

Julian Assange's extraordinary record of investigative journalism

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The illegal arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange inside Ecuador's London embassy, and the attempt by the US to extradite him on concocted conspiracy charges, are a frontal assault on freedom of the press.

The Trump administration, with the support of the Democrats, and US allies including Britain and Australia, is seeking to establish a precedent that criminalises genuine investigative journalism, including the publication of classified material exposing government illegality.

This is nothing less than an attempt to abolish the function of a genuine free press, established over centuries of struggle against despotism.

The attacks on Assange are opposed by masses of workers, students and young people around the world. Corporate media outlets, however, have responded to Assange's arrest by escalating their protracted campaign of slanders and lies against him.

They have adapted themselves to the bogus US charges against Assange, with many alleging that he is not a journalist and that WikiLeaks merely "dumps" material it receives online. Australian journalist Peter Grete, for instance, wrote within hours of Assange's arrest: "To be clear, Julian Assange is not a journalist, and WikiLeaks is not a news organisation."

Such individuals and media organisations only demonstrate that they are the servile mouthpieces of governments, intelligence agencies and the corporate elite. Speaking for the most affluent layers of the upper-middle class, they are no less hostile than Assange's persecutors to the publication of material that threatens the status quo.

In reality, Assange's record as a journalist is unparalleled in the contemporary period. As world-renowned investigative journalist John Pilger told a Socialist Equality Party rally in June, 2018: "No investigative journalism in my lifetime can equal the importance of what WikiLeaks has done in calling rapacious power to account."

When a full record of WikiLeaks investigative exposures is published, it will span volumes.

In a 2006 essay, written shortly after the founding of WikiLeaks, Assange, then the publisher's editor-in-chief, explained some of the conceptions underlying the project.

He wrote: "Authoritarian regimes create forces which oppose them by pushing against a people's will to truth, love and self-realization. Plans which assist authoritarian rule, once discovered, induce further resistance. Hence such schemes are concealed by successful authoritarian powers until resistance is futile or outweighed by the efficiencies of naked power."

In August, 2007, WikiLeaks published the secret report of a Kenyan government investigation into official corruption. The document, produced in 2004, revealed that previous US-backed President Daniel Arap Moi and his closest associates had looted the impoverished country's economy to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars. Its publication sparked mass anger and impacted on the Kenyan national election held in late 2007.

In November 2007, WikiLeaks published a 2003 copy of "Standard Operating Procedures for Camp Delta," outlining official US army policy at its brutal Guantanamo Bay prison, where individuals have been illegally detained after rendition operations. The document indicated that the US was preventing the Red Cross from accessing some of the prisoners, a claim the government had previously denied.

In February 2008, WikiLeaks released records of the Cayman Islands branch of Swiss bank Julius Baer. The material, detailing the accounts of 2,000 corporations and ultra-wealthy individuals, including 40 politicians, resulted in allegations of tax avoidance on a vast scale.

The bank responded by suing WikiLeaks and securing an injunction in the US which took down its main website. The decision was subsequently overturned on appeal by a judge, who cited the freedom of the press provisions in the First Amendment of the US Constitution. Swiss prosecutors charged and jailed Rolf Elmer, a bank manager who was the source of the material.

During 2008, WikiLeaks also published exposures of the extreme right-wing British National Party, and material on the Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin.

The US response to WikiLeaks' early publications was swift and brutal.

A secret memo, issued by the Cyber Counter-intelligence Assessments Branch of the US Defence Department on March 8, 2008, detailed a plan to destroy the organisation. It was headlined: "Wikileaks.org—An Online Reference to Foreign, Intelligence Services, Insurgents, or Terrorist Groups?" The document called for measures to undermine the "feeling of trust" that is WikiLeaks' "centre of gravity," including through threats of "exposure [and] criminal prosecution."

In 2009, the number of WikiLeaks publications expanded dramatically.

In January, the organisation published intercepts of the phone conversations of Peruvian businessmen and politicians implicated in a corruption scandal relating to oil contracts the previous year.

In the middle of that year, it released official Iranian reports into a major nuclear accident at the country's Natanz nuclear facility the previous year. The details of the disaster, which occurred amid stepped-up US and Israeli war threats against Iran, led some to suspect that the accident may have been caused by a malicious computer virus originating from Western intelligence agencies.

Other publications exposed the transfer of vast sums of money from Icelandic banks to their executives and the writing off of major debts on the eve of the country's 2008 financial crisis; a British Ministry of Defence document outlining measures to prevent leaks; evidence of corporate dumping of toxic material in the Ivory Coast; documents relating to the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the list of websites banned by the Australian government. The latter included news and political sites, exposing the fraudulent character of government claims that the blacklist only targeted child pornography and other illicit content.

In February 2010, the year that WikiLeaks came to the attention of millions of people around the world, the organisation published a US

diplomatic cable dubbed Reykjavik 13. It was the first material released, which had been leaked by the courageous US army whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The document detailed previously hidden information about the diplomatic dispute, known as Icesave, that followed Iceland's financial crisis.

