

Stefania Maurizi: “This is an Unbelievable Failure of Journalism.”

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Global Research, October 22, 2020
[Exberliner.com](#) 15 October 2020

Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)
Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)
In-depth Report: [CRIMINALIZE WAR](#)

*Italian journalist **Stefania Maurizi** has worked for some of the country's top publications including *la Repubblica*, *l'Espresso* and, now, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. In 2009, she started working with **Julian Assange** and WikiLeaks on secret files concerning the war in Afghanistan, the US diplomacy cables and Guantanamo detainees. She also investigated top-secret files leaked by whistleblower **Edward Snowden**, uncovering serious cases of environmental pollution in Italy and the exploitation of Pakistani workers in a factory operated by an Italian company, among others.*

Maurizi was a witness in last month's Assange extradition hearings. As a London judge ponders over whether to extradite the WikiLeaks founder to the US, we spoke to her about her experience making powerful enemies, what she describes as smear campaigns against WikiLeaks and those working with them – and why Assange should never have left Berlin.

How did you become involved with WikiLeaks?

Stefania Maurizi: In 2008, I was working for a leading Italian news magazine *l'Espresso*. I had already worked as an investigative journalist and when I looked at WikiLeaks publications like the Guantanamo Standard Operating Procedure document I was really impressed. The document had been requested by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Pentagon had refused access. WikiLeaks was able to obtain the document, not only that but they had told the Pentagon that they would not remove it from their website. For me this was really important, as it made me realise how much courage the people behind WikiLeaks had. This was around the time when the *New York Times* were publishing lies about the Iraq war. *The Washington Post* has published the CIA black sites story, but they had not published the names of the Eastern European countries where the sites were based, because the Bush administration had asked that it not be published, and the CIA was continuing to torture people in these black sites.

When I realised that there was a media organisation that was not willing to obey the Pentagon I knew I had to establish contact because I liked their work and their courage. I did, and in 2009 they called me in the middle of the night and said 'You have an hour. Go to your computer and download the document otherwise we will remove it.' They asked me to help them verify whether the document was genuine. They said if it was, I could do an investigation into it and work with WikiLeaks. I went to my computer and I saw that the document was about the rubbish crisis in Naples, I verified it was genuine and certainly in the public interest because of the alleged involvement of the Italian secret service. This was the first time I worked in partnership with WikiLeaks and I have done so ever since.



A demo in Berlin at the beginning of Assange's extradition trial. (Photo: Supplied/Exberliner.com)

What was the verification process like when you worked with WikiLeaks documents?

SM: First of all, you have to realise that it's a complete lie that WikiLeaks just dump stuff on the internet. I have worked on all of their documents apart from the few that they published without any media partners. In most cases WikiLeaks do their own verification process and the media partners do theirs in parallel. We exchange opinions and concern over the authenticity of a document and we have never got it wrong. Working for a media partner, most of the time you got something like 100,000 documents and maybe five million emails. You search these databases for tiny bits of information and do your own verification process using the classic journalistic techniques. For example when we got emails about Stratfor, we checked whether all the Stratfor employees were the right ones and whether the facts described in the emails were true. If you get these things wrong and your reputation is compromised, it's very hard to regain it. Reputation is your currency as a journalist.

Most of the time, the company where the documents have come from do not want to cooperate. In the case of the US diplomatic cables leak it wasn't difficult because we had a team with US colleagues who knew how cables are written and redacted. This work is only possible because we work together. For the Guantanamo files we worked together with *The Washington Post*, *Le Monde* and a knowledgeable expert on Guantanamo, Andy Worthington. I think WikiLeaks was good at putting together the right team of people with expertise to verify the documents. Verifying is the most serious problem, as you can imagine it's very easy to destroy the reputation of the organisation by sending it false documents.

One major accusation against WikiLeaks is that most leaked documents contained classified stuff that's kept secret for a reason. Do you believe all restricted information is fit to be shared with the public at large, without discrimination?

SM: You see, as journalists we get restricted documents all the time. Without using restricted information, there's no journalism. Of course we are rational people and we care about the consequences of what we publish. At the same time you have to realise that not all secrets are alike. For example, if you have the security measures for a nuclear power plant, there is a reason for keeping that information secret, namely that it could be used by terrorists. In other cases, you have information that is classified just because it is embarrassing, because someone is trying to cover up war crimes, torture or crimes against humanity – and we absolutely have the right to expose these secrets.

