

German media denounce Assange

By Peter Schwarz
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Reading the comments of the German media on the arrest of Julian Assange, one can only conclude that democracy and press freedom in Germany are in a dire state.

The founder of WikiLeaks was hauled from his refuge at the Ecuadorian embassy in London and is in danger of being extradited to the US for exposing the crimes of the American military in Afghanistan and Iraq, the conditions in the Guantanamo detention centre, the illegal cooperation of Germany's foreign intelligence agency with the American NSA, and many other state crimes.

The illegal termination of Assange's asylum and his arrest mark a political turning point. The aim is to silence Assange forever and intimidate truthful journalists. Anyone who exposes war crimes, corruption or the illegal machinations of the intelligence services must expect persecution and heavy penalties in the future.

Despite this, there is not a hint of protest in the German media and hardly a critical word. Reactions range from unconcealed rejoicing to cynical indifference and calculated neutrality. The hacks in the editorial offices obviously lack the backbone to oppose arbitrary state attacks.

Worst of all is the tabloid *Bild*, the smear sheet of the Springer publishing empire, whose main shareholder, Friede Springer, is close friends with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

"His arrest is legal and right," *Bild* writes, displaying a notion of freedom and democracy that would appeal to any dictator. "Publishing stolen, secret, highly sensitive data was not a service to freedom, but a knife in its back," it declares in an editorial, adding, "Assange's war against state structures has become a fight against Western freedom."

Bild and many other newspapers are particularly angry with Assange for publishing internal documents

about Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate in the 2016 US presidential election. The completely unsubstantiated assertion that WikiLeaks acted at Moscow's behest is repeated as insistently as the claim that Assange was responsible for Donald Trump's election victory.

Bild states that the publication of the Clinton emails was "perfectly orchestrated" to "inflict the maximum damage on her and American democracy." It continues, "The goal was not (only) the election victory of Donald Trump, but the erosion of American institutions."

The pro-Green Party *taz* writes that Assange has lost much sympathy among the left-liberal public in recent years because of "his more or less clear election assistance to Donald Trump."

This reveals a very strange understanding of journalism, to say the least. No one disputes that the documents revealing Clinton's close ties to Wall Street and the efforts of the Democratic National Committee to sabotage Bernie Sanders' election campaign were authentic. But according to Assange's critics, the public has no right to know the truth if it stands in the way of their own political agenda. In fact, Trump did not win the election because of WikiLeaks' revelations, but because former Secretary of State Clinton was deeply hated among workers for her war crimes and her close ties to Wall Street, the military and the secret services.

The online edition of the *Rheinische Post* also rejoiced over the arrest of Assange. One could only "welcome the decision of the Ecuadorean government to lift [his] asylum," it commented. "Julian Assange now has to accept the consequences for his actions. That can only be right."

A particularly hateful article was published in the online edition of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* by Jannis Brühl, a former Arthur F. Burns scholarship holder with close links to US media. He is outraged that

Assange “could also rock the world from his emergency shelter in London,” could receive visitors, and had “at least temporary access” to the “WikiLeaks Twitter account with 5.4 million followers.”

It is not enough that Assange was forced to spend seven years in intolerable circumstances in the Ecuadorean embassy because of the very real danger of being handed over to the US, most recently without any access to outside communications or the Internet. If it were down to Brühl, he would have been held in solitary confinement.

The next day, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had to admit that the now published indictment of the US Justice Department threatened the freedom of the press. This was “a shockingly criminalizing description of absolutely appropriate journalistic procedures,” the paper wrote. Among other things, Assange was being accused of protecting his source, of consulting with informants via an encrypted chat service, and of encouraging them to “hand over information and documents from US government agencies.” If this was not allowed, “any kind of critical research journalism would be impossible.”

The Berlin daily *Tagesspiegel* denounced Assange as a “star with guru status,” whose “pilgrims will now be upset.” He was “weird, grotesque, confused, extravagant, immature, irresponsible.”

A few decades ago, bourgeois journalists still exhibited a certain sense of democratic values. In 1962, *Spiegel* editor Rudolf Augstein went to jail for unveiling plans for rearming the Bundeswehr (German armed forces). Whistleblowers like Daniel Ellsberg, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who exposed the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate scandal, received support and were honoured.

Today, the idea that the media can be more than a faithful mouthpiece of the authorities hardly exists. The main reason for this is the return of the class struggle. As social tensions mount and opposition to official politics grows, governments, establishment parties and the media move closer together and turn ever further to the right.

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