

Australian Broadcasting Corporation televising *Ithaka: A fight to free Julian Assange* this week

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Australia's state-funded national broadcasting network is screening *Ithaka: A Fight to Free Julian Assange* at 8.30 p.m. (AEST) on June 7, and at the same time Tuesday June 14. The documentary, originally released in selected cinemas as a two-hour feature, will be screened on ABC-TV in two 60-minute episodes. Both episodes will be available to stream on ABC iView.

Ithaka was filmed over two years in the UK, Europe and the US and charts the determined struggle waged by 76-year-old John Shipton, Assange's father, to secure his son's freedom. It was produced by Assange's brother Gabriel Shipton and written and directed by Ben Lawrence, with an original score by Brian Eno.

Producer Gabriel Shipton spoke to the World Socialist Web Site in October 2021 about the documentary and harrowing struggle he, his father and Stella Moris, Assange's wife, have waged to win the WikiLeaks founder's release. That interview is republished below.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke this week to Gabriel Shipton, a film producer and brother of Julian Assange. The WikiLeaks founder is again before a British court that will decide whether he will be dispatched to the United States for the "crime" of exposing illegal US wars, human rights abuses, mass spying operations and global diplomatic conspiracies affecting the lives of millions of people.

Shipton has recently completed a feature-length documentary entitled *Ithaka*, which will have its world premiere at the Sydney Film Festival next month and open for general release in January 2022. Directed by Ben Lawrence, the movie chronicles the efforts of Assange's father, John Shipton, to raise awareness of his son's plight, build public support and lobby for an end to the US prosecution and for his freedom.

The film provides a moving portrait of the immense toll that the decade-long persecution of Assange has taken on the WikiLeaks founder himself, and those closest to him, including his fiancée Stella Moris, his two young children and John Shipton. They speak powerfully on the lawless character of the US prosecution, and its dire implications for press freedom and democratic rights.

The discussion has been edited for brevity. The WSWs began by asking when Gabriel Shipton had last been able to visit his brother, who remains incarcerated in London's Belmarsh Prison, not for having been convicted of any crime, but to facilitate the US extradition effort.

Gabriel Shipton: The last time I saw Julian was in October 2020. After that the prison went into a COVID lockdown, for ten months in the end, where they had no visitors. On top of the COVID protocols, it's Belmarsh maximum-security prison.

There are three or four gates that you have to go through to enter, you're searched, even your mouth, your thumbprints are scanned at every point. Visits were very short because of COVID, they had reduced them to 45 minutes. There was no touching. Julian is a bit of a hugger, so there

was that awkward moment at the end of the visit where the guard says, "No touching." Usually, you would have a hug to say goodbye, but at that time we couldn't.

It's gotten better now, but I think it was 12 months that he wasn't able to touch anybody, including Stella or any other visitors. The last couple of months his children can visit, he can hold the kids, so it has gotten better.

But it's a maximum-security prison. I think Julian is one of two remand prisoners there so it's not a remand prison. I think 30 percent of the people there are convicted of violent crimes. That's who Julian is in with, and that's what that prison was made for, the most violent criminals in the UK. He's an innocent man, not sentenced. It's just another one of the many irregularities in Julian's case.

WSWS: How has the persecution of Assange impacted on you?

GS: I went to the prison in 2019 when Julian was first taken from Ecuador's London embassy and sent to Belmarsh. I really hadn't been involved in advocacy for Julian or anything to do with WikiLeaks until then. But when I went to see him in 2019, I'd never seen him like that before. He had been on suicide watch, which I didn't know at the time, but I left thinking I could potentially never see him again. That's how it felt. That this could be the end. That day I got home and messaged Daniel, his adult son, and wrote, "You better go over and see dad. This could be your last chance."

That's when I decided that I had to do something and I joined the campaign, started doing advocacy, speaking and interviews, and that was the genesis of this documentary. I'm a film producer and we were thinking, "How can we tell a different side to this story, how can we tell a personal side which will engage an audience emotionally, rather than the usual way people engage with Julian and his work?" Eventually we landed on the idea of following John's journey and his fight to defend his son.

