The media’s role in persecuting Julian Assange

By Andre Damon
17 April 2019

Last week’s arrest of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange has been met with universal approval from the US print and broadcast media.

The New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal, the three major US newspapers, have all enthusiastically endorsed Assange’s arrest and extradition to the United States, for charges related to his publication of documents implicating the US government in war crimes and the mass murder of innocent people.

These newspapers’ enthusiastic approval for the effective rendition of a journalist, with the threat of torture, indefinite imprisonment and possible execution, sums up their attitude to the freedoms of speech and the press embodied in the First Amendment: they oppose it.

They are not an independent media, but propaganda mills like those that exist in any dictatorship.

Jeff Bezos’ Washington Post was the least guarded, declaring Assange is “long overdue for personal accountability,” and reveling at his potential “conversion into a cooperating witness.” In reference to a country like the United States, which does not recognize basic international human rights agreements, extracting “cooperation” from a witness is a euphemism for torture.

But such cold, calculated editorials constitute, if this is possible, the less degraded portion of the media response to Assange’s imprisonment, which has been treated by print newspapers, the broadcast news, and, perhaps worst of all, the late night talk shows, as the occasion to heap crude insults upon a persecuted journalist who cannot defend himself.

In the “news” section of the newspapers, the line between reporting, opinion, gossip, slander and libel was totally obliterated.

“Even Mr. Assange’s friends have described him as … a narcissist with an outsize view of his importance and little interest in mundane matters like personal hygiene,” wrote veteran New York Times Pentagon stenographers Scott Shane and Steven Erlanger in a front page news article, without bothering to explain who these “friends” are, or why they describe Assange in the same language as Mike Pompeo.

To the sound of canned laughter, “Daily Show” host Trevor Noah proclaimed that Assange has “finally been arrested” for letting his cat “shit all over the embassy.” Tonight Show Host Jimmy Fallon joked that Assange, whose solitary confinement has broken his health, resembled “Dumbledore,” an aged character from J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series.

The list goes on. Seth Meyers, host of NBC’s “Late Night,” laughed that Assange was “dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy looking like Santa Claus with a manifesto.” Saturday Night Live parodied Assange’s imprisonment, with a bearded Michael Keaton, as Assange, declaring himself to be the “terror of the embassy cleaning staff.”

This disgusting and shameful gloating resembles nothing so much as a pillory or lynching, where the dregs of society are invited to hurl insults and garbage at a powerless victim. But unlike in Dickens’ London, these social dregs find themselves not at the bottom, but at the top of society: they are multi-millionaires staffing the media, the entertainment industry, and the big business parties.

Of course, there is a political reason and logic to this outpouring of vitriol. The aim is to manufacture public opinion: to make the heroic journalist an un-person, stripped of all rights—an outcast—in order to justify the US state’s persecution.

But this political necessity cannot explain the
degrading depths to which the media has gone to
dehumanize Assange, repeating, in banner headlines,
scurrilous rumors about his personal behavior as if it
were undisputed truth. The people who write such
things are not merely doing the dirty work of the ruling
class for pay. They hate Assange, because they see in
him a challenge to the natural order of things, in which
the media publish what the government says, and the
people believe what the media publishes.

This sentiment was best summed up by the satirical
news site The Onion in a quote it attributed to the
Washington Post, “We denounce Julian Assange in the
strongest possible terms for his negligence in publicly
demonstrating the kinds of work journalists could
actually be doing to investigate government
malfeasance and hold the powerful accountable.”

But the hatred goes deeper. Anyone who carefully
reads the opinion sections of the major newspapers,
cannot but come away with the conclusion that they
intentionally hire not just people with exceptionally
right-wing views, who are open to suggestion from the
powers that be, but people, to put it bluntly, who are
emotionally unstable.

It is the combination of all of these attributes that
produces an article like that published by Kathleen
Parker of the Washington Post, entitled “Julian
Assange isn’t a journalist or a Daniel Ellsberg. He’s
just a ‘cypherpunk.’”

Ms. Parker, a regular panelist on NBC’s “Meet the
smelled like an overladen fishing vessel adrift in the
searing sun.”

The WikiLeaks founder is a “solid jerk,” with “no
conscience.” While Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the
Pentagon Papers, insists that there is not a sliver of
daylight between his activities and those of Assange,
Parker insists that Ellsberg’s actions were “a historic
act of bravery,” while those of Assange are “more like
feces-smearing by a fishy-smelling ‘cypherpunk.’”

When the political wind changes, Assange’s name
will carry the same connotations as other political
prisoners and martyrs for civil rights, from Galileo to
Martin Luther King.

Those that insulted him and aided the state in his
persecution will try to eat their words. But history will
remember their actions, which will blacken their names
forever.

The persecution of Assange has elicited another
response from the population more broadly, whose
confidence in the official media has plummeted since
the start of the “war on terror” whose crimes Assange
helped expose.

One compendium by the Washington Post of the
responses to the late-night talk-shows to Assange’s
arrest had an 80 percent disapproval rating, with the
comments full of sympathy for Assange and hatred of
the court jesters laughing at his expense.

“Exposing and publishing the crimes the elites,
governments and politicians commit and paying for it
with your freedom is a laughing matter in American
mainstream media,” wrote one commenter, adding,
“Disgusting.” Another commented, “Almost as if
they’re laughing at us.”

As the working class enters into a global wave of
strikes and struggles, the political winds will change,
and soon. Those who helped persecute a defenseless
journalist will have to answer for their actions.

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