

Corporate media blacks out admission that witness against Assange lied for US indictment

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Last Saturday, *Stundin*, a prominent Icelandic biweekly, published revelations that Sigurdur “Siggi” Thordarson, a key witness in the US indictment against Julian Assange, has walked back almost all the allegations he made against the WikiLeaks publisher.

The bombshell report should have been front-page news all over the world. It demolishes the US attempt to prosecute Assange as a dirty-tricks operation, conducted by the intelligence agencies and the top levels of the American government. According to one of their own star witnesses, the US submitted an indictment to the British courts that contains lies. The fabricated document is the basis for Assange’s ongoing imprisonment in the UK and the US bid to extradite him.

One might have thought that media interest in the story would be particularly great in the US, Britain and Australia. The US, after all, is seeking to try Assange on 17 Espionage Act charges, which are a frontal assault on freedom of the press. Britain is indefinitely detaining Assange, a journalist, in a maximum-security prison. And the Australian government, along with the Labor Party opposition, have washed their hands of Assange, despite the fact that he is a persecuted Australian citizen and publisher.

Instead, the response has been one of radio silence. As of today, a Google News search indicates that not a *single* English-language corporate publication has even referenced the *Stundin* report or Thordarson’s admission. It would be difficult to conceive of a more complete suppression of significant and newsworthy information. The blackout has been adhered to across the board, without even one publication breaking ranks and informing its readership.

The media embargo is not motivated by concern that the *Stundin* report stood on shaky ground. The newspaper

interviewed Thordarson, meaning that the story came from the horse’s mouth. The reporters, moreover, cited chat logs and other documents provided by Thordarson, which they say substantiates his admission to have lied for the indictment.

The silence is all the more striking given that many of the publications maintaining it, such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the British *Guardian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, have published editorials and/or opinion pieces branding the attempted US prosecution of Assange as a threat to journalism and press freedom.

Those statements, however, all had a pro forma character. They were couched in the most tepid and non-committal terms, and were not accompanied by any concrete actions or campaign for Assange’s freedom.

In fact, over the past two years, one could chart a law of diminishing returns in the corporate media coverage of Assange. The more the US-led pursuit of Assange has been exposed as a politically-motivated frame-up, the less the newspapers have published about the WikiLeaks founder. The same goes for publicly-funded outlets that claim to offer impartial reportage, untainted by the editorial influence of private owners, such as the British and Australian broadcasting corporations.

Outlets that previously reported every smear and slander against Assange with relish, have increasingly dropped his case altogether. The 2019 finding by United Nations Rapporteur Nils Melzer that the persecution of Assange amounted to state torture was given short shrift. So was the final collapse of Swedish sexual misconduct allegations, which had been used against the WikiLeaks founder for the best part of a decade, including by the media, but never made it past the “preliminary investigation” phase.

Revelations that the US Central Intelligence Agency

had illegally spied on Assange and all his associates, while he was a political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy, were given scant attention, as were reports that this campaign included discussion of kidnapping and murdering the WikiLeaks founder. The same was the case for warnings, including by prominent doctors, that Assange could die in a British prison due to the deterioration of his health, and the powerful defence testimony during the extradition hearings last September.

In other words, the official media has largely run cover for the US government and Justice Department, as the operation to prosecute a journalist has unravelled.

There is a particular reason, however, why the major publications are especially intent on covering up the *Stundin* revelations. For years, they have sought to justify their participation in what Melzer aptly termed the "public mobbing" of Assange, by questioning or dismissing his journalistic credentials.

The corporate outlets criticised the Trump administration's Espionage Act charges against Assange, primarily from the standpoint of their potential implications for the mainstream media, while claiming that Assange was a "polarising figure," a "bad actor" and worse. The main argument they set upon was that Assange was something other than a journalist or publisher. He was an "activist" at best, a "computer hacker" at worst.

The US incorporated Thordarson's lies into a superseding indictment against Assange, issued in June 2020, precisely to bolster this narrative, and to obscure the fact that the attempted prosecution was an attack on press freedom. Thordarson's tales of having conspired with Assange to secretly record the conversations of Icelandic politicians, hack into banks and commit other cyber-crimes, are presented in the indictment as fact, and proof that the WikiLeaks founder is nothing more than a common criminal.

When the indictment was released, Thordarson's credibility was already low. He had previously been convicted in an Icelandic court of impersonating Assange, stealing tens of thousands of dollars from WikiLeaks, and molesting underage boys. The psychiatric assessment presented to those hearings was hardly a glowing character reference, describing the Icelandic man as a sociopath.

The indictment and Thordarson, however, received limited media scrutiny, because his lies dovetailed with those of the corporate press. Now that he has walked back the claims, nothing is said or written.

The *Stundin* responseport to brandshethe media as an adjunct of governments and the intelligence agencies. The Assange case has revealed the willingness of almost the entire corporate media to facilitate and aid a state campaign aimed at destroying a journalist for exposing war crimes, global diplomatic intrigues and government surveillance operations.

The despicable role played by the press has served to undermine the widespread public support that Assange has won for his journalistic exposures, and to create an environment in which governments feel emboldened to be ever-more brazen in their persecution of him. The same function has been played by a host of pseudo-left and trade union organisations, which once claimed to support Assange, but abandoned him long ago.

The *Stundin* episode again demonstrates that any perspective of securing Assange's freedom by issuing plaintive appeals to the official institutions of capitalist society, including the corporate media, amounts to a fool's errand.

In its own way, the media silence indicates the real constituency for the defence of Assange and all democratic rights. The blackout of the Thordarson revelations is a tacit acknowledgement that if the details of Assange's plight were widely known and discussed, they would provoke mass outrage and opposition from ordinary people. It is the working class, increasingly being propelled into struggle against inequality, austerity and war, that can defeat state frame-ups and guarantee democratic rights, if it is politically-educated and mobilised.

Finally, the episode demonstrates the crucial importance of the fight against online censorship. But for *Stundin*'s initial article and reports about it by a handful of alternative and anti-war publications, Thordarson's admission that the US indictment is based on lies would not have appeared anywhere on the entire internet.



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