

# “HI, THIS IS JULIAN ASSANGE”

LE 22 OCTOBRE 2010 ADMIN

While WikiLeaks relied on the greatest news outlets in the world, Julian Assange entrusted OWNI with the conception, the design and the development of the crowdsourcing application. Here is the story. Our questions. His answers.

On Friday, October 8, an email appeared in our inbox, citing an “urgent request” for the team that developed the **Afghanistan warlogs** application. It was forwarded to me, as I was the datajournalist behind the project. Although I was almost certain that this was the umpteenth journalist enquiry regarding the warlogs, the sender’s name immediately caught my eye.

It was *Sunshine Press*. As it happens, *Sunshine Press* is the company that publishes the **wikileaks.org** website. This was serious. After a couple of email exchanges, my cell phone rang. **Julian Assange was on the other end. I was talking to the soul of Wikileaks.** To provide context, we have posters of Assange in our open-plan office. This was the datajournalist equivalent of a teenage girl having Justin Bieber on the line.



After such excitement, we of course accepted to go to the meeting Assange had proposed, in London, three days later. I got aboard the Eurostar with **Pierre Romera**, the developer who worked on the first version of *Warlogs*. Once in St Pancras, we headed towards the bar in which we were to meet Assange, stressed and scared as if we were to meet the head of some secret service. From there, we were walked to the office where the Wikileaks team worked. Assange was sitting there, much less intimidating in real life as when he’s wearing his grey suit with neatly combed white hair. Still, we felt unnerved by the situation, being in a position to negotiate with him whatever it was he wanted from us.

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*“We have the same dataset as the one you worked on. Except it’s larger, and concerns another country”, he said (not verbatim, my memory is pretty bad and recording the conversation wouldn’t have been such a smart idea). “We liked the crowdsourcing app you made for the Afghan logs and we would like to give you more time this time around.” How much time? “Six days”. Ah.*

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“What is the risk that this file encounters the same criticism as the first ones, especially with regards to the names of the informants?” we asked. “This has been taken care of” , was the answer. “Although we’re going to be criticized on other points,” added another person in the office.

In the end, we were told that many journalists were investigating the current corpus and that we wouldn’t have to dig out stories by ourselves. Rather, **Assange wanted us to produce an interface that would complement diarydig.org**, a website where one can search and browse through the files. We had to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) before any further information could be disclosed. If we opened our mouths, we’d now have to pay a hefty fine of £100,000. Despite this lavish insurance, we had no access to the database. Instead, Assange gave us a ‘redacted’ sql file, stripped of all the interesting bits.

Now, we decided to work for Wikileaks despite not knowing what kind of stories the files contained, because we were given the assurance that no lives were going to be put at risk by the release of the logs. Had it been otherwise, we would probably not have done it. All in all, the four conditions we established before coming to London were met:



- 1. We had six days and a free hand on the development;**
- 2. We had no knowledge of the data before the official release date (or as little as was needed from the technical aspect);**
- 3. We knew for sure that several newsrooms were working on the logs and that sensitive information had been retracted;**
- 4. We wouldn’t have to host the app. A ruling by France’s supreme court in January, 2010, is phrased in such ways that a host is now responsible for all content on its servers. Had we hosted the app ourselves, likely within hours of launch the police would demand we take it offline. We had to look to freer countries for hosting. Wikileaks told us to look at Bahnhof.se, their own host, famous for having its servers buried deep in a nuclear shelter.**



We started work as soon as we signed the NDAs, while still in the London studio. The specs document (in which we detail how the app is supposed to work) was completed within minutes. It was easy: we already had our original vision from when the logs were first released, but now we had the opportunity and time to make it a reality. We spent the entire afternoon, part of the night and the following day coding our asses off, and only took a break to grab some dinner with Julian and a few others.

Back in Paris, we held an emergency strategy meeting, so that every developer and every coder knew what they had to do. By then, we still had no access to the actual files. Design was done in eight hours, as developers were getting the structure ready. On Saturday, October 16, the app was 95% complete. We only had to plug the actual database into our system. The Monday deadline, as we now know, was a decoy.

We continued working on refining the app for the whole week, without knowing the actual release date. On Thursday, Assange resumed contact and put the sql files directly on the server. To give him access to the servers, we used a secure chat. Given the sensitivity of the conversation, we double-checked Assange’s identity by asking him something only he and I knew: “*what was the flavor of the waterpipe we smoked at the restaurant in London?*” A real war movie. A few hours before launch, we finally got hold of the files. After some last-minute checks, we loaded the complete, final version on the servers.

At 23:00 Paris time, we pressed the ‘play’ button. **The rest is being written now.**



Click here to open the app

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**LAURA STRICKLER**

le 23 octobre 2010 - 17:41 &bullet; SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



*Having major problems with the site – can someone email us with some tech support?*

VOUS AIMEZ



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LUI RÉPONDRE

**ADMIN**

le 23 octobre 2010 - 17:59 &bullet; SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



@laura: please contact [nkb@owni.fr](mailto:nkb@owni.fr)

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LUI RÉPONDRE

**NONAME**

le 4 janvier 2011 - 19:14 &bullet; SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



*Juge d'instruction P. RAMAËL blanchie un commandant de Police en fonction à I.G.S. Gilles ALIROL des accusations de violation des articles 434-4 et 434-7-2 du Code Pénal.*

*Est-ce que cette information est intéressante pour OWNI ?*

VOUS AIMEZ



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LUI RÉPONDRE

**COPPER CUPOLAS**

le 11 novembre 2011 - 1:11 &bullet; SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



*Hello! I just would like to give a huge thumbs up for the great info you have here on this post. I will be coming back to your blog for more soon.*

VOUS AIMEZ



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LUI RÉPONDRE

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[Live] StateLogs: A new world? » Article » OWNI.eu, Digital Journalism le 27 novembre 2010 - 17:14

*[...] we published the Iraqi Warlogs, Wikileaks contacted us directly and we worked with them on the browsing interface that helped users analyze the 400,000 Sigacts [...]*