

UK media lines up behind campaign to extradite Assange and silence WikiLeaks

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The British media has played a venal role throughout the ongoing efforts to witch-hunt and silence WikiLeaks and Julian Assange. But it has plumbed new depths following the decision by Ecuador to grant his request for political asylum.

The WikiLeaks founder sought refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London on June 19, when it became apparent that UK authorities intended to extradite him to Sweden.

In his statement delivered from a window at the embassy on Sunday, Assange gave fresh evidence of Britain's efforts to flout international law with its threat to derecognise the embassy and send police to arrest him. He described how he had heard police "storming" through internal fire escapes earlier in the week.

He denounced the incarceration and torture of alleged whistleblower, US Army private Bradley Manning, called for an end to the US-led persecution of WikiLeaks, the defence of free speech and resistance to state repression.

Like the British government, which has refused to comment on Assange's statement, the media had nothing to say on the substance of his remarks. The well-paid hacks of Fleet Street are just as contemptuous towards democratic rights as their political masters. This applies with equal measure to those employed by newspapers that are overtly right-wing, such as the *Daily Mail*, or nominally liberal outlets like the *Guardian*.

Unable to deal with Assange's statement in an honest manner, the approach taken by the UK's print media is two-fold.

First, they mocked Assange's appearance—drawing analogies with scenes from *Monty Python's Life of Brian* among others. Thus, Luke Harding wrote in the *Guardian* that Assange's speech at the embassy window was the "moment for someone to shout: 'E's not the Messiah! 'E's a very naughty boy!'" For her part, Melanie Phillips in the *Daily Mail* denounced Assange for "Posing as a champion of justice and human rights",

claiming his "theatrical statement from the balcony" made him "like an Eva Peron of the ether."

Just who and what are these nobodies attempting to ridicule? Everyone knows that WikiLeaks and Assange are responsible for informing a world audience of monumental crimes routinely committed by the US and its allies—from murder, extraordinary rendition and torture to conspiring to suppress basic rights.

They might be indifferent to the Collateral Murder video, leaked by WikiLeaks, in which laughing US Apache helicopter operatives strafed Iraqi civilians with machine-gun fire, killing more than a dozen people including two children—carnage which, as two of the US personnel involved admitted, were "everyday occurrences" during the occupation of that country. The millions who viewed the footage are not.

Puerile analogies and sarcasm could never suffice to obscure the real issues involved in the Assange witch-hunt, which is why the main plank of their coverage is disinformation and a pose of moral indignation.

The Sun complained that Assange's speech was "long on egotistical claptrap, but oddly failed to mention what this extradition case is actually about—the rape of one woman and sexual molestation of another."

The Independent editorialised that Assange "is all but incarcerated in the Ecuadorean embassy not because he is a fighter for freedom but because he is wanted in Sweden over wholly unrelated allegations of sexual assault."

Most bellicose was the *Guardian*. Accusing Assange of "jumping bail", it claimed, "It is to avoid being confronted with accusations of rape and sexual assault that Mr Assange is now holed up in the Ecuadorean embassy."

These assertions are false. Assange can hardly avoid the "accusations" made against him, since they have been repeated ad nauseam ever since they were first leaked by the Swedish prosecutor's office to the tabloid newspaper

Expressen in August 2010, before Assange had even been informed of them.

This was only the first indication of a dirty tricks campaign aimed at destroying Assange's reputation and silencing WikiLeaks.

The fact remains that the accusations are just that—accusations. Ones, moreover, that relate to what all parties agree involved consensual sex and which were only made days after they were supposed to have occurred. Assange has still never been charged with any offence.

Sweden has gone to extraordinary lengths to have Assange extradited, supposedly for questioning over the allegations—from the issuing of a European Arrest Warrant to numerous court cases where that has been challenged. Yet Swedish prosecutors have repeatedly declined offers to question Assange in the UK, including the latest proposal by Ecuador that he could be interviewed in its embassy.

It is not the highly questionable and disputed allegations of sexual misconduct that have led to Assange taking refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy. Rather, as Ecuador set out in its statement, "The applicant had made his asylum request based on his fear of eventual political persecution by a third country, the same country whom could use his extradition to the Kingdom of Sweden to enable an expedited subsequent extradition."

The rape allegations emerged just as Assange was preparing the release for October 22 of the Iraq War Logs, detailing war crimes by Iraqi police and soldiers serving under the US-led occupation between 2004 and 2009. It is a matter of record that, during the same period, the Obama administration launched an investigation against WikiLeaks and began a financial blockade to shut the site down.

Regarding his extradition, the Ecuadorian statement notes specifically that Assange fears the "possibility of being handed over to the United States of America by British, Swedish or Australian authorities", where he could face charges of "espionage and treason" for his whistle-blowing.

Phillips at least acknowledges that it is "widely thought that the US authorities would rather like to have a bit of a chat" with Assange for what she described as the "real damage" he and WikiLeaks have "inflicted ... upon Western interests."

The *Guardian*'s editorial stoops lower still. With unashamed dishonesty, it complains of the "repeated suggestion from Mr Assange's supporters that if he goes

to Sweden he will face extradition to the US to be prosecuted for treason.

"Yet there is no serious evidence that Washington plans to start such proceedings", it asserts.

Perhaps the authors should read the August 2 edition of their own newspaper, which carried an op-ed piece by Michael Ratner, the US attorney for Assange and WikiLeaks, in which he explained, "Julian Assange is right to fear US prosecution."

Among the "unambiguous signs" that this was imminent, Ratner wrote, "A grand jury in Alexandria, Virginia, empanelled to investigate violations of the Espionage Act—a statute that by its very nature targets speech—has subpoenaed Twitter feeds regarding Assange and WikiLeaks. An FBI agent, testifying at whistleblower Bradley Manning's trial, said that 'founders, owners and managers' of WikiLeaks are being investigated. And then there is Assange's 42,135-page FBI file—a compilation of curious heft if the government is 'not interested' in investigating its subject."

If the *Guardian* had an ounce of integrity, it would attempt to factually refute rather than simply dismiss what Ratner reports. But it knows very well that what he writes is true.

In its statement granting Assange political asylum, Ecuador explained that it had sought assurances from the UK and Sweden that Assange would not be extradited to a third country, but this request was rejected. As to its requests for the US government to "officially reveal its position on Assange's case", it reported, "The US response has been that it cannot provide information about the Assange case, claiming that it is a bilateral matter between Ecuador and the United Kingdom."



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