

Assange or Khashoggi: Whither Journalistic Standards?

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During the media frenzy, diplomatic flurry and widespread speculations around a hitherto marginal Saudi journalist's apparently grizzly demise in Istanbul's Saudi consulate last October, my thoughts stayed with the deathly silence that had fallen around Wikileaks' founder and director.

Information about Julian Assange had become increasingly sparse and obscured. After six years under [virtual house arrest in Ecuador's London embassy](#), his fate was more precarious every day. Seeking temporary asylum with Ecuador was apparently a serious miscalculation by Assange and his lawyers.

By 2017, Assange's astute observations on a range of policy issues were becoming few and far between, his opinion on international matters sought or quoted www.Wikileaks.org turned less tantalizing too. (The most recent post is dated January, 2019.)

Did international media and free press advocates who once celebrated Assange and who utilized his revelations and heaped awards on Wikileaks collectively agreed to abandon their erstwhile hero? And why the turnaround? (Not easy to explain although one suggestion is [former associates conspired to depose him](#))

Increased silence from within Assange's refuge presaged his recent 'capture'. Then, when he suddenly appeared, subdued by several guards, international media shamelessly rushed to applaud his arrest. Many repeated scant, salacious details of his condition at the time of his forced removal from the embassy. Reprehensible. Dismaying. Will those gloating journalists care what his captors do to Assange in detention?

This for the man whose political analyses and Wikileaks revelations had been daily headlines not long ago. This for a journalist and publisher who introduced a profound strategy to expose a government's sinister diplomatic schemes, excesses and crimes documented by their own internal reports. This for an organization gathering evidence of government wrongdoing at a critical time, starting in 2006 when U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were being reevaluated by a sobering public. Rumors of military crimes, cover-ups, torture, black-site prisons, etc. had gradually, although belatedly, gained credibility and, following Abu Graib Prison revelations, Wikileaks provided irrefutable evidence of how U.S.A. and its allies conduct their wars. (How useless normal checks are was demonstrated by Chelsea Manning's thwarted attempts to report questionable practices within the U.S.military structure.)

Also Assange launched Wikileaks.org soon after we recognized the potential of new digital

technology. Here was a tool with the capacity to store and transfer massive quantities of data; hard copy was redundant and security systems for digital data including those of intelligence agencies were untested.

Julian Assange was no ordinary, lone, computer geek hacking commercial operators. He had a clear political agenda. He emerged as the unmatched pioneer sleuth for our new digital age, building Wikileaks as a free public platform for distributing huge quantities of data, material supposedly only accessible to authorized personnel. In its audacity Wikileaks even published a CIA manual on its (own) hacking methods! The undeniable content of the Iraq and Afghanistan War Logs and diplomatic files known as Cable Gate clearly demonstrates how the U.S. spies on governments, including allies.

Wikileaks set a [new standard for investigative journalism](#).

It took an exceptional mind to create the Wikileaks platform but also to assess and manage massive amounts of data gathered and uploaded to it. (I myself never searched through those files, but my perusal of the [2015 book, The Wikileaks Files](#), with an introduction by Assange offers a hint of the treasure the original files represent.) They will doubtless be drawn on by historians and policy analysts for decades.

Assange's technical handling of the files he assembled was matched by his articulate public statements. He understood their implications better than many others and he demonstrated a critical grasp of international issues and policy implications. He could condense and explain the data to laypeople better than seasoned political journalists and professors could. So lucid were Assange's commentaries that he was certain to be viewed by authorities as threatening as the Wikileaks postings.

With this brief sketch of Assange's short career and his contributions to journalism, let's recall the hardly known internationally celebrated personage in whose name an [international award](#) was created— an undistinguished fellow whose death, we were told, threatened one of Washington's sacred alliances:—that with Saudi Arabia.

Certainly, this gadfly media celebrity should not have been murdered and “disappeared” in what sounds like an ugly, bungled inside job. One doesn't want to see anyone losing his or her life in our noble profession, (although many do). Tell me frankly though: what was the real contribution of Jamal Khashoggi to journalism? Not much. Yes, he held positions at reputable Arab news agencies and he was doubtless highly competent.

He'd become an insider of the Saudi court. Although a clearly privileged position, that may have become an arrangement he sought to end.

In January 2018, Khashoggi was appointed as one of three new Global Opinions contributors at the prestigious Washington Post. It's an expedient and not uncommon practice for news agencies to take on 'native' journalists like him. These visitors become highly valued 'silent' sources for their host while gaining legitimacy by writing occasional columns— a hell of a sweet deal.

Yet however insightful your occasional WaPo commentaries, they hardly matter. If you advise staff writers with reliable insider information about your country's personalities and policies, you enjoy an elite professional badge, one you expect will protect you as well.

In Khashoggi's case that security arrangement didn't work out so well. Although the

Washington Post managed to redeem itself by portraying their new columnist as an invaluable veteran employee who was horribly assassinated. Khashoggi became an instant American martyr, his murder a blow to the entire profession, an act that might unravel the unshakable U.S.-Saudi bond. Khashoggi's spectacularly imagined death dominated headlines for weeks, disrupting a web of diplomatic relations. (Although talk of ending just one dimension of the American-Saudi alliance, the Yemen war, came to naught.) As for the Saudi crown prince: he may maintain a lower public profile today, but there's little evidence his real power is diminished. Meanwhile, can you recall any citations of the Saudi journalist's writings?

With the drama of Khashoggi's death largely forgotten and the U.S.-Saudi status-quo restored, is there any way to compare his contribution to the imprisoned and vilified Wikileaks' director?

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