

US indictment of Assange based on testimony of FBI assets, convicted child molester

By Oscar Grenfell
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The Department of Justice today issued a superseding indictment against Julian Assange in the latest salvo of a decade-long campaign by the US government and its intelligence agencies to destroy the WikiLeaks founder and besmirch his reputation.

The new indictment does not contain any charges additional to those filed in May 2019. The 17 Espionage Act counts over WikiLeaks' publication of documents leaked by Chelsea Manning exposing historic war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and illegal global diplomatic intrigues remain. These represent the greatest attack on press freedom and the First Amendment of the US Constitution in decades, directly targeting the right of all journalists to publish "national security" material.

The indictment also contains one charge of conspiracy to commit computer intrusion. It was the first US count unveiled against Assange after he was dragged by British police from Ecuador's London embassy in April 2019.

The additional material added to the introductory section of the new indictment is a desperate attempt to bolster that count, and the broader narrative that Assange is a "hacker," not a publisher or journalist.

Its inclusion follows the public discrediting of the computer intrusion allegation, including in the first week of Assange's British extradition hearings last February. According to the indictment, in March 2010, Manning asked Assange for assistance with cracking a hash value, or a password, that would have enabled her to log into the US army computer network anonymously.

It is now almost universally acknowledged that the hash value was never hacked. Manning, moreover, had by that point already gathered the material that she would provide to WikiLeaks. The purpose of her request, apparently made half in jest, was to browse the internet and download music anonymously.

The new indictment further exposes the attempt to extradite Assange to the US as a dirty-tricks political operation, rather than any sort of legal proceeding. It paints a picture of US government operatives pouring through decade-old tabloid gossip and dredging up the most unsavoury creatures of their own intelligence agencies to fling mud at Assange. It is an attempt to salvage their claim that he is a "hacker," more than a year after they first publicly-unveiled charges against him.

Almost all of the new material has been on the public record in one form or other, for six years or longer.

Points four through six, for instance, reference Assange's

speeches to public conventions of computer experts in the Netherlands and Malaysia, in 2009 and 2010. The indictment claims that he encouraged those present to use their computing abilities to access classified material. To assert that such a statement, made in public, constitutes evidence of a "conspiracy," is laughable.

However, the accusation continues the strand that runs throughout the indictment of seeking to criminalise standard journalistic practices, including encouraging sources and potential sources to provide a media organisation with newsworthy information in the public interest.

Sections F and G similarly allege that Assange and WikiLeaks associates encouraged administrators and others with access to computer systems to expose illegal activities by the intelligence agencies and corporate malfeasance. They are, again, based on statements at public gatherings spanning from 2013 to 2016, some of which have been viewable on the internet ever since.

Significantly, none of the events was held in the United States, but are cited as evidence of intent, or conspiracy, to violate American laws. This is in line with the unprecedented assertion of extraterritorial jurisdiction on which the entire indictment is based. The Justice Department is essentially arguing that domestic US laws apply to all individuals and gatherings in every part of the world.

Unlike the previous indictment, the latest US charge sheet condemns Assange over WikiLeaks' role in assisting Edward Snowden to travel from Hong Kong to Russia in 2013, where he successfully obtained political asylum. Snowden is a multi-award winning whistleblower, who exposed illegal global surveillance operations by the US National Security Agency.

The document complains that WikiLeaks publicised its role in defending Snowden to display its commitment to whistleblower protection. This alone brands the new indictment as a further assault on fundamental journalistic practices.

A substantial part of the new material in the indictment appears to be based on testimony and information provided by two acknowledged informants of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI): Sigurdur "Siggi" Thordarson, named in the document as "Teenager," and Hector Monsecur, known by the online pseudonym "Sabu."

In June 2019, WikiLeaks issued a statement reporting that the US government could be preparing a new indictment against Assange, based on testimony from Thordarson. The Icelandic man

had made it known on social media that he was being ferried to the US for discussions with American government agencies. In subsequent press interviews, he revealed that Monsegur was also involved. WikiLeaks' warning has now come to pass.

The indictment alleges that in early 2010, "Teenager" provided Assange with information stolen from a bank. It claims that the WikiLeaks founder "asked Teenager to commit computer intrusion and steal additional information, including audio recordings of phone conversations between officials in NATO Country-1, including members of parliament..."

