

Debate on Julian Assange at London's Frontline Club for journalists

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The Frontline Club, bringing together journalists and photographers with an interest in war reporting and international relations, organised a meeting in London Tuesday night, *Julian Assange: The Debate*.

The Frontline Club has a long connection with Assange. In December 2010, one of the club's founders Vaughan Smith stood surety for Assange to the tune of £20,000 along with eight others, hosting him for more than a year in his home after a two-month stay at the Club. Since then, Smith has faced a barrage of criticism for speaking in Assange's defence.

While the ticketed event for around 100 was publicised as a debate, it took the form of a series of questions by the chair, veteran journalist Robin Lustig, to former *Guardian* editor-in-chief Alan Rusbridger, *Times* columnist and broadcaster David Aaronovitch, Index on Censorship chief executive Jodie Ginsberg, Assange's barrister Jennifer Robinson, as well as Smith.

Arguably the most despised among the advertised speakers, *Guardian* columnist Suzanne Moore, pulled out at the last minute. Moore famously tweeted of Assange, "He really is the most massive turd." It was left to Aaronovitch, like Moore a former member of the Communist Party who has lurched ever further to the right, to take up the role as the event's most vitriolic and unprincipled critic of Assange.

In 2012, Aaronovitch likened Assange's "celebrity backers" to Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, "swinging down from a flying buttress to scoop up the doomed and swooning Esmeralda and swinging back, shouting 'Sanctuary! Sanctuary!'" He had declared that Assange "should be arrested the second he steps outside the Ecuadorean embassy," and headlined another article with the claim, "It's Sweden that Assange fears, not America." In November 2017,

he proclaimed that "Assange isn't a dreamer, he's a destroyer," in "the same destructive club as Putin and Trump."

Lustig opened the meeting by asking whether Assange "deserved" solidarity and support. He declared his own passive and deliberately evasive position, "I hope the award-winning journalist is not to be extradited, but that if he is, he would be acquitted." This was a position the despicable Mr. Aaronovitch was happy to sign off on, given the fact that Assange faces a kangaroo court in the UK whose verdict in favour of extradition is a foregone conclusion.

Rusbridger followed. His role in betraying and defaming Assange during his period as *Guardian* editor is a matter of public record. Yet he used his appearance to airbrush history, emphasising he was opposed to Assange's extradition to the US. He cited 10 articles he had written in Assange's defence and spoke of journalists' obligation to defend Assange's release of documents exposing US war crimes. He recalled the *Guardian's* early collaboration with Assange—stressing his newspaper's careful editing of the Wikileaks documents as "responsible" journalism. He had promised to stand by Assange if he faced prosecution for his work with the *Guardian*, a pledge he relayed to the audience without any evident shame.

When questioned about the *Guardian's* failure to retract its long-discredited report that Donald Trump's presidential campaign manager Paul Manafort met with Assange at the Ecuadorian Embassy in 2016—a claim flatly denied both Assange and Manafort—Rusbridger washed his hands of the issue, replying the article was written after his departure from the *Guardian* in 2015. He said nothing of the anti-Assange campaign begun under his own editorship and was not pressed seriously on this by Lustig.

Aaronovitch was far more explicitly hostile to Assange. When he referred to the Swedish allegations of sexual misconduct as “charges,” the pro-Assange audience shouted, “allegations not charges!” But he dismissed their protests, claiming, “I have to say that for most people, such distinctions are pretty small” and repeatedly referred to “charges” throughout the remainder of his venomous contribution.

While he did not name Assange, he insinuated that there are people in the media who are working with Russia—not as spies but as “agents”—who are manipulating the news and seeking to sway elections.

Vaughan Smith spoke with considerable feeling for the persecuted journalist, who he said had been “smeared on an industrial scale” to divert attention from the crimes he had exposed. Citing UN rapporteur Nils Melzer, he said that there was a well-funded attempt to demonise Assange, whom journalists had a responsibility to defend.

Following the Swedish allegations of sexual misconduct, Smith said there was a marked shift in the way Assange was treated in the press. He was smeared as a rapist. Facts were misrepresented. Crucially, the allegations were used not to prosecute Assange, but to defame and demonise him. He pointed out the ugly way the media had gloated over his illegal and brutal removal from the Ecuadorian embassy. He added that Assange had been sent to Belmarsh jail, dubbed Britain’s Guantanamo, in a bid to portray him as a danger to society.

Smith rebutted Aaronovitch’s inference that Russia was the source of some of the material published by Wikileaks. There was no evidence to substantiate this. Even more tellingly, he demolished the assertions by Lustig and Aaronovitch that it would perhaps be better if Assange faced trial in the US and was subsequently acquitted. The British legal process was a vehicle for revenge that sought to prevent anyone else following in Assange’s footsteps. None of those who had committed war crimes have faced or are likely to face prosecution and he did not believe that Assange would ever be treated with “equality under the law.”

Jennifer Robinson gave a clear and factual presentation pointing out that Swedish authorities, despite nine years of “preliminary investigations,” had presented no charges against Assange.

The US was attempting to prosecute a journalist

working outside the country for breaching US law. If the UK extradited Assange, this would set a dangerous precedent for journalists who opposed crimes in Saudi Arabia, Russia or China to be extradited to those countries.

She rejected the claim that Assange was working with Russia, noting that the US extradition charges did not refer to the 2016 Democratic Party email leaks. She was contemptuous of the *Guardian*’s claim that Manafort had visited Assange in the Ecuadorian Embassy, pointing out that the newspaper had the embassy’s visitor log which showed this was untrue.

Despite the implausibility of its claims, the *Guardian* had failed to retract the article, “Manafort held secret talks with Assange in Ecuadorian embassy, sources say,” authored by Luke Harding and Dan Collyns, with the subhead, “Trump ally met WikiLeaks founder months before emails hacked by Russia were published.”

Robinson concluded by saying that if the media had stood with Assange as it should have, he would never have been charged.



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