had connections to some organizations that wanted to act as "fiscal sponsors." They were nonprofit organizations to which American donors could transfer money in order to avoid taxes. I don't know whose company Julian was keeping at the time, what kind of films he was watching, or more significantly, which documents on our site he had been reading a bit too closely, but suddenly all he could talk about was "front companies," "international law," and "offshore" firms. I imagined him sitting in front of me with his encrypted cell phone, his hands nonchalantly on his hips, his long white hair slicked back with gel, saying, "Hello, Tokyo, New York, Honolulu? Please transfer three million to the

Virgin Islands. Yes, thanks a lot. And don't forget to destroy the documents after the transaction has been completed. Burn them, please. And wipe up the ash and swallow it. OK? You know that I can't stand leftovers. . . ."

Whatever scenes Julian was playing out in his imagination, they fit his dream of an untouchable organization, an international network of firms, and the aura of someone invulnerable who juggled finances and firms all over the world and whom no one in the world could stop. Nonetheless, while it may not have been sexy, we could have used a few simple, practical things first of all.

My girlfriend at the time had bought us secure cell phones, or Cryptophones, as they're called. She shelled out an awful lot of money in one fell swoop. And I still feel bad now, when I think about how I slowly let our relationship die.

Months later, when we were in Iceland, I accidentally found out that Julian was trying to sell one of those astronomically expensive cell phones to one of our acquaintances—for 1,200 euros. Not only didn't the cell phones belong to him, but he wanted to sell one off at a hugely inflated price to someone who had no money for that kind of thing. Afterward, Julian gave away the cell phone to some seventeen-year-old guy he wanted to become more involved. Julian could be unself-consciously generous one minute, then really miserly a minute later.

In April 2008 we had opened an account with the UK-based money-transfer company Moneybookers. It was primarily intended to enable donors in the United States to transfer their

money to us online. No one knew how much money was deposited in the Moneybookers account and what it was used for. Julian refused to allow me or other colleagues who joined later any access to the account.

Julian later opened another Moneybookers account in his own name. There was a direct link from our donation page to it. He refused to say what the account was for. It was closed in the fall of 2010, and later Julian publicly complained that WikiLeaks had had its money taken away. There is an e-mail Moneybookers sent to WikiLeaks on August 13, 2010, which was later quoted by the *Guardian* newspaper. According to it, the account was closed after examination by the security department at Moneybookers in order “to comply with money laundering and other investigations being carried out by government agencies.” The account was indeed shut down. But every single cent had been withdrawn beforehand.

Ironically, Julian didn't really care about money per se. He never carried any on him, always letting other people pay. He justified this practice by saying that he didn't want anyone to trace his whereabouts from his ATM visits. Sometimes he would tell our helpers this—an hour after giving a press conference that had beamed his current location all around the world. They may well have swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. Women, in particular, liked to help Julian. They bought all sorts of things for him: clothes, rechargers, cell phones, coffee, flights, chocolate, new luggage, woolen socks.

Julian didn't give a hoot about status symbols. He may be different today, but back then, when we traveled together, he didn't own a watch, a car, or any designer clothing. He just didn't care.

Even his computer was ancient: a white iBook that was almost a museum piece. At the most, he would buy himself a new USB stick.

In addition to the donor accounts, we also considered other ways of raising money. One idea was to get paid for the leaked documents directly by auctioning off exclusive access to the material. A kind of eBay for WikiLeaks, you could say. In September 2008 we released a trial balloon. We announced on our website and in press releases that we were going to sell off to the highest bidder e-mails from Freddy Balzan, the speechwriter of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. The announcement got lots of media coverage in Latin America. That was not, however, because of the number of media organizations competing with one another to express interest in the documents. Instead, attention immediately shifted to our plan itself, and a critical debate ensued. We were accused of wanting to capitalize on the work of our sources. And there were complaints that only media organizations with money would be able to exploit this interesting material first. We just wanted to test the waters. In actual fact we didn't have the technical capacity to stage an auction of that kind at the time.