For you personally, what was the most meaningful leak from WikiLeaks?

SM: The Abu Omar case. Italy is the only country in the world which was able to sentence the CIA agents involved in the kidnapping of the Milan cleric. He was captured in the middle of the day in the centre of Milan. Our prosecutors were so good that they managed to identify 26 US nationals, most of them CIA agents. They put them under investigation and convicted all of them. The US put pressure on the Italian politicians and said, 'There is nothing more dangerous for our bi-lateral relationship.'

Because of this, six justice ministers refused the arrest warrant for the CIA agents. Two Italian presidents, including our current President, Mattarella, issued two presidential pardons for three CIA agents and the head of security at the US base in Aviano. This is where Abu Omar was brought immediately after he was kidnapped. These people were granted impunity and they never spent a single day in prison. In 2016 the European Court of Human Rights condemned Italy for granting impunity. All this was in the public sphere, however, thanks to the cables. I was able to provide evidence of pressure by US diplomats on Italian politicians. Without the cables we would never have had any proof that any of this was happening. There is no other way to access this information and it would have been impossible for the prosecutors to have evidence.

So you are saying that this is in the public interest because Italian people should know about the political corruption of their government.

SM: Yes, but this goes beyond corruption – it’s unlawful to grant impunity to people involved in kidnapping. There is no other way to get evidence about these extremely serious things. We need whistleblowers, but we also need organisations like WikiLeaks to publish information. You might have the best whistleblower, the most explosive, secret documents but if you don’t have the guts to make it public, it’s worthless. People say, ‘Well we like Chelsea Manning, she had the courage but WikiLeaks were just a passive recipient’. That’s completely false. If you’ve ever been a journalist you know what it means to publish something that someone very powerful wants to stop. You know what it means to be afraid for your life and your freedom. You have to have extremely courageous journalists and publishers who will say, ‘I will publish no matter what’. This is what impressed me from the very beginning. I have been a journalist for the last 19 years and I have never heard anyone say “no” to the Pentagon.

What do you think about whistleblowers like Snowden who, instead of using a platform like WikiLeaks, chose to trust two famous journalists and the traditional press instead?

SM: Of course it is up to the whistleblower to decide what they are comfortable with. I can tell you that if a whistleblower goes to WikiLeaks, they will certainly have their documents published. If you choose single journalists, you have to know them well and really trust them and know whether they will take the risk to publish dangerous information. In the case of WikiLeaks, they always deliver, they always publish. They have a long history of publishing risky documents. For the last 14 years, no matter what, they have had the courage to face the serious consequences. Julian Assange hasn’t known freedom since publishing the US secret documents.

I’m not saying Assange and WikiLeaks are perfect. Sometimes they made mistakes, but sometimes you make mistakes when you’re in uncharted territory. It is always challenging, especially when you want to publish original documents, a database of one million documents without revealing personal information. Of course if you don’t publish these documents, you don’t get things wrong. Ten years on, we are still accessing the cables and they are still relevant. On a daily basis I go to the WikiLeaks cables database. I look for a single politician, diplomat or NGO and see if there is any information about them. You don’t have to call Assange and ask for access to the database, you just go to the website and look.

How do you explain that mainstream media are not more supportive of

WikiLeaks?

SM: There has been a propaganda war against WikiLeaks since 2010. Of course, after this there is no sympathy and support. The US government began this at the very beginning. From the moment that the Pentagon said 'they might have blood on their hands' all the media were reporting the same thing. This propaganda worked in changing the public opinion. It's the same with Russia - bring me evidence that WikiLeaks was in bed with the Kremlin. We were never shown evidence. I have seen first-hand how this propaganda works. When working on the Podesta emails [the emails from [Podesta](#), a former [White House chief of staff](#) and chair of [Hillary Clinton's](#) 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, whose Gmail account was hacked by then unknown parties and later published by Wikileaks], I was the only media partner, because nobody wanted to touch the emails because of the media campaign saying that it came from Russian spies. It worked.

