

Corporate media smears WikiLeaks and Julian Assange

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A number of corporate media outlets have begun the year by publishing scurrilous and derisive attacks against WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange.

The coverage has the character of a coordinated political campaign, with the most sinister motives. Its aim is to legitimise the stepped-up persecution of Assange by the US and British governments, which are pursuing the journalist and publisher because of WikiLeaks' exposures of their war crimes, diplomatic intrigues and illegal spying on the American and world population.

Virtually identical articles were featured this week in some of the most prominent publications around the world, including the *London Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Australian*. All of them centred on personal smears against Assange and attempts to downplay the immense threat to democratic rights posed by the US-led vendetta against him.

The pretext for the venomous outpouring was the publication of a confidential email sent by WikiLeaks to media organisations, rebutting 140 falsehoods about Assange that have appeared in the press. The document demanded that the recipients of the email refrain from presenting the defamatory statements as facts.

A version of the email was first published online on January 7 by Emma Best, a self-styled "transparency activist." Best's "activism" has included numerous denunciations of WikiLeaks that echo the talking points of the US government and its intelligence agencies. She came to media prominence by "leaking" private online discussions between WikiLeaks supporters last year.

The tenor of the coverage that followed Best's blog post is summed up by a sampling of media headlines: "Julian Assange fails the smell test" (*Washington Post*), "WikiLeaks Doesn't Want Reporters Covering Julian Assange's 'Poor Personal Hygiene'" (*Observer*),

"WikiLeaks wants people to stop saying Julian Assange bleaches his hair, eats with his hands, or has bad hygiene" (*Business Insider Australia*), and "WikiLeaks doesn't want you to say Julian Assange lives in a cupboard 'under the stairs'" (*Mashable*).

In other words, a raft of publications seized upon the email as the opportunity to trumpet some of the most demeaning lies they have previously circulated about Assange to undermine the mass popular support he enjoys.

One would have no idea from the articles that their subject is one of the world's foremost political prisoners, whose claim for asylum has been upheld by the United Nations. Or that doctors have repeatedly warned that Assange's ongoing involuntary detention in the small Ecuadorian embassy in London poses grave risks to his rapidly deteriorating health.

Nor do the individuals who affixed their bylines to slandering Assange care that the US attempts to prosecute him are aimed at doing away with press freedom and creating a legal precedent for locking-up any journalist or whistle-blower who challenges the powers that be.

They are representatives of what world-respected journalist and filmmaker John Pilger aptly described as "Vichy journalism," after the French regime that collaborated with the Nazi occupation of the country during World War II. Their aim is to suppress the truth, smear those who expose government crimes and defend the status quo.

The attitude of the establishment media to WikiLeaks was summed up by the article in the *Times*, which was prominently republished in the *Australian*. It denounced Assange for his "long career leaking other people's secrets." The *Observer* likewise condemned "government transparency absolutists."

The article's authors, and the organisations who publish their filth, make no attempt to conceal the fact that they identify wholeheartedly with the intelligence agencies, governments and corporations whose corruption and crimes were exposed by WikiLeaks. They are aggrieved that WikiLeaks' publications have documented US-led war crimes of an historic magnitude in Iraq and Afghanistan, US imperialist meddling all over the world and CIA spying, to name only some of its most notable revelations.

The WikiLeaks email itself pointed to the relationship between government interests and the circulation of smears against Assange.

WikiLeaks, the document stated, has published: "The largest, most accurate leaks in the history of the CIA, State Department, Pentagon, US politics, and Saudi Arabia, among many others. Predictably, given the nature of some of these entities, numerous falsehoods have been subsequently spread about WikiLeaks and its publisher."

The email noted that media lies against Assange have escalated since March last year, when Ecuador cut off his communications, internet access and right to receive most visitors. WikiLeaks observed that the scale of attacks against its founder was "perhaps because there is an incorrect view that Mr. Assange has no means to defend his reputation from falsehoods in such grave circumstances."

WikiLeaks particularly highlighted a *Guardian* article last November which claimed that Assange met with American political lobbyist and consultant Paul Manafort at the Ecuadorian embassy in 2013, 2015 and early 2016. The allegation was aimed at tying the WikiLeaks founder to Manafort, who later served as a Trump campaign advisor and has been a central target of a US Special Counsel investigation into purported collusion between Trump and the Russian government.

Since November, the article has been utterly discredited. The *Guardian's* editor Kath Viner and the authors of the piece—most notably the anti-WikiLeaks hack Luke Harding—have evaded all questions about the fraudulent character of their allegations and made no attempt to substantiate them.

Despite this, many of the comments on the WikiLeaks email repeated the *Guardian* lies, only noting in passing that they had been contested. Many of the articles asserted, without any substantiation, a

relationship between WikiLeaks and Russia. *Business Insider Australia* blithely stated: "Some view WikiLeaks as a tool of Russian intelligence, given Russia's interference in the United States 2016 presidential election and WikiLeaks' role in releasing private emails from Hillary Clinton aide John Podesta."

In reality, WikiLeaks published leaked documents in 2016 that revealed that the Democratic National Committee sought to rig the party's primaries against Senator Bernie Sanders on behalf of war-monger and big business operative Hillary Clinton. WikiLeaks also published secret speeches delivered by Clinton to Wall Street banks, in which she pledged to do their bidding.

None of the slanderous articles against Assange bothered to mention that WikiLeaks has published hundreds of thousands of documents from Russia, many of which exposed the authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin.

That the latest smears against Assange were prominently featured by the *Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* only highlights the shameful role of the Australian media in the attacks against the WikiLeaks publisher, who is an Australian citizen.

The complicity of the Australian political and media establishment underscores the importance of demonstrations called by the Socialist Equality Party in Sydney and Melbourne in March. The SEP will fight to mobilise the working class around the demand that the Australian government use its diplomatic powers and legal discretion to secure Assange's safe passage to Australia, with an unconditional guarantee against extradition to the US.



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