

The war on journalism is a war on the humanities

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Dr. Monika Eisenhauer is an independent historian and medievalist. She studied history and philosophy at the University of Hagen, Germany, and wrote her magister thesis on the transformation of procedural law at the end of the Middle Ages. She wrote her doctoral thesis on the monastic reforms in the 15th century, focused on the political and state-building character of the reforms. Today she lives in Koblenz, Germany, and her research covers legal, economic, social and religious history in connection with philosophy, theology and art history.

Dr. Eisenhauer submitted this statement in support of the call for a worldwide campaign to stop the extradition of Julian Assange. The World Socialist Web Site invites others to send in their statements.

On 14 June, the extradition hearing of Julian Assange was held at Westminster Magistrates Court in London. The five-day main extradition hearing will be held in February 2020. Assange faces 18 charges and is accused of threatening US national security by publishing documents on Afghanistan and Iraq. The trial is taking place after the journalist was subjected to psychological torture for years, as the UN special rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer explained recently.

As we consider freedom of the press a high value in the Western world, the US government's charges against the journalist Julian Assange, currently detained at Belmarsh maximum security prison for breaking bail conditions, present an unparalleled attack on press freedom throughout post-war history.

The publication of secret documents is protected by the freedom of the press and guaranteed by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

The indictment of the US government against Julian Assange contains the following charges: "to receive and obtain documents, writings, and notes connected

with the national defense (...) for the purpose of obtaining information respecting the national defense, and knowing and with reason to believe at the time such materials are obtained, they had been and would be taken, obtained, and disposed of by a person [Manning]" (Indictment, Count I, B, 2).

This corresponds to the definition of journalism: Journalism is any type of journalistic activity with the intention of creating public knowledge. Its tools include print media, online media and broadcasting services. For good reason, the constitutions of the Western world do not define who is to be considered a journalist and who is not, because such a definition would already be a limitation of press freedom, which the First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees without any restriction.

Thus, any attempt to defame someone who is creating publicity by publication, as a non-journalist, is already a violation of the First Amendment. Julian Assange is certainly a journalist according to the constitution and the definition of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Charging him with the receipt of documents with the intention of publishing them started a war on journalism. Further searches and arrests already have been carried out among investigative journalists in the USA, Australia and France in recent weeks.

The Assange case goes beyond the attempt to criminalize investigative journalism: Julian Assange is an Australian citizen and has published outside US territory. This extraterritorial access to an author would set a dangerous precedent for international law and place any publication of sources and texts under threat from an assertion of sovereignty by any world leader. Assange himself called this procedure "lawfare." As an example of such an extraterritorial possibility, imagine that the ruler of North Korea made a request for

extradition because an author had published a text about a secret detention camp in North Korea.

So, what we are facing here is the criminalization of the reading, processing and publishing of “national security” documents in a vast number of countries around the world, with the prospect of prosecution by the United States. The sovereignty over the interpretation of the term “national security” would lie with a small political elite of the US oligarchy.

And here we are: Within the humanities, history is particularly affected. What are the intentions and tasks of history? Well, the intention of historical science is to write the history of people and societies as objectively as possible. For this purpose it needs free and unrestricted access to the sources. It also needs the ability to freely and objectively edit the sources. And in the end it needs the freedom to publish independently.

For other people being able to work on sources, some historians publish pure sources for other historians to place them in the overall context. This is what Julian Assange has done for the journalistic field. The sources are not only available to journalists, but also, just like transcribed manuscripts in medieval studies, to the general public and, of course, to the humanities. The historical sciences’ task is to improve the perception of contemporary problems through analysis of historical developments and working out the complexity of their causes.

However, this can be done only when access to the relevant sources is not subjected to arbitrary classification by governments around the world. This can be done only when a text’s publication does not create a life-threatening situation for the author. Imagine a situation where the USA, especially, defines which documents are allowed to be used and which not. How could historians write the history of any country in Latin America with their strong connection to CIA activities then? The same goes for the Middle East. Imagine a situation where the world’s literature on contemporary history has to be authorized by the US elite.

Therefore, we must not allow Julian Assange to be extradited to the United States! We must do everything we can to protect him, to protect the freedom of the press and, furthermore, to protect the independent humanities!



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