

Corporate publications hostile to exposure of CIA spying on Assange and their own reporters

By Oscar Grenfell
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The response of the corporate media over the eleven months since *El Pais* first revealed details of a vast spying operation against WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, while he was a United Nations-recognised political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy, has been decidedly muted.

The initial *El Pais* article in October last year has been followed by a raft of damning information. This has established that the surveillance, conducted by the UC Global security company in charge of managing security at the embassy, included the illegal interception of Assange's conversations with his lawyers, in a flagrant breach of attorney-client privilege, menacing probes into his partner and infant child, and discussions about the possibility of kidnapping or even poisoning the WikiLeaks founder.

The mechanisms of the surveillance, which likely involved the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), have also become clearer. UC Global chief David Morales, it is alleged, entered into a secret agreement with emissaries of US intelligence to surveil Assange in 2015, and pass on all of the material gathered, in an operation that extended until March, 2018.

The statements of former UC Global employees, and documentary evidence, have indicated that the security company of Las Vegas casino mogul and leading Trump donor Sheldon Adelson served as the middle-man between Morales and US intelligence. The former Spanish navy marine turned mercenary was raided and arrested by Spanish police late last year, and faces the prospect of substantial criminal charges.

In other words, the apparent lack of media interest is not for want of information, or because the unprecedented surveillance of the world's most famous persecuted journalist is not newsworthy. Rather, it is a continuation of the alignment of the corporate media with the US-led vendetta against Assange, bound up with their close ties to the intelligence agencies and the official political parties that have spearheaded his persecution, as well as their broader support for an agenda of militarism and authoritarianism.

This was given striking confirmation in an article published by investigative journalist Max Blumenthal on the *Grayzone* website last Friday. Blumenthal's detailed report was based on

the statements of an anonymous WikiLeaks source, along with extensive comments from Stefania Maurizi, an Italian journalist who has partnered with the media organisation for the past decade. Hitherto unpublished communications from Morales were also featured, further establishing his and UC Global's secret collaboration with US authorities.

Blumenthal noted the fact, already well-established, that the UC Global spying eventually came to encompass all of Assange's visitors. Among those targeted were *Washington Post* national security reporter Ellen Nakashima, who visited the embassy in December, 2017 to interview Assange, and Lowell Bergman, who has worked for the *New York Times* and PBS.

Nakashima was subjected to the "standard" UC Global protocol for Assange's visitors. She was compelled to leave her possessions at the front desk, and they were then rifled through and photographed by its staff. This included taking details of her phone, which would enable it to be hacked, and an unsuccessful attempt by a UC Global employee to steal her voice recorder.

What was new in Blumenthal's article, but not surprising, is that the *Washington Post* and other leading publications have rebuffed requests that they publish information of the espionage, which clearly constituted an attack on press freedom and their own reporters, and have refused to join a legal action that Maurizi is seeking to launch in October. Blumenthal wrote:

Correspondents from a major US newspaper were presented with detailed evidence of UC Global spying on Assange and his associates, and documentation of the firm's relationship with the CIA and Sheldon Adelson, a WikiLeaks source told *The Grayzone*.

Not only were the reporters initially uninterested in the spying scandal, the WikiLeaks source said one correspondent justified the CIA's surveillance on national security grounds. "He said, well, that's what an intelligence service is supposed to," the source recalled, describing the experience as "crazy."

Nakashima herself has never mentioned the spying publicly or responded to multiple requests for comment about it from Blumenthal and others. Maurizi, who was also extensively spied on, explained that she had not received a positive reply from a single corporate US reporter, who she has asked to join a class action to be filed in Spain's National Court on behalf of journalists who were caught in the dragnet. Nakashima ignored her correspondence. Bergman said he was not interested.

Randy Credico, a US comedian, activist and WikiLeaks supporter, recounted a similar response, telling Blumenthal that he "went to everybody," with information about the surveillance, which he was also subjected to.

"I went to MSNBC, to the *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, to journalists I knew, and I couldn't get anyone interested. I mean, all these reporters hate Trump, and here you had [US Secretary of State] Pompeo and Sheldon Adelson, the guy who finances Trump, breaking the law. You would think this would be a big deal to these lean forward progressives. And they haven't said shit. It's appalling that they haven't come forward and said something about this."

The *Grayzone* report points to some of the obvious reasons for the hostility of corporate publications to any exposure of the CIA's activities. The *Washington Post*, for instance, is owned by Amazon, which has multi-billion dollar contracts with the Pentagon. Nakashima, when she visited Assange, listed her employer, not as the *Washington Post*, but as "Amazon."

The major publications, moreover, including the *New York Times*, function as the public mouthpieces of the intelligence agencies. Press releases from the CIA are published almost verbatim, while the word of "unnamed intelligence officials," whose unsubstantiated assertions fill so much column space, is treated as the gospel truth.

These publications, moreover, have for over a decade repeated the lies and slanders concocted by the intelligence agencies to undermine support for Assange and WikiLeaks.

This has included the endless promotion of the bogus Swedish investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct against Assange, the "preliminary" stage of which was discontinued for the third and final time last year because of the absence of any evidence, without Assange ever having been charged with a crime. Also notable has been the immense coverage devoted to the discredited conspiracy theory that WikiLeaks' 2016 exposure of gross corruption on the part of the Democratic National Committee was the product of some sort of "Russian plot."

In every instance, the aim has been to poison public opinion

against Assange, and divert attention away from the war crimes, diplomatic conspiracies and political abuses that WikiLeaks has exposed. The fact that Assange was the victim of a massive US government spying operation, which violated innumerable international laws and domestic legislation across multiple jurisdictions, simply does not suit the official narrative.

There may be additional reasons for the reticence of the corporate publication, however. Many of them featured material from surveillance inside the embassy, before UC Global's operations became public knowledge last year.

Footage of what appeared to be the sole occasion that Assange momentarily stood on a skateboard was aired ad nauseum after his expulsion from the Ecuadorian embassy and brutal arrest by the British police. This served to justify the absurd claim that the Ecuadorian government had illegally revoked Assange's asylum because he was a "bad house guest," and not because it was one of the conditions for massive international loans and closer ties with the US.

The skateboard footage, and other films aimed at degrading Assange, were probably shot with UC Global cameras. While it is likely the material was leaked by the new Ecuadorian regime of President Lenin Moreno, to justify its attack on Assange, it is doubtful that the CIA would have objected.

The question inevitably arises: is it plausible that all of the major corporate publications, and their staff, who enjoy the closest relations with the US intelligence agencies and have participated with glee in the campaign against Assange, did not know of the UC Global spying as it was occurring? And if they did, but chose not to report it at the time, does that not make them complicit in major attacks on press freedom and the institution of political asylum, which is protected by international law?

Meanwhile, Blumenthal's article put paid to UC Global head Morales' lame denials that he was working for US intelligence. For instance it cites messages from Morales to his employees, informing them in May 2017, that he was travelling to Miami to provide "the agency of the stars and stripes" with a budget for the installation of more sophisticated surveillance equipment to spy on Assange.

Morales, apparently in reference to his ultimate employer, posted cartoons of US President Donald Trump in response to further inquiries from UC Global staff.

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