

New York Times publisher warns of a “worldwide assault on journalists” but is silent on Julian Assange

By Oscar Grenfell
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In an opinion piece on Monday, A.G. Sulzberger, the publisher of the *New York Times*, warned of a “worldwide assault on journalists” that he said was being “being passively accepted and perhaps even tacitly encouraged by the president of the United States.”

In the article, which was delivered as a speech at Brown University earlier in the day, Sulzberger cited the growing number of journalists around the world who face persecution, imprisonment and even murder as a result of their work.

The publisher noted that Trump’s denunciations of the press as “the enemies of the people” harkened back to the violent rhetoric of the Nazis. He warned against moves to prosecute journalists for exposing government wrongdoing, within the US and internationally, and concluded with a declaration that the “time has come for us to fight” for “free expression and to champion the rights of the free press.”

In his extended clarion call for “press freedom,” however, and his lengthy condemnations of Trump, Sulzberger did not so much as mention the only journalist and publisher currently facing criminal prosecution at the hands of the US government: WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

The omission was all the more striking, given that Sulzberger’s speech was delivered the day after Assange’s custodial sentence on bogus British bail charges ended. A British judge has decreed that Assange must remain jailed indefinitely in a maximum-security prison ahead of and during proceedings for his extradition from Britain to the US, which begin on February 25, 2020.

In other words, the various pseudo-legal pretexts for Assange’s arbitrary detention have fallen away. He is now being explicitly held as a political prisoner, at the

behest of the Trump administration.

The sole reason for Assange’s ongoing jailing is the attempt by the US government to prosecute him on 18 charges, including 17 of espionage and carrying a maximum-sentence of 175 years’ imprisonment, over WikiLeaks’ publication of material in 2010 that exposed American war crimes and global diplomatic intrigues.

Sulzberger and the *New York Times* are well aware of the far-reaching implications of the attempt to prosecute Assange for standard journalistic and publishing activities.

As WikiLeaks noted in response to the speech, when the US charges were unveiled in May, the *New York Times* editorial board had warned that they “could have a chilling effect on American journalism as it has been practiced for generations,” and were “aimed straight at the heart of the First Amendment.”

Sulzberger’s silence, then, can only be described as a conscious political policy, aimed at suppressing any discussion of Assange’s plight. It goes hand in hand with the *New York Times*’ integration with the state and military apparatus and its alignment with the Democratic Party, which has spearheaded the US pursuit of Assange for years.

The refusal to even mention Assange gave the lie to the entire pretense that Sulzberger and the *New York Times* hold any genuine concerns about “press freedom.”

Their real worries were hinted at by Sulzberger himself. Much of his speech consisted of a series of self-absorbed complaints about the commercial and political difficulties that Trump’s right-wing populist rhetoric and actions had caused for the *New York Times* itself.

Amid warnings that a *New York Times* correspondent may have faced arrest by the US-backed military regime in Egypt, they could not count on the intervention of the

Trump administration to defend him. As it transpired, the reporter left the country in the company of Irish diplomats, without incident.

Other *Times* journalists had felt intimidated when the Cambodian prime minister denounced them at a rally. Trump's condemnations of "fake news" were fuelling growing public skepticism about the truthfulness of corporate news, and the popularity of social media was challenging their business model.

The prospect of Assange facing life imprisonment for publishing the truth did not rate a mention compared with these weighty concerns.

That is because Sulzberger's underlying complaint, which ran like a thread through the speech, was that Trump, in his turn to openly authoritarian forms of rule, had disrupted the cosy relationship that has existed for decades between the *New York Times* and the American government.

To advance this line, Sulzberger was compelled to present a delusional narrative of the US, under virtually every president before Trump, as a bastion of "press freedom" and enlightenment ideals. This included the right-wing militarist Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama, who prosecuted more whistleblowers than all of his predecessors combined and initiated the unprecedented pursuit of Assange.

Sulzberger's depiction of the *New York Times* as a fearless champion of investigative reportage was no less fraudulent.

One only needs to recall that the publication trumpeted the lies of the intelligence agencies about weapons of mass destruction to justify the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, which resulted in up to a million civilian deaths. Or former editor Bill Keller's infamous defence of the paper's suppression of "state secrets" at the behest of government authorities. "Freedom of the press includes freedom not to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity," Keller shamelessly declared.

The *New York Times*' collaboration with the state has gone hand-in-hand with its central role in smearing Assange and legitimising his persecution.

The publication joined with WikiLeaks in 2010 to publish the Afghan war logs, exposing US war crimes, and diplomatic cables revealing US intrigues around the world.

Under Keller, the *Times* consulted the Obama administration over which documents it would publish and which it would withhold. At the same time, the publication claimed, and continues to assert that its

relationship with Assange was that of a "source," not a "co-publisher," in a shabby effort to protect itself from prosecution for some of the same charges the WikiLeaks founder currently faces.

The *Times*, along with the *Guardian*, rapidly turned on Assange.

Over the years, they have relentlessly promoted the attempt to frame him on manufactured allegations of sexual misconduct in Sweden, obscuring the fact that Assange was never charged with a crime in that country, that a "preliminary investigation" was dropped twice, and that the entire exercise was aimed at blackening Assange's name and providing an alternate route for his dispatch to the US.

More recently, the *Times* has been at the forefront of a campaign by the intelligence agencies and the Democratic Party to smear Assange as a "Russian agent" responsible for the election of Donald Trump.

This slander, which is not based on any evidence, stems solely from WikiLeaks' 2016 publication of true and newsworthy emails demonstrating that the Democratic National Committee had sought to rig the Democratic Party's presidential primaries against Bernie Sanders and in favour of Hillary Clinton. WikiLeaks also revealed Clinton's secret speeches to Wall Street banks, at which she pledged to do their bidding.

Even in its May editorial board statement, ostensibly condemning the Trump administration's indictment of Assange, the *Times* could not resist declaring: "There is much to be troubled by in Mr. Assange's methods and motives, which remain murky."

There will be no defence of democratic rights from this quarter. In their participation in the persecution of Assange, the *New York Times* and other corporate publications have shown themselves to be the handmaidens of authoritarianism and government attempts to abolish genuine press freedom.

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