I tried to apply for money from the Knight Foundation. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, based in the United States, promotes exceptional journalistic projects. In 2009 alone, the foundation handed out more than \$105 million. At the end of 2008 I submitted our first funding application, for \$2 million. It got turned down in the third or fourth round of the multistage application procedure. When we received the news that we had made it into the second round, Julian announced that the \$2 million grant was as good as in the bag. Well, not quite.

I tried again in 2009, submitting an application for half a million dollars. This application was very time-consuming, and Julian didn't help me. I spent two weeks working on the application with a volunteer. I had to answer eight questions about the motivation and inner structure of the project. One day before the deadline for submissions, Julian turned up with the nanny in tow.

The plan had been for the nanny to write the application on the eve of the deadline, but I had long since completed it. So we decided that we would make two applications. One was bound to be successful, or so the thinking went. Julian and the nanny tried to convince me that theirs would be the successful application. It was rejected in the first round. Mine got further, proceeding from round one to round two. Then, all of a sudden, we were in the penultimate round.

Later Julian would complain that I had tried to smuggle my name onto the application. That was a brazen reversal of the facts. Back in 2008, I had sat on the last day with the completed forms on my desk, wondering what to do about the signature. It was a real headache. We had to supply a real address, a real name, a permanent abode, and so on. . . . We didn't have an office that I could have used as an address. And Julian didn't have a fixed address anyway.

Time was running out, so I thought, Who cares about the United States? It really doesn't matter if I use my real name. I signed the application and sent it off. And in 2009 I did the same thing. I spent the next few days dreaming that WikiLeaks had been awarded the half million dollars and dreaming about all the things that we could afford with it. Just before going to sleep I thought about how we could set up the most sophisticated

security equipment—only the best: half a rack in a properly air-conditioned data center, with an electric generator and a network as well as a terminal server for accessing other servers if there was a problem. And the servers would be from the most recent generation, not from two generations past.

I carried on dreaming. Of renting an office and entrusting people with specific tasks. Of paying ourselves salaries. I would have preferred never to return to the company I worked for, with its Excel sheets, Tuesday meetings, and my secret telephone conferences in the storeroom on the eighth floor.

The application procedure went on for weeks. The Knight Foundation asked for additional paperwork and wanted to invite us to the last round at MIT in Boston. They wanted to meet us personally and put questions to our “board.”

The advisory board was a daring construction that had been set up before my time. Only one of the eight people listed as belonging to our advisory board publicly acknowledged a link to us—that was C J Hinke, a Net activist from Thailand. Journalists dug up every single one of the ostensible board members over time. The Chinese ones immediately denied any connection. Julian dismissed this with the words “Of course, they can’t publicly acknowledge their link to us.” Ben Laurie denied on several occasions ever having played an advisory role. Phillip Adams at least said that he had agreed on some occasion but had not been able to contribute to the project for health reasons.

The foundation would no doubt have found it useful to have met with the inner circle of WikiLeaks on at least one occasion, but it was impossible to find a time that suited us all. The e-mails went back and forth for ages. The foundation must have thought

that we were either completely arrogant or extremely disorganized. Both were true. That's why I put myself at their disposal. I wanted to give our contacts the feeling that we had things under control. Julian wrote me an angry e-mail afterward: "You're not the applicant."

Later he told the others that I had tried to force my way onto the application. My God! We could have put our energy to better use by combining forces to put together a great presentation. The application failed to clear the final hurdle.

who wanted to hear us, they would have had to install another floor halfway up the walls.

We had distributed pieces of paper with numbers on them to the audience. I then told them that we'd been approached in Iceland by the "Christmas Gang," who had given us a leak: a leak of all the people who probably weren't going to get any Christmas presents next year because they hadn't done their duty toward society. Everyone with a number had a year's time to fulfill his obligations. In return, we'd put in a good word for them with Santa Claus. In the months to come, we were constantly receiving donations and offers of help connected with these numbers.

Next we gave our audience an account of Iceland, our idea for setting up a safe haven for the press there, and the appearance on Egill Helgason's talk show, where we had made our proposal public. Then we asked an open question: Were those in the audience at the bcc capable of truly comprehending why the freedom of the Internet was so vital?

