

British “Watchdog” Journalists Unmasked as Lap Dogs for the Security State

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Global Research, June 27, 2022

[MintPress News](#) 24 June 2022

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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Events of the past few days suggest British journalism – the so-called Fourth Estate – is not what it purports to be: a watchdog monitoring the centers of state power. It is quite the opposite.

The pretensions of the establishment media took a severe battering this month as the defamation trial of *Guardian* columnist Carole Cadwalladr reached its conclusion and the hacked emails of Paul Mason, a long-time stalwart of the *BBC*, Channel 4 and the *Guardian*, were published online.

Both of these celebrated journalists have found themselves outed as recruits – in their differing ways – to a covert information war being waged by Western intelligence agencies.

Had they been honest about it, that collusion might not matter so much. After all, few journalists are as neutral or as dispassionate as the profession likes to pretend. But as have many of their colleagues, Cadwalladr and Mason have broken what should be a core principle of journalism: transparency.

The role of serious journalists is to bring matters of import into the public space for debate and scrutiny. Journalists thinking critically aspire to hold those who wield power – primarily state agencies – to account on the principle that, without scrutiny, power quickly corrupts.

The purpose of real journalism – as opposed to the gossip, entertainment and national-security stenography that usually passes for journalism – is to hit up, not down.

And yet, each of these journalists, we now know, was actively colluding, or seeking to collude, with state actors who prefer to operate in the shadows, out of sight. Both journalists were coopted to advance the aims of the intelligence services.

And worse, each of them either sought to become a conduit for, or actively assist in, covert

smear campaigns run by Western intelligence services against other journalists.

What they were doing – along with so many other establishment journalists – is the very antithesis of journalism. They were helping to conceal the operation of power to make it harder to scrutinize. And not only that. In the process, they were trying to weaken already marginalized journalists fighting to hold state power to account.

Russian Collusion?

Cadwalladr's cooperation with the intelligence services has been highlighted only because of a court case. She was sued for defamation by Arron Banks, a businessman and major donor to the successful Brexit campaign for Britain to leave the European Union.

In a kind of transatlantic extension of the Russiagate hysteria in the United States following Donald Trump's election as president in 2016, Cadwalladr accused Banks of lying about his ties to the Russian state. According to the court, she also suggested he broke election funding laws by receiving Russian money in the run-up to the Brexit vote, also in 2016.

That year serves as a kind of ground zero for liberals fearful about the future of "Western democracy" – supposedly under threat from modern "barbarians at the gate," such as Russia and China – and the ability of Western states to defend their primacy through neo-colonial wars of aggression around the globe.

The implication is Russia masterminded a double subversion in 2016: on one side of the Atlantic, Trump was elected U.S. president; and, on the other, Britons were gulled into shooting themselves in the foot – and undermining Europe – by voting to leave the EU.

Faced with the court case, Cadwalladr could not support her allegations against Banks as true. Nonetheless, the judge [ruled](#) against Banks' libel action – on the basis that the claims had not sufficiently harmed his reputation.

The judge also [decided](#), perversely in a British defamation action, that Cadwalladr had "reasonable grounds" to publish claims that Banks received "sweetheart deals" from Russia, even though "she had seen no evidence he had entered into any such deals." An [investigation](#) by the National Crime Agency ultimately found no evidence either.

So given those circumstances, what was the basis for her accusations against Banks?

Cadwalladr's journalistic *modus operandi*, in her long-running efforts to suggest widespread Russian meddling in British politics, is highlighted in her [witness statement](#) to the court.

In it, she refers to another of her Russiagate-style stories: one from 2017 that tried to connect the Kremlin with Nigel Farage, a former pro-Brexit politician with the UKIP Party and close associate of Banks, and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who has been a political prisoner in the U.K. for more than a decade.

At that time, Assange was confined to a single room in the Ecuadorian Embassy after its government offered him political asylum. He had sought sanctuary there, fearing he would be extradited to the U.S. following publication by WikiLeaks of revelations that the U.S. and U.K. had committed [war crimes](#) in Iraq and Afghanistan.

WikiLeaks had also deeply embarrassed the CIA by following up with the publication of

leaked documents, known as [Vault 7](#), exposing the agency's own crimes.

Last week the U.K.'s Home Secretary, Priti Patel, [approved](#) the very extradition to the U.S. that Assange feared and that drove him into the Ecuadorian embassy. Once in the U.S., he faces up to 175 years in complete isolation in a supermax jail.

