

Media Intrigue: Spying on Julian Assange

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History's scope for the absurd and tragic is infinite.

To see images of an exhausted and world-weary Julian Assange attempting to dodge the all-eye surveillance operation that he would complain about is to wade in the insensibility of it all.

But it could hardly have surprised those who have watched WikiLeaks' battles with the Security Establishment over the years.

Assange is not merely an exceptional figure but a figure of the exception. Despite being granted asylum status by an Ecuadorean regime that would subsequently change heart with a change of brooms, he was never permitted to exercise all his freedoms associated with such a grant. There was always a sense of contingency and qualification, the impending cul-de-sac in London's Ecuadorean embassy.

Between December 2017 and March 2018, [dozens of meetings](#) between Assange, his legal representatives, and visitors, were recorded in daily confidential reports written by an assigned security team and submitted to David Morales, formerly of special ops of the marine corps of the Spanish Navy. The very idea of legal professional privilege, a fetish in the Anglo-American legal system, was not so much deemed non-existent as ignored altogether.

The security firm tasked with this smeared-in-the-gutter mission was Spanish outfit UC Global SL, whose task became all the more urgent once Ecuador's Lenín Moreno came to power in May 2017. The mood had changed from the days when Rafael Correa had been accommodating, one at the crest of what was termed the Latin American Pink Tide. Under Moreno, Assange was no longer the wunderkind poking the eye of the US imperium with cheery backing. He had become, instead, a tenant of immense irritation and inconvenience, a threat to the shift in politics taking place in Ecuador. According to [El País](#),

"The security employees at the embassy had a daily job to do: to monitor Assange's every move, record his conversations, and take note of his moods."

The revelations of the surveillance operation on Assange had had their natural effect on the establishment journalists who continue taking the mother's milk of conspiracy and intrigue in libelling the publisher. CNN's Marshall Cohen, Kay Guerrero and Arturo Torres [seemed](#) delighted in finding their *éminence grise* with his fingers in the pie, making the claim, with more than a whiff of patriotic self-importance, how "surveillance reports also describe how Assange turned the embassy into a command centre and orchestrated a series of damaging

disclosures that rocked the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States.” Rather than seeing obsessive surveillance in breach of political asylum as a problem, they see the quarry obtained by UC Global in quite a different light. The WikiLeaks publisher had supposedly been outed.

The trio claimed to have obtained documents “exclusive” to CNN (the labours of *El País*, who did the lion’s share on this, are confined to the periphery) – though they have not been kind enough to share the original content with the curious. Nor do they make much of the private security materials as such, preferring to pick from the disordered larder that is the Mueller Report.

The CNN agenda is, however, clear enough. “The documents build on the possibility, raised by special counsel Robert Mueller in his report on Russian meddling, that couriers brought hacked files to Assange at the embassy.” Suggestions, without the empirical follow-up, are made to beef up the insinuated message. “While the Republican National Convention kicked off in Cleveland, an embassy security guard broke protocol by abandoning his post to receive a package outside the embassy from a man in disguise.” The individual in question “covered his face with a mask and sunglasses and was wearing a backpack, according to surveillance images obtained by CNN.” So planned; so cheeky.

Another line in the same report also serves to highlight the less than remarkable stuff in the pudding. “After the election, the private security company prepared an assessment of Assange’s allegiances. That report, which included open-source information, concluded there was ‘no doubt that there is evidence’ that Assange had ties to Russian intelligence agencies.” Not exactly one to stop the presses.

CNN, in fact, suggests a figure demanding, unaccountable, dangerous and entirely in charge of the situation. It is the psychological profile of a brattish historical agent keen to avoid detection. (Here the journalists are keen to suggest that meeting guests “inside the women’s bathroom” in the Ecuadorean embassy was a shabby enterprise initiated by Assange; the obvious point that he was being subject to surveillance by UC Global’s “feverish, obsessive vigilance”, to use the words of *El País*, is turned on its head.)

He is reported to have “demanded” a high-speed internet connection. He sought a working phone service, because obviously that would be unreasonable for any grantee of political asylum. He requested regular access to his professional circle and followers. Never has such a confined person been deemed a commander, an orchestrator and master of space. “Though confined to a few rooms inside the embassy, Assange was able to wield enormous authority over his situation.”

The [account offered](#) by Txema Guijarro García, a former advisor to Ecuadorean Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño and an important figure dealing with the logistics of granting Assange asylum in 2012, is decidedly different. In general, “relations between him and the embassy staff were better than anyone could have expected. The staff had amazing patience and, under difficult conditions, they managed to combine their diplomatic work with the task of caring for our famous guest.”

The language from the CNN report suggests the mechanics of concerted exclusion, laying the framework for an apologia that would justify Assange’s extradition to the United States to face espionage charges rather than practising journalism. It is a salient reminder about

the readiness of such outlets to accommodate, rather than buck, the state narrative on publishing national security information.

It is also distinctly out of step with the defences being made in favour of publishing leaked diplomatic cables being expressed in the Tory leadership debate in Britain. While it should be construed with care, the [words](#) of Boris Johnson in the aftermath of the publication of British cables authored by the now ex-UK ambassador to Washington, Sir Kim Darroch, are pertinent. "It cannot conceivably be right that newspapers or any other media organisation publishing such material face prosecution". Even Johnson can take the pulse of history accurately once in a while.

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