It was the greatest moment of my entire life. We hadn't given a pop concert or promised to hand out a thousand free drinks. All we'd done was give a lecture about international media law. But people clapped like crazy. First one member of the audience, then two, then three stood up, and suddenly they were giving us a standing ovation. The noise was deafening. I felt waves of enthusiasm floating up to us like a cloud from the masses down below. That was an awesome feeling. Truly awesome.

Slowly but surely, money started coming in.

We had announced that we needed \$200,000 for operating

costs and, ideally, \$400,000 more for salaries. By February or March 2010, we had gotten the first \$200,000 together, and that was just in our account with the Wau Holland Foundation, which ran our German account for us. This had been set up in October 2009. The Chaos Computer Club had put me in touch with the foundation, which was named after the deceased information philosopher. Holland was one of the founding fathers of the CCC, and the foundation managed his estate and supported projects that furthered freedom of information. The good thing about the foundation was that it took care of the donations and ensured that everything went through official channels. Anyone in Germany who wanted to give us money could deduct it from his taxes. I made contact and took over the paperwork. The lion's share of our donations came from Germany.

In the first two weeks after our initial post-strike publication, the "Collateral Murder" video, we raised another \$100,000. By summer 2010, it was already \$600,000, and the last time I was able to check, the foundation had collected as much as a million dollars for us. When I left the project in September, we had invested \$75,000 in hardware and travel costs. In the following two months, a far greater sum was withdrawn—probably because a way had been found to pay salaries.

With the submission system sorted out, we went back online in January 2010 so that people could upload new documents. The background system was, technically speaking, far more advanced than it had been before our break, but the wiki—the user interface with the start page, the explanations of all the leaks, and the links to the documents—remained offline for another six months. For half a year, we could receive new material but were otherwise

unreachable via the Internet. That was because our repair operations had proved a bit trickier than we originally imagined.

Suddenly there was plenty of money available, and unlike Julian, I was in favor of spending it. Between March and May, for instance, we got some seventeen new servers up and running.

Transactions with the foundation were relatively simple. The foundation advanced me money, and I bought things and submitted the receipts. Once I received 10,000 euros, and later, on another occasion, 20,000, which went to buy hardware and pay for transportation and travel costs. In late August we updated our infrastructure again. When I left WL in September 2010, the project was in the sort of technological shape I'd always dreamed of. We had Cryptophones, satellite pagers, and state-of-the-art servers—everything we needed. We were on solid footing, and our architecture was exemplary.

We also needed an office and some permanent employees. We'd been talking about this for some time. As a headquarters, we'd considered Berlin or somewhere in the Alps. Julian enjoyed the fresh air and the mountains just as much as I did.

In 2009, we briefly toyed with the idea of getting an air-raid shelter. I went as far as to ask the German military if there were any unused sites for rent or sale. The plan was to set up a computer center, which could have also served as home for related projects by other people we wanted to support. We would have hoisted a giant WL flag above it. It would have underscored our reputation as an unassailable fortress. Our stated goal at this point was to become "the most aggressive press organization in the world."

Then suddenly, as money began pouring in, Julian changed his mind. He thought we should become an "insurgent operation."

Insurgents? Insurgents don't have offices. They work underground. To my mind, he was casting doubt upon the basic idea of everything we'd worked toward for years.

Increasingly, he would talk about how we were being shadowed and how we needed to make ourselves "untouchable." He was convinced we were no longer safe on the streets, that our mail and belongings were being searched, and that we had to disappear and live underground. He fantasized about bulletproof vests and international secret services always on our heels.

Now, I'm a big critic of the German government, but I still believe we live under a government that respects the law. I didn't think we needed to fear being kidnapped on our trips to Iceland, Italy, or Hungary. And before we started complaining about people breaking into and searching our office, it would have been nice to have one.