But it cannot be that journalists are that vulnerable to believing propaganda. It's the opposite of what you'd expect from a professional journalist.

SM: When you consider that not a single journalist has tried to get the documents for the Julian Assange and WikiLeaks case, it tells you a lot about the level of journalism. They reported on the case without ever asking for factual information or asking for the documents. They were reporting whatever the prosecutors and lawyers were telling them. I have tried to access these documents. After five years, it was so hard to understand the case, in particular the Swedish allegations of rape, because the reporting was so bad.

I told myself I couldn't deal with such chaos, I started filing my freedom of information request in Sweden, the UK, US and Australia. This case has been going on for 10 years and I have spent the last five years trying to get the documents using the FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] and litigating my FOIA in four jurisdictions: my lawyers and I are still fighting to get the documents, which shows you the unbearable secrecy around this case. I have seven lawyers, four jurisdictions. I'm telling you this to make you realise how superficial the reporting is even though hundreds of journalists were reporting on it. This is an unbelievable failure of journalism.

What do you say to people who would normally support whistleblowing and WikiLeaks, but won't support Assange because of the Swedish case, i.e. the rape accusations against him?

SM: The Swedish case was one of the important things used to destroy Julian Assange's reputation. Whenever you have an accusation of sexual assault or pedophilia, people immediately stand in solidarity with alleged victims. I don't think that the Swedish case was a plot, I don't believe in conspiracies. What I am saying is that this case was full of mysteries, for example why was this case kept open for so long without either charging him or dropping the case once and for all.

A high-profile Italian prosecutor asked me why the case had been going on since 2010 with no progress at all. I explained that the lack of progress was because Swedish prosecutors didn't want to travel to London to question Julian Assange and to decide whether to charge him or to drop the case once and for all. When I got access to the documents under FOIA, I discovered it was the UK authorities who had told the Swedish prosecutors not to travel to London to question him. They had also told them that the case was not being dealt with as another extradition request, and they had also discouraged the Swedish prosecutors to drop

their case in 2013, when they had considered to do it.

Why would the UK authorities be meddling in an alleged Swedish rape case?

SM: That's exactly the question I began to ask myself. What kind of special interests would the UK authority have in this case? I asked for more documents and I was told they had been destroyed, which is highly suspicious, because when they destroyed the documents, the case was still ongoing and highly controversial.

Five years later I'm still trying to get an answer about why that happened. This was done by the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service) the same agency in charge of extraditing Assange to the US. This makes me very suspicious. This Swedish case has had a huge impact on Assange's reputation in making him appear as a rapist who escaped justice. Now the investigation has been closed and cannot be reopened because of the statute of limitations.

So what do you think about the way the UK has reacted to this whole case?

SM: You have to realise that London and the UK have a special relationship with the US, not just historically, but also a strong partnership for sharing intelligence. The UK might even be more serious when it comes to intelligence than the US. It's not a coincidence that they produced the James Bond saga which lionises secret agents: they have a real culture and love for intelligence, secrecy, the secret services. Julian Assange should have never gone to the UK. On September 27 2010, he flew to Berlin to meet me and other journalists. After that meeting, he decided to fly to London to work on the Iraq War Logs and the U.S. diplomacy cables. I tend to believe that he would have never experienced such devastating lawfare, confinement, arrest and now the Belmarsh prison and the risk of extradition to the US, if he hadn't left Berlin to fly to London.

Do you see British judges as complicit with intelligence services or sharing the political agenda of the US?

SM: What I say is that the UN working group on arbitrary detention confirmed that the UK and Sweden had been detaining him arbitrarily since 2010. This is not my opinion, this is what the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention established. And the UK authorities did absolutely nothing about it. Neither the media, the prosecutors or the judicial did anything about it. When the UN special reporter on torture [Nils Melzer openly wrote to them](#) saying that Assange was subjected to psychological torture and they were abusing his rights, again nothing was done.

I know that they have a reputation for fair play and justice, but at the end of the day, if you look at this case closely, their reputation is suffering a lot as they are behaving like an outlaw country. They don't care about the UN working group decision or Nils Melzer's reports. They are keeping a publisher in a high-security prison like any other criminal. They have denied him even one hour outdoors at the embassy, a punishment only given to the worst criminals. If you look at this case, the rhetoric about British institutions respecting human rights and freedom of the press, you get a different narrative.