Assassination Plot

We now know, courtesy of a *Yahoo News* investigation, that through 2017 the CIA hatched various schemes to either [assassinate](#) Assange or kidnap him in one of its illegal "extraordinary rendition" operations, so he could be permanently locked up in the U.S., out of public view.

We can surmise that the CIA also believed it needed to prepare the ground for such a rogue operation by bringing the public on board. According to Yahoo's investigation, the CIA believed Assange's seizure might require a gun battle on the streets of London.

It was at this point, it seems, that Cadwalladr and the *Guardian* were encouraged to add their own weight to the cause of further turning public opinion against Assange.

According to her witness statement, "a confidential source in [the] U.S." suggested – at the very time the CIA was mulling over these various plots – that she write about a supposed visit by Farage to Assange in the embassy. The story ran in the *Guardian* under the headline "[When Nigel Farage met Julian Assange.](#)"

In the article, Cadwalladr offers a strong hint as to who had been treating her as a confidant: the one source [mentioned](#) in the piece is "a highly placed contact with links to U.S. intelligence." In other words, the CIA almost certainly fed her the agency's angle on the story.

Carole Cadwalladr says in her witness statement that "a confidential source in US" gave her the idea for her highly-speculative Farage/Assange story in 2017 about WikiLeaks' CIA leak.

The article's only official source was "a highly placed contact with links to US intelligence" pic.twitter.com/FYg4wqj9OJ

— Matt Kennard (@kennardmatt) [June 13, 2022](#)

In the piece, Cadwalladr threads together her and the CIA's claims of "a political alignment between WikiLeaks' ideology, UKIP's ideology and Trump's ideology." Behind the scenes, she suggests, was the hidden hand of the Kremlin, guiding them all in a malign plot to fatally undermine British democracy.

She quotes her "highly placed contact" claiming that Farage and Assange's alleged face-to-face meeting was necessary to pass information of their nefarious plot "in ways and places that cannot be monitored."

Except of course, as her "highly placed contact" knew – and as we now know, thanks to exposes by the *Grayzone* website – that was a lie. In tandem with its plot to kill or kidnap Assange, the CIA [illegally installed cameras](#) inside, as well as outside, the embassy. His

every move in the embassy was monitored – even in the toilet block.

The reality was that the CIA was bugging and videoing Assange's every conversation in the embassy, even the face-to-face ones. If the CIA actually had a recording of Assange and Farage meeting and discussing a Kremlin-inspired plot, it would have found a way to make it public by now.

Far more plausible is what [Farage](#) and [WikiLeaks](#) say: that such a meeting never happened. Farage visited the embassy to try to interview Assange for his *LBC* radio show but was denied access. That can be easily confirmed because by then the Ecuadorian embassy was allying with the U.S. and [refusing](#) Assange any contact with visitors apart from his lawyers.

"Links to Julian Assange"? He asked to do an interview with LBC, his primary job, with his producer in tow, which was politely declined. It is endless fabrications like this that brings the Guardian into disrepute.

— WikiLeaks (@wikileaks) [July 25, 2018](#)

Nonetheless, Cadwalladr concludes: “In the perfect storm of fake news, disinformation and social media in which we now live, WikiLeaks is, in many ways, the swirling vortex at the centre of everything.”

‘Swirling Vortex’

The Farage-Assange meeting story shows how the CIA and Cadwalladr's agendas perfectly coincided in their very own “swirling vortex” of fake news and disinformation.

She wanted to tie the Brexit campaign to Russia and suggest that anyone who wished to challenge the liberal pieties that provide cover for the crimes committed by Western states must necessarily belong to a network of conspirators, on the left and the right, masterminded from Moscow.

The CIA and other Western intelligence agencies, meanwhile, wanted to deepen the public's impression that Assange was a Kremlin agent – and that WikiLeaks' exposure of the crimes committed by those same agencies was not in the public interest but actually an assault on Western democracy.

Assange's character assassination had already been largely achieved with the American public in the Russiagate campaign in the U.S. The intelligence services, along with the Democratic Party leadership, had crafted a narrative designed to obscure WikiLeaks' revelations of election-fixing by Hillary Clinton's camp in 2016 to prevent Bernie Sanders from winning the party's presidential nomination. Instead they [refocused](#) the public's attention on evidence-free claims that Russia had “hacked” the emails.

