

Over Assange, Britain's Press Prefers to Serve Power Not Media Freedom

We might have expected British journalists to have turned the Julian Assange case into a cause celebre for press freedom and free speech. Not at all. Most of the mainstream media are silent or hostile, and are acting as instruments of the state.

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Just over ten years ago, Lord Justice Leveson [proposed](#) tougher legislation of newspapers amidst general horror that journalists had hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Millie Dowler.

His proposals were greeted with fury.

In the *Daily Mail* Richard Littlejohn [said](#) they meant the "suppression of free speech." This was, added Littlejohn, the "classic hallmark of a fascist regime."

Mike Harris for the *Daily Telegraph* [warned](#) that "three centuries of press freedom will be consigned to the dustbin of history, with investigative journalism almost impossible and shackles imposed on our much-loved local press".

Every title from the Murdoch press, Associated Newspapers and the Telegraph - the hegemonic groups which account for approximately 75% of mainstream newspaper readership - denounced the Leveson reforms.

Meanwhile they united to launch a concerted campaign - the so called free speech network - to block them.

It was one of the most effective campaigns in modern times.

Behind the scenes politicians were nobbled. Deals were struck. Leveson Two - the section of the enquiry which would have examined links between politicians, the police and press -

was [blocked](#).

Let's contrast the campaign against Leveson with British media coverage of the US attempt to extradite Julian Assange.

Another Watergate?

As I write Assange rots in a cell in high security Belmarsh prison, where he has been held for years. Any day now could see the WikiLeaks publisher sent to the United States for trial on trumped up espionage charges - then dumped in a US jail for the rest of his life.

The consequences of such a judgement could not be more grim for free speech.

Any story which depends on obtaining documents from US government sources will become impossibly dangerous.

Break another Watergate scandal? Forget it.

No British journalist would dare to handle the material, let alone publish it. Any journalists involved could find themselves subject to extradition.

The more serious the story, and the more it needed to be published, the greater the danger.

Let's spell this out.

Julian Assange is by far the most important case involving free speech this century. No wonder the late Daniel Ellsberg, who exposed so many of the US lies about the Vietnam war, gave such powerful testimony for Assange before his death in June this year.

Ellsberg, the principled former marine who leaked the so-called Pentagon papers, said that he [felt](#) a "great identification" with Assange.

Cause celebre?

So you would have expected British journalists and newspaper editors to have turned the Assange case into a cause celebre for media freedom.

Wrong.

The Assange story has been treated by much of the British media like an embarrassing family secret.

As I discovered when I carried out a survey of recent press reporting.

The *Times* claims to be Britain's foremost paper of record. There have been a handful of news stories such as ['Assange not allowed to attend Vivienne Westwood's funeral'](#) and no opinion piece since the start of 2021.

That one wasn't friendly. Written by James Ball, a former WikiLeaks staffer, the headline announced: ['Assange is no hero. I should know - I lived with him and his awful gang'](#).

There has been a comparable [lack](#) of reporting in the *Telegraph*. Not much in the [Financial Times](#). Ditto the *Sunday Times* - the paper once edited by the formidable investigative

editor Harold Evans – and the *Sunday Telegraph*.

Richard Littlejohn, the columnist for the *Daily Mail* who absurdly compared the Leveson proposals to fascism, mocked Assange in a contemptible article as he emerged from incarceration at the Ecuadorian embassy in London: [claiming](#) that “he stank the place to high heaven”.

Liberal Left

The *New Statesman* is a sad case. Once a beacon of the liberal left, a [hatchet job](#) on Assange by Suzanne Moore in April 2019 set the tone.

“Wikileaks was the future once,” wrote Moore. “Remember? We were all excited about the vast info dumps revealing horrific war crimes and the killings of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. Then it became something else. It became *him*, and he did not care if the information he was releasing was helping Trump or Putin, outing gay men in Saudi Arabia, identifying informants or rape victims. Their names were out there and they were at risk.”

To think that the *New Statesman* was once a supporter of press freedom, human rights and the radical left. Or that its editor Jason Cowley, occupies the same chair as Kingsley Martin or Anthony Howard.

To be fair to Suzanne Moore she did state that it was wrong to extradite Assange.

Not so the *Economist*, which actually supports extradition. The paper [argued](#) in April 2019 that “the central charge – computer hacking – is an indefensible violation of the law. Neither journalists nor activists, like Mr Assange, have carte blanche to break the law in exercising their First Amendment rights. They are entitled to publish freely; not to break and enter, physically or digitally, to do so.”

In preparation for this piece I have repeatedly approached the magazine’s spokesperson asking if its position has changed. There have been no replies to my emails. Until the *Economist* publishes an editorial to the contrary, we must assume that the paper still supports extradition.

Even those titles which oppose extradition tend to do so superficially.

They fail to highlight the full horror of Julian Assange’s ongoing incarceration in Belmarsh. That the CIA plotted to assassinate Assange.

Or the magnitude and horror of what he revealed about the US led war on terror.

Such as the [video](#) of US helicopter gunmen laughing as they shot at and killed 12 unarmed civilians in Iraq – including a Reuters photographer and his assistant. The US refused even to discipline the perpetrators.

The core revelation that civilian casualties in Iraq were far [higher](#) than the US had admitted. The systematic [abuse](#) at Guantanamo Bay. That 150 innocent inmates were [held](#) for years without charge.

And so on.

Old Bailey

No titles have properly reported the story, and virtually all of those that have, are from outside the mainstream media.

Only a handful of reporters regularly attended Assange's four-week hearing three years ago at the Old Bailey: one from the specialist agency Central Court News, another from the Press Association; and court reporter James Doleman filing daily reports for Bridges for Media Freedom. There was a reporter from the *Morning Star*.

A BBC representative attended every day but appears not to have filed anything at all.

The former British ambassador Craig Murray, sitting in the public gallery with the Assange family, filed a series of brilliant daily reports. No British paper provided anything comparable.

The Assange case proves the argument made by Noam Chomsky that mainstream media should be understood as an instrument of state and corporate power.

I rang up the one figure from the mainstream media who has broken from this paradigm: Peter Hitchens has used his *Mail* column (credit to *Mail* editor Ted Verity) to make the case against extradition. "It could happen any day now", he [warned](#) last month.

"After yet another brief, unsuccessful court hearing, a column of vans and police cars roars out of Belmarsh prison in [London](#) and hurries to Heathrow, where a manacled, stooped and blinking prisoner is handed over to American officials and bundled aboard a plane bound for Washington [DC](#)."

Hitchens added:

"He faces absurd charges of spying, when he never spied. His crime was to embarrass the US government by selectively releasing information that Washington had tried and failed to keep secret. I do not think this is a crime, here or there."

Hitchens named several British columnists.

"Charles Moore. Danny Finkelstein. Matthew Parris. Janice Turner. These are all people I respect greatly, people who are prepared to say difficult or unpopular things. They believe in liberty under the law. I would love to see their voices raised in favour of Assange. I just don't think that they've made the connection. It's not too late for them to do so."

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