You were a fact witness at Julian Assange's trial last month. What do you make of the proceedings over those four weeks in October, and what do you expect to happen now?

SM: I think the most crucial aspect about the hearings is the fact that the US authorities

were misrepresenting facts: the prosecution kept claiming the US authorities are not prosecuting Julian Assange's journalism, but rather prosecuting a narrowly limited publication of unredacted documents which, according to them, put US sources and informants at risk. First of all, this is not true: every journalist worth their salt can check the superseding indictment and realise that the US authorities are definitely prosecuting him for purely journalistic activities, like receiving and obtaining classified documents like the cables, the Guantanamo Files and the Iraq Rules of Engagement.

They are also trying to jail him for life for the unauthorised disclosures of those classified documents. These are purely journalistic activities: if Julian Assange ends up in prison for this, every journalist will be at risk. It will be the end of journalism exposing war crimes, torture and serious human rights violations. Secondly, US authorities keeps putting forward the accusation that Assange would have put lives at risk.

From the very beginning, the Pentagon tried to argue that WikiLeaks might have blood on their hands, and since 2010 they've worked really hard trying to assess the potentially harmful impact of these publications. Ten years later, they are still unable to bring a single shred of evidence that anyone was killed or injured or put in prison as a result of the WikiLeaks' revelations. Even at the Chelsea Manning trial, the head of the task force established by the US authorities to analyse the publications didn't find a single 'victim'.

Image on the right: Lawyers for Assange



Meanwhile, we have plenty of evidence of war crimes thanks to the WikiLeaks publications. The fact that the war criminals have never been indicted and never spent a single day in prison, whereas Julian Assange has never known freedom again and now risks spending his life in prison, gives you a measure of how the US democracy lost its way. The Assange case is a wake-up call: US democracy is getting so dystopian that the war criminals enjoy impunity, whereas a journalist exposing war crimes gets life imprisonment. It's unprecedented.

But still, wouldn't it be a reasonable argument to say that Assange *could have* put people's lives at risk by not being careful enough and publishing unredacted cables.

SM: The reason the unredacted cables documents were published was because two journalists from *The Guardian* published the password in a book, making the information available for anyone to access, and someone else published the full archive. WikiLeaks never planned to publish unredacted cables. On the contrary, for almost a year there was a

careful procedure to redact the cables. If the plan had been to publish the documents unredacted, why would we have done this? This has been an ongoing campaign to depict WikiLeaks as irresponsible criminals putting lives at risk. It is part of the propaganda war against WikiLeaks.

Do you still believe the UK will give in to the US and extradite Julian Assange? It's illegal to extradite someone for political reasons, isn't it?

SM: Absolutely. But they don't care. We have seen how they have been dealing with this case. If people take refuge in an embassy usually you offer them safe passage. They never offered that. The UK authorities were ready to storm the embassy, while they left him there for seven years without medical treatment or outdoor access. At the end of the day they arrested him and took him to a maximum security prison and he isn't allowed to leave even if he risks getting infected with Covid-19. For these reasons, I cannot trust that they will play by the rules.

What do you think people who care about freedom of the press can do at this stage?

SM: I want people to get the facts right in this case, due to this propaganda war. This is what drives me. I'm getting no money, I'm struggling to get money for my freedom of information litigation and I can tell you that this kind of work doesn't gain you powerful friends. It's quite the opposite - you get powerful enemies. Nobody wants to have problems with the US. They are too powerful, their influence is felt all around the world. I am fighting because I want to live in a society where you can reveal war crimes without ending up in prison, as Chelsea Manning did.

I want to live in a world where you have the chance to reveal war crimes without the threat of losing your freedom as is happening to Julian Assange. Unless we build such societies, nobody will do it for us, we have to struggle for it to be like this. I can struggle in the only way I know, with journalism. I want to use my journalism to get the facts right about this case and to have people understand how wild it is that you expose war crimes and you lose your freedom.

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Featured image: Investigative journalist Stefania Maurizi told us about exposing secret information, working with WikiLeaks and the guts it takes to stand against powerful enemies. (Photo: Supplied/Exberliner.com)

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