There's been three suicides in Belmarsh during the past year, so we live in this fear that Julian will join that number. [Computer programmer and businessman] John McAfee was going to be extradited from Spain to the US, and when his extradition was approved, he committed suicide. That's something that is always there in your mind. It's a constant fear.

Stella, John and I are doing this full-time now, so in terms of our lives, that's basically our full-time job. So that's another thing that we have to contend with. But it's just the reality. You just do what you can. I saw a gap over in the US for advocacy for Julian, so I started doing it. You see these little things, opportunities to advocate for Julian and his freedom, and you just go out and do them. And John and Stella are the same, that's how we work.

WSWS: Your film is one of the few objective and sympathetic documentaries or movies that have been made about Julian, including in Australia. Can you speak about the challenges you have had, and why so

few films have been produced on this extraordinary story?

GS: We faced problems with this film. We were totally independent for a long time into the process. All of the negative propaganda and character assassination is so pervasive that many people in the sector and the traditional distribution outlets don't want to be seen as engaging in advocacy for Julian.

We now have the local screen bodies on board, but they wouldn't commit until they saw a rough-cut of the film. It's very difficult to actually get something off the ground.

If you look at a platform like Netflix, it had [leading Democratic Party representative] Susan Rice on its board until just recently. Biden was elected so she left Netflix and went to the White House. Obama got a \$400 million contract from Netflix. These companies, major corporations, they're revolving doors. It's no different in Australia with the corporate media.

You know who Julian's enemies are, what we're up against, it's the US security state, which has its tentacles everywhere. When you go against their narrative, you need to look for alternative methods of getting your product out there.

WSWS: What has been the response in Australia. Have you had contact with the film festivals?

GS: Australia's good in that way. A lot of the population is behind Julian. We were going to show at the Melbourne International Film Festival, before it went online because of COVID, as well as the Sydney Film Festival. The others here were interested and we're working at locking in an international festival.

WSWS: Can you comment on the role of the Australian government and its refusal to defend Assange even though he is an Australian citizen and journalist?

GS: They treat Julian like some backpacker who lost his passport. They provide the minimal assistance they can get away with. They're coming under more and more pressure now to actually do something. All it would take is something like the prime minister picking up the phone, calling Biden and raising that we're supposed to be best friends with the US, why can't they just bring Julian home.

But Australia is beholden to the US. We're not as independent as we like to think we are when it comes to this sort of thing. I think the Australian government is just following the lead of the US when it comes to Julian's persecution.

WSWS: The film features the visit you and John Shipton made to the US earlier this year, around the time that Biden was inaugurated. What were your experiences in attempting to lobby the new administration?

GS: In the film we were over there in the January period, when there's this time between administrations and the incoming government is making policy and planning what it is going to do. We were trying to take advantage of that before the new administration had formally taken over.

We did have some contacts with the human rights areas in the Biden administration. We got a letter to them, and the response we got back was "Please wait until after the inauguration. There's the potential for a meeting, but it would take place after then." We never received another response back from those people.

We returned to the US in June and did a 15-city tour across the US, 20 or so in-person events, rallies, actions. The response on the ground was great, we spoke to thousands of people, educating them and activating the supporter groups, getting people together. We generated some media, so we were able to get the issue of Julian back in the mainstream media at that time. And that has sort of flowed on. We saw the investigation recently by *Yahoo News* reporters with over 30 sources from within the intelligence community confirming what we sort of knew already, that there were plots to kidnap and murder Julian.

Under Trump, you had people like Mike Pompeo saying, "The CIA is going to target WikiLeaks, it's a non-state hostile intelligence service,"

and others, all happy to go on the record about their plans for Julian's prosecution, how they were basically going to throw everything against WikiLeaks.

Since Biden has come in, it's much different. Whenever anyone in the administration is asked what's going on with Julian's case, they handball it to someone else. When Secretary of State Blinken was asked about Julian in France he said, "We have an independent Justice Department, it's their responsibility." White House spokesperson Jen Psaki did the same.

