Interview of Julian Assange "We have been the trigger" Libération – April 17, 2011

Before being the man behind WikiLeaks, Julian Assange was, as a teenager in Australia, one of the best hacker of his generation. He wrote it all in 1997 in his very first book « Underground » that became cult for the hacker community. As its very first French edition is about to be published, and of which I signed the preface, I went to the peaceful village of Beecles, in Norfolk England, where "the most dangerous man in the world" is, until his next hearing in late July, retained under house arrest. Surrounded by wild ducks and charming bed and breakfasts.

In 1994, you decided to spend three years of your life writing this book, which tells the epic story of the first hackers. Why?

It was a unique world in which I was involved and I wanted to show the world. I was proud of that environment, proud of what we had accomplished as a community of young people around the world. We were ahead of something crucial, before the Internet itself was accessible to anyone, even the army. I wanted to tell how this international network of hackers operated, their motives, culture and mindsets, in Australia but also in the USA.

In your book, hackers see themselves as explorers. Today they live as revolutionaries. What happened in 15 years?

Entering our lives, the Internet has interfered in all aspects of society and has brought his values in. I remember that moment. It was around 1996 when the first public websites appeared. You could see that the Internet desire was to penetrate society. We had our own values, reflecting those of the Internet users (academics, students and hackers) at that time. We wondered how our culture would evolve penetrating Society at large. In fact, they have really merged. The core of the hacking culture is now becoming mainstream. Students discover how the world works through the Internet. They learn and grow in a peculiar way. This is about to reach a tipping point. Through our publications and our own example, we showed a new way. Now that there are all these battles around us, these young people realize that there is something here, like freedom of information and speech on the Internet, to cherish. The protection of these values has become something common for these new generations and that makes us very optimistic. According to activists whom I admire as Daniel Ellsberg, this has not happened since 68. We are experiencing a new version of 68. This comes from the people, from the bottom.

What do you think of the role of Anonymous, this informal hackers' collective that launches operations to support the people of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or attacks oppressive forces or governments?

Anonymous is really an interesting phenomenon precisely because anyone can get involved, anyone can say that is Anonymous, anyone can participate in leaks. This is a very fluid organization, without leadership, that demonstrates there is a professional and a very strong politicization among hackers. Even the best of them contribute to Anonymous from time to time because the cover is solid. It is an idea and a brand to act but they belong to nobody. Anonymous is one of those spontaneous movements that occur today, precisely because of the ease of appropriation of these practices, the speed of diffusion and the emotions that people involved experience, the friendships they develop. The movement's inherent values are positive ones. This is all about anti-sectarianism.

How did WikiLeaks, social networks and hackers have contributed to the Arab spring?

The Middle East was like fire about to burn, for a bunch of reasons: demography and a prominent youth, the Internet penetration, migration waves between states, satellite TV. Al Jazeera editorial choices to cover and investigate these revolts were key. Because of the geopolitical implications for Qatar, its work is compromised in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain but for Tunisia and Egypt, his contribution was excellent. But none of this started on its own. It needed a trigger and that trigger was the diplomatic cables on these countries, those published by WikiLeaks. They were picked up by Arabic local newspapers as al-Akbar in Lebanon, or clones of WikiLeaks, as TunisiaLeaks who translated our cables into French. As a result, Arabic and French versions of these cables spread very quickly in Tunisia at the beginning of December. And they did not just describe the corruption of the Ben Ali regime but also put in evidence its extreme fragility. The cables showed clearly that if there was a conflict between the Ben Ali regime and the military, the United States would not necessarily support Ben Ali but the army. This sent a strong signal to activists in Tunisia, but also to the army, to supporters of Ben Ali and also to neighboring regions. This gave confidence to activists. Similarly, the support of the West to Ben Ali had been weakened by the revelation of the true American vision of the regime. It became very difficult for France to support Ben Ali when the US ambassador vision is clearly exposed.

What about Egypt?

The same happened: an Egyptian national newspaper started to publish diplomatic cables. Because of the situation in Sinai, Israel and the United States wanted to preserve their positions. When the regime began to waddle and Mubarak was attacked from all sides, Omar Suleiman, the former head of the Egyptian secret services, was put forward by the United States and Israel. But the Egyptian cables we leaked told a different story: suddenly, it became impossible for Americans to publicly support Mubarak and Suleiman when their own cables described how this man they were supposedly supporting, was, according to them, dangerous and terrible. By ripple effect this kind of support

became impossible for all Western governments. The whole Middle East area is in a unique dynamic where dictators support each other. The WikiLeaks Cables and the internal revolts forced the regimes to focus on their internal problems instead of doing what they usually do: rely on each other, between dictators.

How far can it go? Do you think this dynamic can affect Europe or the United States?

This is really a sign of great hope for me. In the Middle East we saw dictators fall as well as consenting to huge concessions to people. To stay in power, they know they have to make compromises. At the end of the day, this is what we need. What matters is not who represents the State, but the level of power the population has recouped, through these compromises. What happened in the Middle East is very inspiring for young people in the West and this could well result in a strengthening of political youth movements here.

Upon your release from jail, it is said that your mother's first asked you if this was really worthing it? What was your answer?

I actually thought about that when I was detained, the fact that I can be stopped or even killed. This rather confirmed my choice, made me more determined. And finally you manage the situation by trying to do your job. So, you do not have time to fantasize too much. You just keep on asking yourself whether your strategy is the good one.

You said that you were happy to go to jail because at least you would have time to read a book. So, what did you read?

I read Solzhenitsyn's Cancer Ward. There are not that many books in jail. I was actually quite surprised to find that one. I have always favored this type of literature, these fights ... And I have a great admiration for Solzhenitsyn. The struggles he went through have constantly challenged his strength and commitment. He is a role model. For all of us.

Underground, Julian Assange and Suelette Dreyfus, Editions des Equateurs, 342 pages, 20 euros

@ Flore Vasseur for Liberation – April 17, 2011

Per FLORE VASSEUR



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Depuis sa résidence surveillée en Angleterre, le fondateur de WikiLeaks, revient sur le rôle joué par Internet et son site dans le printemps arabe.

Julian Assange: «Nous avons été