Landsbanki, one of the country's three largest banks, went bankrupt in 2008. With the national financial authorities rejecting a bailout, over 340,000 retail deposits from the UK and other European nations lost an estimated €6.7 billion in saving, triggering diplomatic recriminations, and a coordinated attempt to mitigate public anger.

In April, WikiLeaks published the infamous "Collateral Murder" video, showing a July 2007 US army helicopter airstrike in Baghdad. It documented US soldiers firing on unarmed civilians. The brutal attack resulted in up to 18 deaths, including two Reuters journalists. After their initial attack, the US forces shot at a group of people who had come to collect the bodies and tend to the wounded.

The footage, which included the murderous comments of the US soldiers, shocked masses of people, revealing, in graphic detail the criminal character of the US neo-colonial occupation.

It was an indictment, not only of the US and its allies, but also of the corporate press, which had promoted the lies about "weapons of mass destruction" used as the pretext for the illegal invasion, before "embedding" themselves with the US and allied military, and presenting the brutal occupation as a "liberation."

The US government responded by launching a witch-hunt throughout the military, culminating in the May 2010 arrest of Manning, after she was entrapped by an FBI informant named Adrian Lamo.

In June, WikiLeaks began publication of the Afghan war logs, comprising over 90,000 incident and intelligence reports from the US military, from January 2004 to December 2009. The organisation partnered with the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and other prominent corporate outlets in the release.

The documents detailed at least 195 civilian deaths at the hands of NATO troops, which had previously been hidden from the public. They exposed the existence of a secret "black unit" within the US military, tasked with illegally assassinating suspected Taliban leaders and opponents of the occupation.

The *Guardian* drew attention to other horrific incidents, including a 2007 strafing of a bus of children by French troops, which wounded eight; a US patrol machine-gun attack on civilians in a bus which killed 15 passengers the same year; and a 2007 revenge mortar attack on a village by Polish troops that decimated a wedding party. Many other similar events were documented.

The logs exposed the fraudulent character of claims that the US was "winning," pointing to the mass opposition of Afghan people to the occupation.

In October 2010, WikiLeaks began publishing more than 400,000 war logs from Iraq, covering the same period as the Afghan documents. The Iraq logs documented the deaths of almost 110,000 people, including more than 66,000 people labelled by the US military as civilians. This included 15,000 civilian deaths, which were known to the US authorities, but publicly suppressed.

They detailed brutal US military attacks on unarmed civilians at checkpoints and elsewhere. The publication established that the US army was actively cultivating sectarian Iraqi militias that functioned as death squads for the US-led occupation. The logs record incidents of torture by US troops, and their Iraqi proxies, and the refusal of military high command to even investigate such war crimes.

In November 2010, WikiLeaks, again partnering with prominent media outlets, began publishing more than 250,000 US diplomatic cables, which had been leaked by Manning.

The documents provided an unprecedented exposure of the daily criminality, intrigues and conspiracies that dominate official politics within each country and on a global scale. A WSWS perspective on November 30, cited some of the initial revelations contained in the documents, including:

* A January 2010 cable describing a conversation between General David Petraeus and the corrupt dictator of Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh in which a deal was hatched for the Yemeni regime to take responsibility for air strikes secretly being carried out by the US military. Just weeks earlier a US cruise missile had devastated a Yemeni hamlet, leaving 55 people dead, at least 41 of them women and children.

* State Department cables instructing US diplomats to gather personal information ranging from credit card and frequent flyer account numbers to Internet passwords, work schedules and even DNA samples on officials of foreign governments and the United Nations.

* A cable describing how the US government worked to intimidate Germany into dropping arrest warrants against CIA agents involved in the kidnapping, detention and torture of an innocent German citizen.

* An October 2009 cable from the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa recognising that the overthrow of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup. The cable documents Washington's support and cover-up for that coup and the repression that followed.

The cables uncovered political conspiracies and Washington's illegal intrigues in countries all over the world.

In Australia, for instance, they established that a cabal within the Labor Party, which had removed sitting Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in June 2010 had been composed of "protected sources" of the US embassy.

The cables documented the intense hostility of US officials to Rudd's proposals that Washington make a limited accommodation to China's rise in the Asia-Pacific to head off a full scale war. They made plain that his removal was aimed at integrating Australia, ever more directly, into a massive US military build-up directed against Beijing.

Other cables exposed neo-colonial operations in Asia, Africa and throughout the Middle East. Cables in the tranche have been submitted as evidence in hundreds of court cases, including those in which oppressed peoples have sought to challenge their persecutors.

Cables from Tunisia documented intimate US knowledge of the gross corruption of the Washington-backed regime of President Ben Ali. They demonstrated that Ali had the support of the US, as he and his family were looting the country's wealth, and that the two countries had collaborated in abrogating the rights of Tunisian citizens detained in Guantanamo Bay.

