

The media's role in persecuting Julian Assange

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Last week's arrest of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange has been met with universal approval from the US print and broadcast media.

The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, the three major US newspapers, have all enthusiastically endorsed Assange's arrest and extradition to the United States, for charges related to his publication of documents implicating the US government in war crimes and the mass murder of innocent people.

These newspapers' enthusiastic approval for the effective rendition of a journalist, with the threat of torture, indefinite imprisonment and possible execution, sums up their attitude to the freedoms of speech and the press embodied in the First Amendment: they oppose it.

They are not an independent media, but propaganda mills like those that exist in any dictatorship.

Jeff Bezos' *Washington Post* was the least guarded, declaring Assange is "long overdue for personal accountability," and reveling at his potential "conversion into a cooperating witness." In reference to a country like the United States, which does not recognize basic international human rights agreements, extracting "cooperation" from a witness is a euphemism for torture.

But such cold, calculated editorials constitute, if this is possible, the less degraded portion of the media response to Assange's imprisonment, which has been treated by print newspapers, the broadcast news, and, perhaps worst of all, the late night talk shows, as the occasion to heap crude insults upon a persecuted journalist who cannot defend himself.

In the "news" section of the newspapers, the line between reporting, opinion, gossip, slander and libel was totally obliterated.

"Even Mr. Assange's friends have described him as ...

a narcissist with an outsize view of his importance and little interest in mundane matters like personal hygiene," wrote veteran *New York Times* Pentagon stenographers Scott Shane and Steven Erlanger in a front page news article, without bothering to explain who these "friends" are, or why they describe Assange in the same language as Mike Pompeo.

To the sound of canned laughter, "Daily Show" host Trevor Noah proclaimed that Assange has "finally been arrested" for letting his cat "shit all over the embassy." "Tonight Show" host Jimmy Fallon joked that Assange, whose solitary confinement has broken his health, resembled "Dumbledore," an aged character from J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series.

The list goes on. Seth Meyers, host of NBC's "Late Night," laughed that Assange was "dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy looking like Santa Claus with a manifesto." Saturday Night Live parodied Assange's imprisonment, with a bearded Michael Keaton, as Assange, declaring himself to be the "terror of the embassy cleaning staff."

This disgusting and shameful gloating resembles nothing so much as a pillory or lynching, where the dregs of society are invited to hurl insults and garbage at a powerless victim. But unlike in Dickens' London, these social dregs find themselves not at the bottom, but at the top of society: they are multi-millionaires staffing the media, the entertainment industry, and the big business parties.

Of course, there is a political reason and logic to this outpouring of vitriol. The aim is to manufacture public opinion: to make the heroic journalist an un-person, stripped of all rights—an outcast—in order to justify the US state's persecution.

But this political necessity cannot explain the degrading depths to which the media has gone to

dehumanize Assange, repeating, in banner headlines, scurrilous rumors about his personal behavior as if it were undisputed truth. The people who write such things are not merely doing the dirty work of the ruling class for pay. They hate Assange, because they see in him a challenge to the natural order of things, in which the media publish what the government says, and the people believe what the media publishes.

This sentiment was best summed up by the satirical news site *The Onion* in a quote it attributed to the *Washington Post*, “We denounce Julian Assange in the strongest possible terms for his negligence in publicly demonstrating the kinds of work journalists could actually be doing to investigate government malfeasance and hold the powerful accountable.”

But the hatred goes deeper. Anyone who carefully reads the opinion sections of the major newspapers, cannot but come away with the conclusion that they intentionally hire not just people with exceptionally right-wing views, who are open to suggestion from the powers that be, but people, to put it bluntly, who are emotionally unstable.

It is the combination of all of these attributes that produces an article like that published by Kathleen Parker of the *Washington Post*, entitled “Julian Assange isn’t a journalist or a Daniel Ellsberg. He’s just a ‘cypherpunk.’”

Ms. Parker, a regular panelist on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” writes, “WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange smelled like an overlaid fishing vessel adrift in the searing sun.”

The WikiLeaks founder is a “solid jerk,” with “no conscience.” While Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers, insists that there is not a sliver of daylight between his activities and those of Assange, Parker insists that Ellsberg’s actions were “a historic act of bravery,” while those of Assange are “more like feces-smearing by a fishy-smelling ‘cypherpunk.’”

When the political wind changes, Assange’s name will carry the same connotations as other political prisoners and martyrs for civil rights, from Galileo to Martin Luther King.

Those that insulted him and aided the state in his persecution will try to eat their words. But history will remember their actions, which will blacken their names forever.

The persecution of Assange has elicited another

response from the population more broadly, whose confidence in the official media has plummeted since the start of the “war on terror” whose crimes Assange helped expose.

One compendium by the *Washington Post* of the responses to the late-night talk-shows to Assange’s arrest had an 80 percent disapproval rating, with the comments full of sympathy for Assange and hatred of the court jesters laughing at his expense.

“Exposing and publishing the crimes the elites, governments and politicians commit and paying for it with your freedom is a laughing matter in American mainstream media,” wrote one commenter, adding, “Disgusting.” Another commented, “Almost as if they’re laughing at us.”

As the working class enters into a global wave of strikes and struggles, the political winds will change, and soon. Those who helped persecute a defenseless journalist will have to answer for their actions.



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