

# Statement on the Invitation of Julian Assange at the Elevate Festival 2018

This year's Festival theme of RISK/COURAGE will be examined across 12 detailed tracks of discussion of varying intensity. An important focus this year, will be placed on whistleblowing, journalism, and media. After much intense deliberation and discussion by the Festival's organizers, the decision was ultimately made to also invite Julian Assange - in full awareness of the many controversies currently surrounding WikiLeaks and his person.

Controversies and criticism of Julian Assange aside, the media organisation WikiLeaks has changed the landscape of media, journalism, the general consciousness of whistleblowing and the awareness of technology and communication forever – on a global scale. Despite being under house arrest or arbitrarily detained for more than half a decade, Julian Assange nevertheless continued to publish globally relevant information, pure data, and systems to search and analyze information contained in leaked documents. Wikileaks' approach to Scientific Journalism and a meticulous technological verification process is unique in its kind. It has provided media partners all around the world with easy access to leaked information. And inspired other media organizations to also install “secure digital drops”. The political ramifications and the fierce backlash from many leaks are being dealt with from within a tiny room in London. Assange got the Ecuadorian citizenship in December 2017, even diplomatic status, but will the British law enforcement provide safe passage to the granted political Asylum in Ecuador? Almost 6 years have passed. Ecuador wants a solution. How long will the United Kingdom stall the process? What's next with WikiLeaks?

At the Elevate Festival 2018 opening event, Julian Assange will give a short speech, followed by a moderated Q&A . In the eyes of the festival makers it is highly relevant and necessary to engage in a conversation with one of the major protagonists of the ongoing information (cyber) war of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **The criticism:**

Julian Assange is undoubtedly a polarizing figure: harsh critics may see him as a suspected fugitive hiding out in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, and has thereby effectively evaded justice in Sweden. From the confines of the Embassy, he is said to have had a decisive influence on the U.S. presidential election campaign. He is also alleged to have selectively published documents via WikiLeaks; he is also ostensibly a Russian agent; and is purported to be promoting Putin's agenda. He is also accused of ideological proximity to the so-called "Alt-Right" movement by virtue of some of his tweets. In addition, there is also the long-standing criticism of WikiLeaks, purporting that private information was recklessly published without any recognizable benefit to the general public, and furthermore, WikiLeaks was accused of having endangered the personal safety of people in the affected countries, yet these very critics failed to supply any such evidence to support this claim that WikiLeaks had “blood on its hands”.

Clearly, that is a great deal of criticism, which in some cases arguably weighs very heavily against WikiLeaks and its publisher. But is there any truth to it, - is it merely a smear campaign? Had Julian Assange really transitioned from a hacker and publisher to an apologist for the extreme right? Had the mission of WikiLeaks, - to be fiercely independent and revolutionary in their scientific journalistic approach - changed over the years - to become an extended arm of the Kremlin (with whom Right-Wing Parties such as the Austrian FPÖ have been courting for years now)?

Many of the relevant issues of our time are closely related to these categories: the division of society into Left/Right blocks; of disinformation campaigns and of propaganda disseminated by

governments and conservative media outlets; of the unchartered influence of social media on world politics; on the crisis of Journalism and media; of whistleblowing and the ills of over-classification; of secret documents and forbidden knowledge; and ultimately, of transparency vs. privacy.

Between the extreme poles of condemnation and glorification, there often seems to be little room for a balanced, factual discussion about Julian Assange. At the Elevate Festival, we would like to engage in this thought experiment. One thing is certain: a good part of the WikiLeaks publications have in fact sharpened public awareness and informed the debate on the topic of War crimes and of the abuses of power. The topic of Julian Assange, as the publisher of WikiLeaks, is indeed a controversial one, and therefore, is deserving of an extensive and factual discussion.

It is important to the Festival for the discussion to take place in a factually-founded discourse and is conducted in a respectful albeit critical manner. For this reason, the Elevate team spent a significant amount of time researching in the months leading up to the recent invitation. The results will serve as a basis for the upcoming debates within the framework of the planned events at the Festival.

To be clear: many of the allegations against Julian Assange described in the introduction are not tenable when looking at the facts. However, criticism of the comments on Twitter and the publication policy of WikiLeaks are justified for some.

At the Festival, both the importance of WikiLeaks for the media landscape and the controversy surrounding Assange will be highlighted. Three events are planned for this purpose, although it is not yet clear whether Julian Assange will participate in an additional one, besides the opening event on February 28th 2018. It is also important to emphasize that Julian Assange will not receive any speaker fees for participating in the Festival.

**The following points should be clarified with regard to the above-mentioned allegations:**

Julian Assange and WikiLeaks have developed from a small publishing project to a global player in the media landscape within just over ten years. It is also certain that over the years WikiLeaks has been involved in a power complex that usually isn't known to mess around: the U. S. Department of Justice, the State Department, secret services such as the CIA and NSA, as well as private security and strategic companies of the military industrial complex had to accept the embarrassing publications of internal documents and e-mails. Meanwhile, WikiLeaks' close relationship with the Trump Administration isn't visibly bearing any fruit, as Trump's CIA director Mike Pompeo recently defined WikiLeaks as a "Hostile Foreign Intelligence Service"<sup>1</sup> - i. e. as a foreign/enemy intelligence service - quite a novelty for a media project specializing in publications. In mid-December in 2017, however, a British Tribunal defined WikiLeaks as a "Media Organization"<sup>2</sup>, which will undoubtedly work in favor for his defense. Julian Assange can thus defend himself against the threat of extradition to the U.S. on the grounds of Press Freedom.

It is also important to note, that all allegations of rape in Sweden have now collapsed. Sweden closed its investigation into this case last Spring. There has never been an official charge lodged against Mr. Assange. Julian Assange willingly collaborated with the investigation and offered to be questioned on said allegations in London several times. For years, this offer was rejected by Sweden. For this reason, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Arrests (UNWGAD) also made a legally binding decision<sup>3</sup> that Julian Assange's treatment was and remains illegal. The procedures for appeal by the British and Swedes were also dismissed. It has also become known in the interim, that the British authorities wanted to unnecessarily delay the procedure.

---

1 <https://archive.is/aGVkl>

2 <https://archive.is/UXi7Y>

3 <https://archive.is/zX50t>

Assange additionally, was found to be vindicated, concerning his fear of extradition by Sweden or Britain to the United States, as there are several cases pending in the United States of America concerning WikiLeaks, including an empaneled secret Grand Jury that is investigating allegations of espionage to indict Assange; initially seeking charges under the Espionage Act that could potentially result in a prison sentence of decades behind bars.

**The eagerly awaited conversation with Julian Assange will take place at the opening of the Festival on 28 February 2018 at the Orpheum in Graz.**

**[elevate.at/e18opening](http://elevate.at/e18opening)**

#e18opening

#elevatefestival