

The ABC documentary “Hero or Villain”: Undermining the defence of Julian Assange

By James Cogan
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A two-part documentary on Julian Assange by the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) “Four Corners” program, which went to air last month, has been rightly condemned by prominent figures in the campaign to defend the persecuted WikiLeaks publisher.

The program was broadcast under conditions in which Assange, an Australian citizen, is imprisoned in Britain and faces trial next February to sanction his extradition to the United States on espionage charges, and the Trump administration has indefinitely re-imprisoned Chelsea Manning, the courageous whistleblower, for refusing to testify against Assange.

The production was an attempt by the ABC to undermine the fight for an independent political movement demanding their immediate freedom.

Filmmaker and journalist John Pilger, a well-known public advocate for Assange, condemned the “Four Corners” documentary as a “smear posing as journalism,” whose “gratuitous abuse, omissions and servitude to the lies of power make a textbook model of modern propaganda.”

Jennifer Robinson, a member of Assange’s legal team since 2010, agreed to be interviewed in the documentary. In an interview after its first part had been broadcast, she told ABC Radio National: “That was supposed to be a program about Julian Assange’s prosecution. Instead, it turned into a prosecution of his personality.”

As the comments of Robinson and Pilger indicate, the preoccupation of “Four Corners” was not with the significance of the journalistic exposures published by WikiLeaks, or the democratic rights at stake in the nine-year US-led vendetta against Assange. Rather, the bulk of the program consisted of giving a platform to representatives of organisations that have vilified, slandered and marginalised him.

These included Alan Rusbridger, the former editor of the *Guardian*; Scott Shane, national security correspondent for the *New York Times*; Neera Tanden, a Democratic Party advisor to former US Secretary of State and 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton; and Clinton herself. It also featured embittered former WikiLeaks employee Daniel Domscheit-Berg, with whom WikiLeaks severed relations in September 2010 and who has since made a media career denouncing his former colleagues.

The statements of such people were used by “Four Corners” to substantiate the subtext of the entire program: that Julian Assange should be viewed around the world as dubious at best, and criminal at worst, and undeserving of even sympathy, let alone active political support. This position was conveyed in the title of the documentary, “Hero or Villain.”

Assange was accused of being an “information anarchist”

(Rusbridger), lacking a “moral compass” (Shane), “a bit megalomaniac... a bit narcissistic” (Rusbridger), “getting into bed with the Russian government” (Shane), “a tool of Russian intelligence” (Clinton) and “a central reason of why Trump got elected” (Tanden).

“Four Corners” and its executive producer Sally Neighbour used its own reporter, Michael Brissenden, to throw into the mix the pathetic smears that Assange displayed “odd behaviour” and had “questionable hygiene standards.”

The claims that Assange does not deserve to be defended, on the basis of one or another false or exaggerated claim, has been the justification for a range of political and media organisations to line up with the US state and remain silent as freedom of speech—and the very existence of independent and critical journalism—comes under an historic assault.

In that context, it is significant that the ABC did not feel it could give any credence to the allegations made in Sweden in 2010 that Assange was under suspicion of committing sexual assault. As “Four Corners” was obliged to note, Assange was never charged with any offence. The Swedish prosecutors abandoned the case more than two years ago.

By that time, however, the character assassination had served its sinister purpose. A whole layer of fake “lefts” used the false allegations to abandon any defence of Assange. He was forced to seek political asylum in Ecuador’s tiny London embassy in June 2012 to avoid extradition to Sweden and rendition to the US. Assange is currently imprisoned in Britain solely for reneging on the bail conditions imposed by British courts as he was fighting the Swedish charade.

The comments that “Four Corners” incorporated into the program from Jennifer Robinson, current WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson and Chelsea Manning’s lawyer Nancy Hollander were generally counterposed to other slanders against Assange however.

These included:

- An insinuation by Domscheit-Berg that Assange used Manning and put her in danger by obtaining leaked information from her when she was a US Army private serving in Iraq.

Hollander and Hrafnsson stressed that Manning was not encouraged or pressured by anyone, and had already downloaded all her files before contacting WikiLeaks. She is currently being imprisoned indefinitely on the orders of an US judge because she has refused to alter her stance and give false testimony against Assange.

- That Assange was indifferent to “harm” caused by publishing the leaks and had “blood” on his hands.

Hrafnsson noted that no such evidence has ever been produced. Moreover, the Manning leaks exposed rampant war crimes, including

the mass killing of civilians by the US military and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq. The question that was not asked by “Four Corners”—of Clinton, other figures who served in the US government or the establishment media representatives—is why no American and allied political or military leader has been charged and tried.