Our first truly serious fights were about the money. I explained to Julian that he wouldn't be the only one to have access to the funds from the Wau Holland Foundation. I wasn't interested in paying them out to myself. I just wanted to be able to make decisions. To be able to get money when it was acutely necessary and when Julian, as was often the case, couldn't be contacted for a couple of days. Our two technicians and the close circle of assistants that had coalesced within WL shared my view. They even suggested splitting the money into two halves so that no one could squander it all individually. Even if one of us made an awful decision, our war chest as a whole would have been safe.

We all worked full-time for WikiLeaks. We had talked about the need to pay salaries for quite some time. I would have been content with 2,500 euros a month gross. I didn't need anything.

What's more, the foundation had told us that any salaries shouldn't be too nominal, to avoid running afoul of German labor laws concerning who was a freelancer and who a permanent employee. That was fine by me. We had talked about modeling what we did on the practices of other charitable organizations such as Greenpeace or Worldwatch. But Julian blocked any and all changes. There was more money around than ever before, but precisely at this juncture arguments broke out about every cent. Such quarrels were unworthy of the project. The fundamental underlying question was much larger. Gradually I realized that we were heading toward a major problem. A true nightmare. The future direction of WikiLeaks was at stake.

In late June, Birgitta and I chatted about a conversation she'd had with Julian. She said that he had told her not to trust me and described me as his adversary.

D: makes no sense

B: no he thinks it is deeper. that you want to take over

D: deeper in what way? thats BS [bullshit]

B: money and credit

D: yes, right, hahaha. well, this is clarified with everyone else. and we all agree on this being BS

B: yes, good

D: the only one that doesnt get it is J, will be sorted out sometime. i know why he thinks that way

B: i hope so. why

D: few remarks that i made for example. re money for example we had a discussion once about me spending some of that money

B: he thinks you keep taking huge amounts of money

D: and i said that if he doesnt talk to me, i will spend money for necessary expenses, in part because the money here in .de is in large parts a consequence of my work

D: LOL [Laugh out Loud]. i took like 15-20k out of this account or so, maximum and all was spent for servers we needed, and stuff like this all 100% accounted for

B: and i kept asking him to just meet you and go over all of these things

At the same time we had to defend ourselves against growing external pressure. On July 30, 2010, WL posted a 1.4 gigabyte

resumed on the daily WL staff chat. Julian emphasized that he had no time to fill us in on the logic behind his decisions because he had “high level discussions with around 20 people a day now.” I have no idea who he meant. Perhaps Julian’s so-called assistants were traveling around with him, attending meetings, or accompanying him to interview shoots. I don’t know. At the time, Julian was still in Sweden. As far as I know, he had contact there with some people from the Pirate Party and some journalists at the Swedish daily *Aftonbladet*, for which he was supposed to begin writing a column. There’s no doubt that it would have been important to get more reliable people involved in WL and take the pressure off the core team.

At the time, we were fighting a lot about an article in the *Wall Street Journal*. The journalists had asked me and Julian independently about our finances. I had told them how transparently and regularly our donations were recorded in Germany. Julian had told them the exact opposite, saying that WL accounts were skillfully and explicitly managed to prevent them from being attacked by anyone on the outside. In the article, he portrayed our non-transparent bookkeeping as a clever method for preventing our enemies from shutting off our cash flow.

That, of course, only attracted a host of other curious journalists who wanted to know why we were concealing our finances. Above all, it meant that the Wau Holland Foundation had a lot of explaining to do. Julian would later claim he had been misquoted.

In the chat room, we again asked him to step back and to stop talking to the press and sending out tweets describing the charges as a Pentagon smear campaign. When our questions got too critical, though, Julian would simply log himself out.

the benefits of this particularly expensive form of journalistic work.

MacFadyen also sits on the advisory board of the Bureau for Investigative Journalism, a journalists' initiative set up in 2009 that attempts, you might say, to put theory into practice. It produces four or five reports every year on particularly important topics that, in the Bureau's opinion, aren't receiving sufficient attention. The reports are not commissioned by the media industry; the Bureau itself funds the painstaking research. The Bureau is also based in London and the Centre for Investigative Journalism provides it with expert advice and reporters.

