

# Australian media maintains an unconscionable blackout on the case of Julian Assange

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In one week, on February 24, Australian citizen and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange faces the beginning of extradition hearings in London that will decide whether he is rendered to the United States to stand trial on multiple charges of espionage.

The significance and historic implications of the Assange case are undeniable. The charges levelled against him all stem from the publication of whistleblower leaks in 2010–2011 which exposed that American and allied forces in Iraq and Afghanistan carried out the indiscriminate murder of civilians, as well as torture and other human rights abuses. Other leaked information revealed numerous diplomatic intrigues by American embassies to prop up or install pro-US regimes.

The document were not only published by WikiLeaks, but by some of the major newspapers around the world, which openly advertised that they were its “partners” in ensuring that the damning exposures of great power war crimes and conspiracies reached the largest global audience.

In other words, if Assange is extradited and convicted in the US for espionage, it will establish an ominous precedent that could be used to prosecute the editors and journalists of publications ranging from the *Guardian*, to *Le Monde* and *Der Spiegel*, to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Going forward, it would set a precedent for the prosecution of the staff of any media organisation that publishes leaked classified American government documents and applications for their extradition to the US from whatever country they live and hold citizenship.

Within the media profession, these facts are well-known and have been widely discussed. After Assange was dragged from the Ecuadorian embassy in April 2019—in violation of his rights of political asylum—and charged by the Trump administration, editorials and comments were

published internationally expressing concern and acknowledging that his case has ominous implications for journalism and freedom of speech.

It is unconscionable that what can only be described as an almost total media blackout is taking place on the Assange case on the eve of the extradition hearings. Developments that are inherently in the public interest are being flagrantly censored.

The Australian media is a particularly graphic example of this censorship, as Assange is an Australian citizen, a member of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and, in 2011, WikiLeaks was bestowed the profession’s Walkley Award for “Most Outstanding Contribution to Journalism.”

Listed below are just some of the developments over the last several weeks that have not been reported in any serious fashion—let alone made the subject of probing commentary and investigation—by the print, radio and television media in Australia, including both corporate-owned media and the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).

· The US Department of Justice has asserted in court filing that because Assange is an Australian citizen, he cannot raise as a defence for WikiLeaks’ publication of leaks the US Constitution’s first amendment protection of freedom of speech.

· Other US court documents indicate that Assange will be detained under “Special Administrative Measures” if he is extradited. Designed to “break” alleged terrorists so they plead guilty, SAMs prisoners are held in virtual total isolation in high security facilities ahead of their trials. They are denied access to news or communication with anyone but lawyers and vetted visitors. All communication, including with lawyers, is monitored. His

legal representatives would be banned from relaying anything said by Assange, or even talking about the conditions he faces. The treatment was described in a 2017 report as “the darkest corner of the US federal prison system.”

· Nils Melzer, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, gave an extended interview to the Swiss publication *Republik*, published on January 31. Melzer systematically reviewed the false allegations that Assange had committed sexual offences in Sweden, the way in which he had been psychologically tortured and the significance of the US extradition. Melzer was not interviewed by Australia media or his *Republik* interview republished in any publication.

· On January 31, a group of German parliamentarians nominated Assange, along with whistleblowers’ Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize. The nomination letter stated: “We feel that Assange, Manning and Snowden have to be recognized for their ‘unprecedented contributions to the pursuit of peace and their immense personal sacrifices to promote peace for all.’ With the unveiling of US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq and the global surveillance program of the US secret services, the three have ‘exposed the architecture of war and strengthened the architecture of peace.’”

· Last week, a petition signed by close to 300,000 people calling on the Australian government to intervene on Assange’s behalf was tabled in the lower of parliament. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and opposition Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese were not questioned by the media over their position on Assange’s extradition trial, the conditions under which he is held in London’s Belmarsh Prison or the broad implications for the media and free speech.

Other newsworthy issues could be cited that are being subjected to media censorship, not least the fact that demonstrations have been called in Australian cities and towns over the coming week to condemn the extradition trial and demand Assange’s freedom.

There is no innocent explanation for the silence. The obvious conclusion is that a decision has been taken by the management and editorial boards of various media organisations that the Assange case will not be reported. There is every reason to believe that such a decision has been taken in consultation with the Morrison government and various intelligence and police agencies.

Everything is being done to 1) prevent public support for Assange; and 2) protect the political establishment

from public scrutiny and outrage over its collaboration with the US administration in the persecution of an Australian citizen and courageous publisher.

Many journalists and media professionals are deeply alarmed about the prosecution of Assange and the sweeping assault on freedom of speech that it constitutes. It is well past time for them to take matters into their own hands and act.

Media professionals should be at the forefront of fighting for a broad political movement demanding the rejection of the US extradition and the immediate and unconditional freedom of Assange, Manning and all other persecuted journalists and whistleblowers. They know what is at stake. The Assange precedent has already been brought to Australia in the form of police raids on ABC offices in Sydney last year and the threatened prosecution of ABC journalists over the publication of whistleblower leaks exposing Australian military atrocities in Afghanistan.

Meetings should be convened by the staff of every media organisation and resolutions adopted opposing Assange’s extradition—as teachers have done—and insisting that his case is accurately and honestly reported. The US charges against him are unacceptable and a threat to fundamental democratic rights.

Journalists often talk of their professional commitment to “speak truth to power.” The Coalition and Labor parties must be held to account for aiding and abetting the vendetta against one of their colleagues.

We urge journalists and media staff to take part in the rallies that have been called by Socialist Equality Party in Sydney on February 22, Melbourne on February 23 and Brisbane on February 29, and the other protest actions taking place around the country.



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