The complicity of the corporate media in the protection of war criminals was underscored when Shane recounted the response of the *New York Times* to the incriminating US cables obtained by WikiLeaks. “I think I started by calling the White House and telling them, ‘By the way, we have a quarter million diplomatic cables,’ and they were somewhat perturbed,” Shane said. Together with his Washington bureau chief and another editor, Shane went straight to the White House to meet with a “rogue’s gallery” of senior State Department, Defence Department and intelligence officials to discuss how to censor the publication of the material.

- That WikiLeaks should not have published Democratic Party emails during the 2016 presidential election because they were allegedly hacked by Russian intelligence with the intention of damaging Clinton and securing the victory of Donald Trump. Neera Tanden asserted: “WikiLeaks was a central reason of why Trump was elected.”

Tanden’s and similar claims are crass propaganda.

Firstly, as Robinson and Hrafsson indicated, Assange has fiercely protected WikiLeaks’ independence and publicly denied that the source of the leaks was Russian intelligence.

Moreover, the emails leaked from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and from Clinton campaign director John Podesta were inherently newsworthy, regardless of their source, and their publication was clearly in the public interest.

The DNC emails showed that its apparatus had worked to rig the party primaries against Clinton’s rival, self-styled socialist Bernie Sanders, who had attracted broad support by denouncing social inequality and calling for a “political revolution” against the “billionaire class.” The Podesta emails contained private speeches given by Clinton to corporate audiences, boasting of her role in instigating the US-led war on Libya—which cost some 40,000 lives and plunged the country into chaos—and her willingness to satisfy the financial elite’s demands.

The DNC leaks alerted voters to what was going on behind the scenes and forced the resignation of top officials. It was only Sanders’ refusal at the party convention in July to demand that Clinton step down that enabled her to win the presidential nomination unchallenged. The Podesta emails shed further light on the reactionary, militarist and pro-big business character of Clinton’s campaign.

Responsibility for the fact that millions of people refused to vote for Clinton rests entirely with her policies and history. Trump scraped into the presidency due to the pro-corporate record of the Obama administration, the low turnout and the peculiarities of the American electoral college system.

For his part, Assange left no doubt about his attitude towards both Clinton and Trump. He declared the choice between the two right-wing representatives of America’s corporate oligarchy was like having to choose between “syphilis and gonorrhoea.” “Four Corners” did not cite this statement, nor any other in which Assange made clear his opposition to the politics of Trump.

The documentary is in line with the indifference or outright hostility that the ABC has displayed toward Assange for a protracted period of time. In 2012, “Four Corners” did produce a well-researched

investigation helped expose the lies and conspiracies behind allegations that Assange had committed sexual offences.

However, after Assange sought political asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy, the ABC fell in with the official Australian line of the then Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard, that he should “face justice.” Since 2016, the ABC has promoted the fraudulent, pro-Clinton narrative that WikiLeaks served Russia and Trump.

No representative of the Labor Party or the current Coalition government was interviewed by “Four Corners” as to why they had refused to defend a persecuted Australian citizen.

There is little doubt that a major impetus for the production of “Hero or Villain” is the broadening campaign internationally fighting for Assange’s freedom. Those who have propagated the lies about Assange are nervous, and outraged, that their complicity is being both opposed and exposed.

In Australia, the Socialist Equality Party has organised a series of public demonstrations demanding immediate Australian government intervention to secure his unconditional right to return to his home country with a guarantee against extradition to the US and indicting the political, trade union and media establishment for their abandonment of an Australian publisher and journalist. The ABC has censored any coverage of these rallies, and most of the actions taken by other organisations and individuals to defend Assange.

The ABC’s blackout of the support for Assange testifies to its ongoing complicity in the effort to railroad the WikiLeaks founder into a prison cell for life, or worse. A recent example was the refusal of the ABC and media internationally to make more than a cursory mention of the damning report issued in May by UN special rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer, and his letters to the governments of the US, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Ecuador, condemning their “collective persecution” of Assange.

By lining up behind the vendetta against Julian Assange, the ABC has helped establish a political climate in which any media that publishes leaked state secrets can be suppressed.

On June 5, while “Hero or Villain” was still in production, Australian federal police raided the Sydney offices of the ABC, seeking evidence over its publication of leaks that exposed Australian war crimes in Afghanistan. “Four Corners” made no reference to this raid, even though charges may be laid against ABC journalists.

As the stakes rise in the fight for democratic rights, the character of the “Four Corners” documentary serves to underscore that the defence of Assange, Manning and all other persecuted journalists and activists must be developed in conscious opposition to, and independent from, all sections of the official establishment, including its media outlets.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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