In January 2011, less than two months after the documents were released, a mass movement of Tunisian workers and youth toppled the dictatorship, which had been in power for decades.

Foreign Affairs magazine, which has close ties to the US state apparatus, summed up the fears of the ruling elite, with a featured article titled "The First WikiLeaks Revolution?" It stated: "we might also count Tunisia as the first time that WikiLeaks pushed people over the brink."

Within weeks, the Egyptian revolution, involving millions of workers, had broken out. It had been directly inspired by the Tunisian uprising. The US-backed dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak also featured in diplomatic cables, documenting its corruption and collaboration with the CIA in the torture and illegal interrogation of political prisoners.

The US response to the publication of the diplomatic cables was

hysterical. Senior US politicians denounced Assange as a terrorist and called for his assassination.

The Obama administration prosecuted Chelsea Manning on counts carrying an unprecedented sentence and impaneled a secret Grand Jury to concoct charges against WikiLeaks. The Swedish authorities, undoubtedly acting in concert with the US, launched a bogus investigation into sexual misconduct against Assange.

The immense persecution, aided by the Labor government in Australia, eventually compelled him to seek political asylum in London's Ecuador embassy in June, 2012.

Despite the restrictions imposed upon him, Assange continued to lead the work of WikiLeaks.

In April 2011, WikiLeaks had published the Guantánamo Files, documenting the illegal imprisonment of at least 150 Afghan and Pakistani civilians, who the US authorities knew had no connection to terrorism. They included a 14-year-old boy and an 89-year-old man.

Beginning in February 2012, WikiLeaks released over 5.5 million internal documents from Stratfor, a US-based company. The documents showed that the corporation operated as a private intelligence agency, including by spying on Occupy Wall Street protesters and environmental activists.

Between 2012 and 2015, WikiLeaks releases included the Syria files; 1.7 million US diplomatic files from the 1970s; documents exposing the activities of 90 major surveillance companies; the hidden negotiations surrounding the establishment of the US-dominated Trans-Pacific Partnership; and more than 500,000 cables from Saudi Arabian embassies around the world.

In June and July 2015, WikiLeaks published a series of documents showing that the US National Security Agency had spied on French President Francois Hollande and his two predecessors, along with the German and Brazilian governments. The revelations were yet another exposure of the repeated violations of international law by the US government.

In July 2016, WikiLeaks began publishing leaked emails from the Democratic National Committee, demonstrating a plot, in contravention of the organisation's own rules, to rig the Democratic Party presidential primary against self-declared "socialist" Bernie Sanders and in favour of Hillary Clinton.

On October 7, 2016, WikiLeaks published a trove of emails sent by John Podesta, the chairman of the Clinton campaign. As with the DNC leaks, the information was highly newsworthy. The emails included transcripts of speeches given by Hillary Clinton to various bank and corporate forums, where she boasted of her support for Wall Street, commitment to the interests of the financial oligarchy and willingness to launch further illegal wars.

The response was to accuse Assange and WikiLeaks, without any evidence, of acting as stooges of the Russian regime of President Vladimir Putin. Media outlets suppressed the fact that WikiLeaks had published hundreds of thousands of documents from Russia, and sought to downplay or ignore the exposure of Clinton as a militarist representative of the ruling elite.

The hysterical anti-Russian campaign has been used to justify the censorship of anti-war and progressive websites, including WikiLeaks, the *World Socialist Web Site* and many others, and to push for an escalation of militarism and war.

In March, 2017, WikiLeaks began publishing Vault 7, the most extensive exposure of the criminal methods of the CIA in more than 30 years.

The documents detailed the activities of a division within the agency, involved in hacking computers all over the world. They branded the CIA as the biggest purveyor of malicious computer viruses in the world.

They also demonstrated that the division had developed techniques to

hack into computer systems and leave "tell-tale" markers, attributing the attacks to other countries, including Russia and Iran, Vault 7 revealed that the agency was spying on people through smart televisions and other household devices. The CIA was also seeking to develop capabilities to remotely take control of the computer systems in modern cars. Such abilities could be used in assassination operations.

The publication of the Vault 7 documents, led to a major escalation of Washington's pursuit of Assange, culminating in his illegal expulsion from the Ecuadorian embassy and arrest by British police, aimed at facilitating his extradition to the US.

Assange and WikiLeaks are publishers with a unique and unparalleled record.

As Nick Beams, a longstanding leader of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), declared at the SEP's Sydney rally to defend Assange on April 12:

"Julian Assange has performed his duty as a journalist to workers, to youth, to the mass of ordinary people around the world. Now, we are obliged to repay that debt which we owe him. To rally, to organise, to agitate, to develop a movement in his defence.

"And not just because of what's he's done, but because of what it means for us. Because that defence of democratic rights is integral to the defence of the rights of the working class as a whole, the world over. His cause is our cause. His defence is our defence."

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