



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on October 19, 2013

The Fifth Estate: Well-Acted, but Between Two Genres

[The Fifth Estate](#) is more like a documentary — without the context or the strict adherence to documentable facts — than it is an dramatization. It's not a bad film, even though it straddles the two worlds without fully embracing either genre. As such, many people who love information about organizations like WikiLeaks will pine for a genuine independent documentary about the website during the movie, while the modestly informed may be confused by the film's swirl of references to actual historical events.



But *The Fifth Estate* tells a story that needs to be told. [WikiLeaks](#) is a whistleblower website that has toppled billion-dollar corporations and banks, overturned governments and elections, and ruined careers of corrupt politicians around the world with one tool: the truth.

All WikiLeaks does is publish secret documents, and protect the leakers with a promise of anonymity. Not surprisingly, the [apologists of corrupt government have cried "treason"](#) at every turn, and used every means in their possession to silence WikiLeaks and its growing number of [counterparts across the Internet](#). Indeed, the land of the free and home of the First Amendment was the first government to censor (temporarily, through a [court restraining order](#)) the WikiLeaks website. The film takes notice of all of WikiLeaks' major scoops, from the [Julius Baer bank](#) scandal that got WikiLeaks going, to the ["Collateral Murder" video](#) of U.S. helicopter gunships gunning down civilians they knew were unarmed and wounded that made global news, to the [Iraq war logs](#), the [Afghan war logs](#), [U.S. diplomatic cables](#), the [overturning of the government in Kenya](#), and the [beginning of the Arab Spring](#).

The Fifth Estate features extraordinary acting performances. Benedict Cumberbatch (*Star Trek: Into Darkness*) is uncanny as Julian Assange. The only thing stopping an Academy Award nomination for Cumberbatch is that the critics have thus far panned the film. Supporting Cumberbatch with excellent performances are Daniel Brühl (*Joyeux Noël*) as Daniel Berg and David Thewlis (*Harry Potter* series) as London *Guardian* reporter Nick Davies.

The Fifth Estate has a dual focus: the exposure of corporate and government secrets by the website, and the breakdown of the partnership between the Australian-born founder Julian Assange and his German protégé Daniel Berg. The former focus retails the actual WikiLeaks revelations of government and corporate corruption around the world, i.e., the verifiable facts. The latter engages in a soap opera-style spat between the two WikiLeaks leading lights. The film draws heavily from Berg's 2011 book [WikiLeaks: My Time with Julian Assange at the World's Most Dangerous Website](#), and has therefore been taken as derogatory against Assange.

It's the film's reliance on the negative portrayal of Assange as a near-sociopath in Berg's book that has rankled WikiLeaks, which has panned the film. Assange even [wrote](#) a letter to Cumberbatch (who had asked to visit with Assange to practice his mannerisms for the film) that "I believe you are a good person, but I do not believe that this film is a good film.... As justification it will claim to be fiction, but it



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is not fiction. It is distorted truth about living people doing battle with titanic opponents. It is a work of political opportunism, influence, revenge and, above all, cowardice. It seeks to ride on the back of our work, our reputation and our struggles.”

But the reality is that Assange — who was raised in a broken family and is himself an absentee father to two children — is damaged goods. His complaints against Berg’s book and the film serve only to vindicate Berg’s charges. Assange is in [legal trouble](#) for several consensual trysts in [Sweden, a nation that has bizarre legal rules](#) that allow men to be charged with rape for not using a condom during consensual sex. But the film doesn’t demonize Assange as much as the thin-skinned Australian claims. It may not be a flattering portrayal, but an even less flattering portrayal could easily have been produced by director Bill Condon.

More importantly, the knowledge that Assange is damaged goods is hardly damning to WikiLeaks. All men are to a certain extent damaged goods, as all are sinners in one degree or another. To gloss over the failings of its founders would be to create a cartoon, or worse, public relations. *The Fifth Estate* doesn’t do that, and a sans-cartoon portrayal does nothing to detract from the valuable work the people at WikiLeaks are doing.

Speaking of public relations, WikiLeaks has just released its own documentary produced by Assange called [Mediastan](#), which was designed to compete with *The Fifth Estate*. Assange wrote in a [WikiLeaks press release](#): “This weekend, instead of wasting your time and money on claptrap Hollywood propaganda, why not get your friends together and watch MEDIASTAN instead?”

There are a few high points in the film. *The Fifth Estate* rises to the level of trenchant analysis at one point in its depiction of the tension between WikiLeaks’ policy of publishing the entire text of leaks and the fact that in some cases this may expose other whistleblowers (who blow the whistle on corruption through the “proper” chain-of-command) to harm and retribution. This, according to Berg, was the reason for the split with Assange and his subsequent alienation from the whistleblowing website.

WikiLeaks continued on in its post-Berg iteration, posting any kind of secrets it chooses. Ironically, WikiLeaks had [leaked the entire script](#) of *The Fifth Estate* long before it was released to theaters. So the film-goer can read the script without ever setting foot in a theater. *The Fifth Estate* is a film worth seeing anyway, even if the film’s quality wouldn’t warrant staying up late in order to watch a midnight premiere.



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