For Cadwalladr and the CIA, the fake-news story of Farage meeting Assange could be spun as further proof that both the “far left” and “far right” were colluding with Russia. Their message was clear: only centrists – and the national security state – could be trusted to defend democracy.

Fabricated Story

Cadwalladr's smear of Assange is entirely of a piece with the vilification campaign of WikiLeaks led by liberal media outlets to which she belongs. Her paper, the *Guardian*, has had Assange in its sights since its falling out with him over their joint publication of the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs in 2010.

A year after Cadwalladr's smear piece, the *Guardian* would continue its cooperation with the intelligence services' demonization of Assange by running an [equally fabricated](#) story - this time about a senior aide of Trump's, Paul Manafort, and various unidentified "Russians" [secretly meeting](#) Assange in the embassy.

The story was so improbable it was [ridiculed](#) even at the time of publication. Again, the CIA's illegal spying operation inside and outside the embassy meant there was no way Manafort or any "Russians" could have secretly visited Assange without those meetings being recorded. Nonetheless, the *Guardian* has never retracted the smear.

One of the authors of the article, Luke Harding, has been at the forefront of both the *Guardian's* Russiagate claims and its efforts to defame Assange. In doing so, he appears to have relied heavily on Western intelligence services for his stories and has proven incapable of defending them when [challenged](#).

Harding, like the *Guardian*, has an added investment in discrediting Assange. He and a *Guardian* colleague, David Leigh, [published](#) a Guardian-imprint book that included a secret password to a WikiLeaks' cache of leaked documents, thereby providing security services around the world with access to the material.

The CIA's claim that the release of those documents endangered its informants - a [claim](#) that even U.S. officials have been [forced to concede](#) is not true - has been laid at Assange's door to vilify him and justify his imprisonment. But if anyone is to blame, it is not Assange but Harding, Leigh and the *Guardian*.

Effort to Deplatform

The case of Paul Mason, who worked for many years as a senior *BBC* journalist, is even more revealing. Emails passed to the *Grayzone* website show the veteran, self-described "left-wing" journalist [secretly conspiring](#) with figures aligned with British intelligence services to build a network of journalists and academics to smear and censor independent media outlets that challenge the narratives of the Western intelligence agencies.

Mason's concerns about left-wing influence on public opinion have intensified the more he has [faced criticism](#) from the left over his demands for fervent, uncritical support of NATO and as he has lobbied for greater Western interference in Ukraine. Both are aims he shares with Western intelligence services.

Along with the establishment media, Mason has called for sending advanced weaponry to Kyiv, likely to raise the death toll on both sides of the war and risk a nuclear confrontation between the West and Russia.

In the published emails, Mason suggests the harming and "relentless deplatforming" of independent investigative media sites - such as the *Grayzone*, *Consortium News* and *Mint Press* - that host non-establishment journalists. He and his correspondents also debate

whether to include *Declassified UK* and *OpenDemocracy*. One of his co-conspirators suggests a “full nuclear legal to squeeze them financially.”

Mason himself proposes starving these websites of income by secretly pressuring Paypal to stop readers from being able to make donations to support their work.

It should be noted that, in the wake of Mason’s correspondence, PayPal did indeed launch just such a [crackdown](#), including against *Consortium News* and *MintPress*, after earlier [targeting WikiLeaks](#).

Statement from [@MnarMuh](#):

Paypal banning myself and MintPress is blatant censorship of dissenting journalists & outlets. For the past decade MintPress has been unapologetically working as a watchdog journalism outlet to expose the profiteers of the permanent war state. pic.twitter.com/kCkfcWNGRN

— MintPress News (@MintPressNews) [April 29, 2022](#)

Mason’s email correspondents include two figures intimately tied to British intelligence: Amil Khan is described by the *Grayzone* as “a shadowy intelligence contractor” with ties to the U.K.’s National Security Council. He founded Valent Projects, establishing his credentials in a [dirty propaganda war](#) in support of head-chopping jihadist groups trying to bring down the Russian-supported Syrian government.

Clandestine ‘Clusters’

The other intelligence operative is someone Mason refers to as a “friend”: Andy Pryce, the head of the Foreign Office’s shadowy Counter Disinformation and Media Development (CDMD) unit, founded in 2016 to “counter-strike against Russian propaganda.” Mason and Pryce spend much of their correspondence [discussing](#) when to meet up in London pubs for a drink, according to the *Grayzone*.