The country being referenced is Iceland. The allegation that WikiLeaks attempted to surreptitiously record parliamentary conversations there has been in circulation for years. The story was only publicly promulgated after Thordarson began secretly working with the FBI. Its transparent purpose was to jeopardise WikiLeaks' activities in a relatively liberal country where it enjoyed high levels of popular support.

Assange, moreover, has never been accused, let alone charged with a crime by any Icelandic agency. Senior government officials, however, including then Interior Minister Ögmundur Jonasson, have stated that FBI dirty-tricks operations were afoot against WikiLeaks.

Jonasson has testified that in June 2011, he blocked a plane load of FBI agents who had been sent to seek "our cooperation in what I understood as an operation to set up, to frame Julian Assange and WikiLeaks." The frame had been accompanied by warnings of a plot to hack Icelandic government infrastructure.

The related new strand of the indictment asserts ties between WikiLeaks and computer hackers. The first set of alleged contacts, from December 2010 until the end of 2011, all involved "Teenager," i.e., Thordarson, who claims to have been acting under the direction of Assange.

The most significant of those, beginning in June 2011, was with Lulzsec, a loose affiliation of US hackers. The supposed contact between WikiLeaks and the group was again brokered by Thordarson. The indictment alleges that Assange encouraged Lulzsec to hack into private security companies, including Intelligence Consulting Company, and provided them with scripts to search material gathered. It does not claim that Assange was involved in the computer intrusion.

That WikiLeaks published material obtained by Lulzsec has been known for years. In 2012, one of the hackers Jeremy Hammond was arrested and convicted for hacking into Stratfor, a private company dubbed a shadow CIA. WikiLeaks released emails from the firm showing that it had spied on activists and revealing its close relations to US government agencies.

The threadbare character of the allegations, however, is overshadowed by the fact that when Thordarson first made contact with Lulzsec, it was already effectively controlled by the FBI. Monsegur ("Sabu"), its leader, had been arrested on June 7, 2011, and had immediately agreed to collaborate with the US government.

A Justice Department press release accompanying the indictment coyly states: "In 2012, Assange communicated directly with a leader of the hacking group LulzSec (who by then was cooperating with the FBI)..." This is a gross understatement. By that stage,

Monsegur had been frantically burning associates for over six months, to avoid decades in prison, and had agreed to transform Lulzsec into a US government entrapment service.

It is not yet known whether Thordarson ("Teenager") was already cooperating with the FBI when he made contact with Lulzsec. If he was, the conversations were between two FBI assets seeking to frame Assange.

Thordarson had insinuated himself into WikiLeaks as a 17-year-old volunteer in early 2010. In August 2011, Thordarson claims that he contacted the US embassy in Reykjavik, offering to assist in the "ongoing criminal investigation in the United States" against Assange.

By his own admission, Thordarson met with FBI agents multiple times in Reykjavik between 2011 and 2012. During that period, US authorities flew him to Denmark three times and to the US on one occasion, for secret meetings about WikiLeaks. He handed over WikiLeaks hard-drives and received thousands of dollars.

Some WikiLeaks collaborators who encountered him have stated that Thordarson's behaviour was strange from the beginning, raising the possibility that he was sent into WikiLeaks as a plant.

Either way, Thordarson is an individual who could never be deemed a credible witness. WikiLeaks has alleged that he stole at least \$50,000 from the organisation.

In 2014, he pled guilty in an Icelandic court to 18 counts of fraud, embezzlement and theft, some of them relating to his missappropriations from WikiLeaks. The combined offenses carried a dollar value estimated at \$US240,000. Thordarson was also convicted of impersonating Assange.

The following year he pled guilty to a raft of sexual offences, after admitting that he had coerced underage boys into performing sexual acts on him. A court-appointed psychologist found that he was a sociopath suffering from a "severe anti-social personality disorder."

In Thordarson, a convicted paedophile and conman, and Monsegur, a former petty criminal turned stool pigeon, the US government has found the fitting representatives of its campaign against Assange. The reliance on testimony from both men demonstrates that the US extradition request should be dismissed as a criminal operation, involving individuals who themselves should be in prison.

The British courts and government, however, have made clear their support for the US-led vendetta against Assange, underscoring that it is up to the working class to take forward the fight for his freedom.

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