

Begging Outrage: British Journalists for Assange

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Even that title strikes an odd note. It should not. The Fourth Estate, historically reputed as the chamber of journalists and publishers keeping an eye on elected officials, received a blast of oxygen with the arrival of WikiLeaks. This was daring, rich stuff: scientific journalism in the trenches, news gathering par excellence. But what Julian Assange and WikiLeaks did was something unpardonable to many who pursue the journalist's craft: sidestepping the newspaper censors, permitting unadulterated access to original sources.

People could finally scrutinise raw documents – cables, memoranda, briefing notes, diplomatic traffic – without the secondary and tertiary forms of self-censorship that characterise the newspaper imperium. Editorially imposed measures could be outflanked; the biases and prejudices of newspaper moguls could be ignored.

This has meant that media outlets in the drought affected mainstream can only ever make quiet acknowledgments about the seriousness of the US case against Assange. It is why certain outlets fail, and have failed to cover the extradition proceedings against the publisher with any degree of serious alarm or considered fear. When they do, irrelevant and inconsequential details feature like tabloid tat: the irate Assange, shouting from his caged stand; the kooky Assange, somewhat unhinged.

A central contention of the prosecution case against Assange is that he is no publisher or journalist being gradually asphyxiated by the apparatus of power for exposing it, but a cold, calculating purloiner of state secrets indifferent to the welfare of informants. Thieves cannot avail themselves of press freedoms nor summon the solid protections of the US First Amendment, even if they did expose torture, war crimes and illegal renditions. It is a narrative that has been fed shamelessly by certain members of the media fraternity, rendering them indifferent and, at times, even hostile to the efforts of WikiLeaks. David Leigh and Luke Harding of *The Guardian* added kindling to his idea by publishing the full passphrase to the file of un-redacted US State Department cables in their 2011 [book](#). It was foolish and clumsy, and did not shine a good light on the parties involved.

A train was set in motion: the German weekly *Der Freitag* [ran a piece](#) in August that same year pointing an indirect finger to the password revealed by Leigh and Harding; Assange, alarmed, had contacted the editor Jakob Augstein beforehand, [telling him](#) he “feared for the safety of informants”. WikiLeaks then reached out to the US State Department warning that publication of the un-redacted trove was imminent. This would have given time to US officials to take necessary measures to protect any protected sources. Cryptome scrambled to publish the documents on September 1, 2011; WikiLeaks followed the next day. The myth of Assange the indiscreet, incautious figure hostile to concealed identities was born.

It has been left to other courageous reporters to right the record at the trial. As

investigative journalist Stefania Maurizi recalled in [her statement](#) read at the extradition proceedings, “I went through the cables as systematically as possible. I was given an encrypted USB stick, and once I returned to Italy I was given the password that would then allow opening the file. Everything was done with utmost responsibility and attention.” She also noted how the password published by Leigh and Harding “was not the same password I myself was given at the time.”

Mature, snappy views have also featured from conservative British voices concerned by this grotesque overreach of US power. In Britain, and elsewhere, these media commenters have been few in number in registering appropriate alarm at the implications of the US Department of Justice’s indictment against Assange. Peter Osborne, [writing](#) last month, issued the call to fellow journalists to take up the case for WikiLeaks. He starts with a scenario: imagine a political dissident held at London’s Belmarsh Prison charged with espionage offences by the People’s Republic of China. The real offence? Exposing atrocities by Chinese troops. “To put it another way, that his real offence was committing the crime of journalism.”

Add to this the findings of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture that the dissident in question showed “all the symptoms typical for prolonged exposure to psychological torture”, with Beijing pressuring UK authorities to extradite him to a place he could face 175 years in prison. “The outrage from the British press would be deafening.” Protests and vigils outside Belmarsh would be unhalting; debates would take place on “prime time news programmes, alongside a rush of questions in parliament.”

Osborne acknowledges the UK-US alliance. But that should not matter one jot “as far as the British media is concerned.” The Old Bailey trial marked “a profound moment for British journalists.” Were Britain to capitulate to the Trump administration on this score, “the right to publish leaked material in the public interest would suffer a devastating blow.” He noted the concerns of 169 lawyers and academics [expressed in a letter](#) to the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Justice Secretary Robert Buckland, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and Home Secretary Priti Patel demanding government intervention. “We call on you to act in accordance with national and international law, human rights and the rule of law by bringing an end to the ongoing extradition proceedings and granting Mr Assange his long overdue freedom.”

The dangers to the Fourth Estate to Osborne are incalculable. On UK soil, an effort is being made by the US “to prosecute a non-US citizen, not living in the US, not publishing in the US, under US laws that deny the right to a public interest defence.” Yet a myopic British press remains more interested in Assange’s character, one attacked for breaching the Bail Act in avoiding extradition to Sweden to face sexual misconduct suspicions, and the distracting point as to whether he really is a journalist.

Peter Hitchens, brother of the late Christopher and long departed from the barricades of Trotskyite fervour, is also very much on Osborne’s page. Admirably, he starts [his reflection](#) on Assange by putting to rest notions of compromising fandom. Assange “is not my world, and his people are not my people.” But he was “wholly, furiously against the attempt by the United States government to extradite Assange from this country”.

Hitchens can seem a touch reactionary at times, his views heavily wrapped in the Union Jack. A sounding board at *The Daily Mail* would suggest such tendencies. But on Assange, he is sharp. He rightly picks up on the barring of extraditions for political grounds under

Article 4(1) of the UK-US Extradition Treaty. He also notes the servility shown by UK officials to US power, given that the treaty permits Washington to “demand extradition of UK citizens and others for offences committed against US law. This is so even though the supposed offence may have been committed in the UK by a person living in the UK.”

In Hitchen’s mind, it was inconceivable to envisage a situation where the US would reciprocate: submitting its citizens to the UK for leaking British secret documents. But allowing Assange to face trial in the US would mean that “any British journalist who comes into possession of classified material from the US, though he has committed no crime according to our own law, faces the same danger.” The process undermined national sovereignty and threatened press freedom. No English court, he argued, “should accept this demand.” Were the courts to fail, “any self-respecting Home Secretary should overrule them.”

Fittingly, and accurately, Hitchens describes the effort mounted against Assange as “a lawless kidnap” against an individual who exposed “inconvenient” truths of US power. It would be heartening to see more journalists, notably British ones, turning their mind to this awful reality, instead of falling for yellow press, click-bait distractions.

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