

Comic-actor Russell Brand lynched by media mob after sexual assault allegations

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British comic, actor and social commentator Russell Brand has been accused of rape, sexual assault and controlling and abusive behaviour by four women, all anonymous. Their unsubstantiated claims were put forward in a joint investigation, begun *four years ago*, by the *Times*, *Sunday Times*, and Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme. Published over the weekend, the allegations have quickly dominated world news reporting. Considerable resources have been expended in the effort to discredit and destroy Brand.

The attack on the comedian has all the earmarks of a #MeToo-style “hit job”, such as those organised against actors Kevin Spacey, Johnny Depp and numerous others. In Brand's case, there is also the matter of his anti-establishment positions on various questions, including the Russia-Ukraine war.

In a video statement, Brand insists he “absolutely refute[s]” the allegations. He adds that at one period in his life “I was very, very promiscuous. Now during that time ... the relationships I had were absolutely consensual. I was always transparent about that then ... To see that transparency metastasised into something criminal, that I absolutely deny, makes me question: is there another agenda at play?”

He further asserts, referring to his podcasts and other public presentations, that “there's a serious and concerted agenda to control these kind of spaces, and these kind of voices, and I mean my voice along with your voice.”

Brand's video refuting the media attack has been viewed almost 69 million times on X/Twitter, and received almost 200,000 likes.

The hysterical response to the Brand story in the media, with the *Guardian* and other nominally “liberal” newspapers far in the lead, undermines basic legal and democratic principles. It has pre-emptively judged Brand guilty, rendering him a pariah and jeopardising any chance of a fair trial if that were ever on the cards in the

future.

As it stands, the first and only legal process began Monday, when a complaint was submitted to London's Metropolitan Police about an event alleged to have taken place in Soho in 2003. There are currently no police investigations and no charges.

The presumption of innocence on which any democratic society is based means Brand is not guilty of anything until proven so in a court of law. But entirely the opposite impression is given in the media's coverage, with words like “allegedly” only grudgingly included as an unfortunate legal nicety.

To justify this, there has been a deeply reactionary attempt to hive off a supposedly separate sphere, a “gray area”, of legal rights from broader society. In a tweet reposted by popular legal commentator The Secret Barrister, a senior lawyer wrote, “I think lawyers are slightly struggling with ‘innocent until proven guilty’. Of course that has a definite place as a legal concept...

“That does not, however, mean that legal processes are the only way that someone can be judged to be found wanting. Life is full of occasions where we pass judgement on the conduct of others. That conduct can fall short of criminality but can include criminality that gets nowhere near the courtroom...

“[W]e fall into error if we think that the criminal process is the only arbiter of whether someone has done something ‘wrong’.”

This is a recipe for McCarthyite witch-hunting. A legal system not underpinned by the presumption of innocence is run by rumour, prejudice and snap judgements based on incomplete information. It is a fertile environment for state and media assaults, personal vendettas, and whisper campaigns.

An atmosphere has been created in which Brand is not only treated as if convicted—and, it should be added, beyond the point of rehabilitation—but totally non-

personned.

The BBC and Channel 4 have removed some content featuring Brand from their streaming services and YouTube has demonetised his accounts. Upcoming dates in Brand's stand-up tour have been postponed. Talent agency Tavistock Wood has "terminated all professional ties" and Bluebird publishers have "pause[d] all future publishing" with him. The perennial political coward Jeremy Corbyn has dropped Brand from his upcoming poetry book co-edited with former union boss Len McCluskey.

A second feature of the coverage of the Brand allegations has been the rush to "substantiate" them with references to how he has conducted himself in his public life. Several graphic stand-up routines and Brand's asking production staff to get the phone numbers of people in his audiences he found attractive are among the examples given of the "open secret" of his attitude towards women, as if betraying a criminal mind.

But none of this is illegal. In fact, as the commentators frequently admit, it was par for the course at the time—or at least for Brand's off-the-wall, provocative, self-professed "sex addict" persona that won him great success across the media.

Much of the fevered character of the present coverage stems from members of the affluent-middle-class commentariat climbing over one another to atone for their past failure to denounce what must now be treated as an unconscionable evil. With his lurid lifestyle, Brand is something of a ready-made villain for the #MeToo age, to be performatively denounced with the appropriate degree of self-flagellation for one's own past "complicity".

As with many previous sexual assault scandals, this is bound up with the hyper-conservative suggestion that sex itself is borderline criminal. The *Guardian's* media editor Jim Watterson writes that "Hypersexualisation and graphic depictions of sexual desire were part of his public persona—which is not illegal, but may have been considered red flags by those hiring him to present their shows."

Another clear agenda is to cast a shadow over any media not vetted by the traditional gatekeepers of public opinion. Brand's eclectic mix of oppositional views—first broadly "leftism", now centred on the politics of "uniting left and right"—broadcast in five 10–20-minute videos a week on his YouTube channel, have won him over six million subscribers.

His opponents have used the allegations against him to declare open season on this platform. The vindictive glee

is evident in Watterson's "analysis" piece, titled, "Now we'll see how many bought Brand's anti-'mainstream media' shtick." Other headlines include, "Russell Brand's wonderland: the online soapbox where the star pushes his 'free speech'" and "Inside Russell Brand's conspiracy-fuelled cult online following".

The absurd, censorious claim has even been made that Brand's whole social media presence was built up as a defence against potential sexual assault claims. These are brought together by the *Daily Mail* in the article, "Did Russell Brand know this was all coming? Fellow comics and experts claim star spent four years 'grooming' online cult following 'to support him when rape allegations become public'."

The World Socialist Web Site does not support Brand's anarchistic views, which are all over the political map, combining denunciations of the US-NATO war against Russia with thoroughly reactionary endorsements of the January 6th insurrectionists and the Wuhan Lab lie.

However, we do not impose a political criterion on whose democratic rights are to be respected.

Legal and democratic rights must be defended to put an end to the situation where public figures and artists can be torn down purely through maliciously intended allegations and gossip. It should not need explaining what enormous power this gives those with the most influence on the media and politics, and the injustice which can be wrought.

Very recently, actor Kevin Spacey has seen a British court dismiss the last of several criminal charges brought on the basis of allegations which have nonetheless destroyed his life.

A mass opposition to the NATO-Russia war, and to capitalism, cannot be built without securing the broadest possible understanding of and commitment to democratic rights. Brand's trial, judgment and sentencing by media must be opposed.



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