

WikiLeaks: read all about it

First there was WikiLeaks, now come all the books on WikiLeaks. **Simon Caterson** dips into the first wave

The “most famous man in the world” is a former computer hacker who owns almost nothing – not even the clothes he wears – and has no fixed address. Julian Assange’s astonishingly rapid rise to global fame has no precedent for an Australian other than Errol Flynn, who became a major Hollywood star almost overnight in the 1930s.

Of course, Assange – the now very public face of WikiLeaks – is not simply a celebrity but someone who by dedicating himself to “scientific journalism” may have acquired the power to change the course of history.

There are those in the media who query whether what Assange has achieved really qualifies as journalism. Nevertheless, there is no denying the sublime power of the idea of an information supply network that seemingly cannot be shut down no matter how powerful those wishing to control its disclosures.

There was the extraordinary release last year by WikiLeaks of the Afghan and Iraq war logs and then the unprecedented release of an immense tranche of American diplomatic cables. Now we are being hit by the sonic boom of the publishing phenomenon. Already there are four books out on WikiLeaks, and there are more to come – including Assange’s own memoir, which he is rumoured to be co-writing with Andrew O’Hagan.

Underground, by Sulette Dreyfus and Julian Assange, which was first published in 1997, provides invaluable historical background to Assange’s peripatetic childhood and the early days of the computer-hacking scene in Melbourne in the 1980s and 1990s.

The other three books – *Inside WikiLeaks*, *WikiLeaks* and *The Most Dangerous Man in the World* – claim to offer the “inside” story on WikiLeaks. They provide different perspectives on the unlikely rise to global prominence of Assange and his increasingly fractious whistleblowing operation. They also look at the current uncertainty surrounding the legal position of Assange and the seemingly grim future facing Bradley Manning, the young US Army soldier who was the source of the most significant leaks.

Daniel Domscheit-Berg (*Inside WikiLeaks*) is the estranged, some might say embittered, former lieutenant at WikiLeaks. David Leigh and Luke Harding (*WikiLeaks*) are journalists with *The Guardian*, the newspaper that used the WikiLeaks material, which also makes them players in the story. The one really independent account is that of Andrew Fowler (*The Most Dangerous Man in the World*), who writes with all the skill, economy and penetration he brings to his ABC TV investigative journalism. Also, Australian readers may find that Fowler’s book is closest to their understanding of the story.

Though the operations of WikiLeaks seem to have been stymied, at least for now, we may well have been witness to a watershed in the history of journalism. Whatever we may think of any of the personalities and organisations involved, at the heart of the matter resides that most sacred principle of our civilisation, the right to freedom of information, as each of these books confirms.

Inside WikiLeaks: My time with Julian Assange at the world’s most dangerous website by Daniel Domscheit-Berg with Tina Klopp, translated by Jefferson Chase. Published by Scribner, RRP \$29.95.

The Most Dangerous Man in the World, by Andrew Fowler. Published by Melbourne University Press, RRP \$32.99.

Underground: Tales of hacking, madness and obsession on the electronic frontier, by Sulette Dreyfus and Julian Assange. Published by William Heinemann Australia, RRP \$24.95.

WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange’s war on secrecy, by David Leigh and Luke Harding. Published by Guardian Books, RRP \$24.95.

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