MacFadyen is both one of Julian's biggest fans and a close colleague of Iain Overton, a documentary filmmaker and the editor in chief of the Bureau. That is probably how the contact with Julian came about—and the idea to work more closely together in the run-up to the Iraq leak. Part of the idea was for the Bureau to pre-produce five-minute videos and sell the rights to them to TV stations.

In 2009 the Bureau received 2 million pounds from the Potter Foundation. Thus, it was financially independent. Its journalists were presumably interested in working together with WikiLeaks for the sake of a good story and perhaps the publicity that any association with WikiLeaks might generate.

The question of rights had already arisen with the "Collateral Murder" video. That had given Julian the idea of using the videos to tap a further source of income.

I've heard from a former *Newsweek* reporter as well as two other sources that Al Jazeera and Channel4 were among those who had paid for the five-minute clips. My sources mentioned sums of

about 110,000 pounds from Al Jazeera and 50,000 pounds from Channel 4. Meanwhile, Iain Overton and the Bureau, the producers of the videos, have come under fire. A number of critics have questioned whether these deals were completely kosher. They want to know whether by buying the videos the broadcasters also purchased the right to take an advance look at the documents. Overton denies this. He says the money only went toward funding his substantial production costs, and that the Bureau ended up with a loss from the deal. I have the feeling that Overton is now paying the price for dealing with a nontransparent organization.

Pre-produced videos were apparently also offered to other TV stations. Some of them, ABC for example, were suspicious about the offer and surprised by the amounts of money being asked for—100,000 pounds for five-minute TV reports. The public—including WL reporters and donors—was also left in the dark about these video sales. That is definitely a point for criticism. It remains unclear to this day who paid what and what they were promised in return. Overton has assured me that he will publicize all the background details of the deals and can show that everything was aboveboard, as far as the Bureau was concerned.

Julian would later fall out with the *Guardian*, when the paper wanted to publish some of the diplomatic cables without consulting him. According to an article by Sarah Ellison in *Vanity Fair*, Julian and his attorney stormed into the *Guardian*'s offices, claiming that the information in the documents was personal property, and that any publication would affect him financially. That raises the question: if Julian can apparently be so open about his financial interests with his media partners, why can't he make them transparent to the general public?

Afterword

TODAY, in January 2011, I'm at much the same point as I was a year ago, when we thought it would be possible to reestablish WL on a new footing. With OpenLeaks, we're trying to build up something we believe is the best way to solve a few of the world's problems. If 2010 was the year of media hype, 2011, we hope, will be the year of substance.

As I was writing my story, new facts were revealed and some of my questions were answered. At the same time, the picture of WikiLeaks's actual situation has become increasingly opaque. We are flooded by media information, and this encourages conspiracy theories, rumors, and myths, creating confusion and deflecting attention from the genuine issues.

In order to dispel the confusion and clear up the mysteries surrounding WL, we need answers to certain questions. They include:

- What is WikiLeaks's financial situation? What have donations been used for? And who decides how money is allocated?

- What is the current organizational and decision-making structure? How are responsibilities divided up?
- What did Julian mean when he reportedly told the *Guardian* that he had a financial interest in how and when the diplomatic cables were published?
- What roles do WL's representatives in Russia and Scandinavia, Israel Shamir and Johannes Wahlström, a father and son with a record of anti-Semitism, play at WikiLeaks?
- What kinds of deals have Wahlström and Shamir arranged with media outlets?
- Are there other WL brokers who have provided media outlets with material, and if so, on what terms?
- Do Julian Assange, other people involved with WikiLeaks, or their companies profit from any such deals?

Only when the specific facts are sorted out will we understand how things have come to be the way they are. Only then can we answer the question of what went wrong with WikiLeaks and the brilliant idea of using a state-of-the-art tool to make matters of urgent public concern truly transparent.

Our society needs citizens capable of thinking and acting on their own. People who do not shy away from critical questions because they're afraid of being disappointed. Our society needs individuals who are able to distinguish good information from bad and to make good decisions based on that knowledge, instead of relinquishing all personal responsibility to messiahs, leaders, and alpha wolves.