The Foreign Office managed to keep the CDMD unit’s existence secret for two years. The U.K. government has refused to disclose basic information about the CDMD on grounds of national security, although it is now known that it is overseen by the National Security Council.

The CDMD’s existence came to light because of leaks about another covert information warfare operation, the Integrity Initiative.

Notably, the Integrity Initiative was run on the basis of clandestine “clusters,” in North America and Europe, of journalists, academics, politicians and security officials advancing narratives shared with Western intelligence agencies to discredit Russia, China, Julian Assange, and Jeremy Corbyn, the former, left-wing leader of the Labor Party.

Cadwalladr was named in the [British cluster](#), along with other prominent journalists: David Aaronovitch and Dominic Kennedy of the *Times*; the *Guardian*’s Natalie Nougayrede and Paul Canning; Jonathan Marcus of the *BBC*; the *Financial Times*’ Neil Buckley; the *Economist*’s Edward Lucas; and *Sky News*’ Deborah Haynes.

In his emails, Mason appears to want to renew this type of work but to direct its energies more specifically at damaging independent, dissident media – with his number one target the *Grayzone*, which played a critical role in [exposing](#) the Integrity Initiative.

Mason’s “friend” – the CDMD’s head, Andy Pryce – “featured prominently” in documents relating to the Integrity Initiative, the *Grayzone* observes.

This background is not lost on Mason. He notes in his correspondence the danger that his plot to “deplatform” independent media could “end up with the same problem as Statecraft” – a reference to the Institute of Statecraft, the Integrity Initiative’s parent charity, which the *Grayzone* and others exposed. He cautions: “The opposition are not stupid, they can spot an info op – so the more this is designed to be organic the better.”

Pryce and Mason discuss creating an astroturf civil-society organization that would lead their “information war” as part of an operation they brand the “International Information Brigade”.

Mason suggests the suspension of the libel laws for what he calls “foreign agents” – presumably meaning that the Information Brigade would be able to defame independent journalists as Russian agents, echoing the establishment media’s treatment of Assange, without fear of legal action that would show these were evidence-free smears.

‘Putin Infosphere’

Another correspondent, Emma Briant, an academic who claims to specialize in Russian disinformation, offers an insight into how she defines the presumed enemy within: those “close to WikiLeaks,” anyone “trolling Carole [Cadwalladr],” and outlets “discouraging people from reading the *Guardian*.”

Mason himself produces an eye-popping, self-drawn, spider’s web chart of the supposedly “pro-Putin infosphere” in the U.K., embracing much of the left, including Corbyn, the Stop the War movement, as well as the Black and Muslim communities. Several media sites are mentioned, including *Mint Press* and *Novara Media*, an independent British website sympathetic to Corbyn.

Khan and Mason consider how they can help trigger a British government investigation of independent outlets so that they can be labeled as “Russian-state affiliated media” to further remove them from visibility on social media.

Mason states that the goal is to prevent the emergence of a “left anti-imperialist identity,” which, he fears, “will be attractive because liberalism doesn’t know how to counter it” – a telling admission that he believes genuine left-wing critiques of Western foreign policy cannot be dealt with through public refutation but only through secret disinformation campaigns.

He urges efforts to crack down not only on independent media and “rogue” academics but on left-wing political activism. He identifies as a particular threat Corbyn, who was earlier harmed through a series of disinformation campaigns, including entirely evidence-free claims that the Labour Party during his tenure became a [hotbed of antisemitism](#). Mason fears Corbyn might set up a new, independent left-wing party. It is important, Mason notes, to “quarantine” and “stigmatize” any such ideology.

In short, rather than use journalism to win the argument and the battle for public opinion, Mason wishes to use the dark arts of the security state to damage independent media, as well as dissident academics and left-wing political activism. He wants no influences on the public that are not tightly aligned with the core foreign policy goals of the national security state.

Mason's correspondence hints at the reality behind Cadwalladr's claim that Assange was the "swirling vortex at the centre of everything." Assange symbolizes that "swirling vortex" to intelligence-aligned establishment journalists only because WikiLeaks has published plenty of insider information that exposes Western claims to global moral leadership as a complete charade - and the journalists who amplify those claims as utter charlatans.

In part two, we will examine why journalists like Mason and Cadwalladr prosper in the establishment media; the long history of collusion between Western intelligence agencies and the establishment media; and how that mutually beneficial collusion is becoming ever more important to each of them.

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