What we're seeing now is a different way the administration operates. They don't like hullabaloo; they don't want a big media frenzy around it. But the prosecution rolls on. It hasn't been withdrawn. You can look back at the CIA revelation, they had a plan to kidnap and to murder Julian in 2017. That's been put in place. Under a veil of legality, he was judicially kidnapped from the Ecuadorian embassy, where he had political asylum.

They effectively figured out a way where they could still kidnap him and take him hostage but do it with this veil of legality. UN Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer calls it a slow-motion murder before our very eyes. It's no different to those CIA plans. It's continuing, just in a different way, under the Biden administration.

WSWS: And Biden may not wish to speak about Assange now, but in 2010 when he was the vice-president in the Obama administration, he denounced Julian as a "high-tech terrorist" for exposing US government crimes as a journalist.

GS: That's right. Biden and [Republican Senate minority leader] Mitch McConnell both called Julian a high-tech terrorist. They said the exact same thing, as if they were parroting each other. And there was talk about placing Julian under the framework of the Patriot Act, like a terrorist, so he could be droned or shot on site. There were calls from within the mainstream media for Julian to be assassinated. It all feeds into itself.

It's exactly the same as Pompeo calling WikiLeaks a "non-state hostile intelligence service." I spoke to Julian about that in 2017, and he said, "This is the first time we've had a full-time CIA team after us." It was that definition that meant the CIA could put a whole team on Julian without any congressional oversight and they could use the same measures they used against Iranian or Russian intelligence services on WikiLeaks.

The Washington DC consensus about killing Julian or going after WikiLeaks is not new, they've been trying to do it for a long time.

WSWS: One of the powerful moments in the film is when Assange's extradition is blocked by a British court in January, but on narrow health grounds. There's an obvious sense of relief and even surprise among his family. But then within days, the same British judge denied a bail request, and now there are the US appeals, with every danger of extradition proceeding. Can you speak about this and the hearings taking place this week?

GS: It's an emotional rollercoaster. You see in the film, there's that moment where we were taken aback, overcome and couldn't quite believe that extradition was rejected. And then it's back to the same grind a couple of days later, and then into this new hearing.

The US had initially put forward five appeal points, but the court only allowed them to proceed with three. They appealed that and are now allowed to challenge on the other two as well.

One of those two is their attempts to undermine the testimony of Professor Kopelman, the psychiatrist who found that Julian would commit suicide if he was extradited to the US. So again, this hearing is going to be focused on Julian, his mental well being, his person. Clare Dobbin, one of the prosecutors, called Julian a "malingerer" in one of the earlier hearings. That's what we expect to happen, keep the focus on Julian, on him personally and keep the attention away from the actual crimes against humanity and corruption that he exposed. That's been the tactic since 2010. They've played the man and not the ball.

WSWS: It's extraordinary that the case is proceeding at all. It's now been revealed that the US government, which is seeking extradition, plotted to murder Assange. One of the key witnesses for its indictment, the Icelandic conman and convicted child molester Siggi Thordarson, has admitted he lied in exchange for immunity from US prosecution. Why do you think the British judiciary is going ahead with this, when by rights the entire US case should have been thrown out?

GS: It's a bit similar to the question of why the Australian government hasn't done more. The thing about this is that it's almost like another WikiLeaks revelation, how Julian has been relentlessly pursued and all of these institutions have been shown to be corrupt.

It started off with the Swedish prosecution service, then the Crown Prosecution Service, the British judiciary, the US Justice Department, the FBI offering Thordarson immunity in exchange for his testimony. For me it's another revelation, the lengths they will go.

I like the David and Goliath metaphor. There's this blind giant that's fighting against a tiny man locked inside a prison cell, and this giant is just knocking down all of these institutions. Eventually it's going to destroy itself. It's showing that all of these institutions are corrupt. The more this plays out the more faith people will have lost in the democratic system that we live under.

If you look back to the Daniel Ellsberg case in the 1970s when it emerged that his psychiatrists were being spied on by the American government and they were sending agents disguised as plumbers to burgle his house, that all fed into Richard Nixon's impeachment. I wouldn't be surprised if we see something similar with Julian's case, that eventually we see someone at the highest level held to account.



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