

A tale of two leaks

NYT hailed for publishing Trump's tax returns, Assange pilloried for exposing DNC-Clinton corruption in 2016

By Oscar Grenfell
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On Monday, the *New York Times* published a featured exposure of Donald Trump's personal and business tax returns over the past twenty years, revealing the American president to be a conman and a swindler who has used every trick in the book to avoid any, even marginal, public impost on his wealth.

As yesterday's perspective article on the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, the exposé of Trump's tax evasion, though surprising to no one, "paints a portrait of a ruling class totally enmeshed in corruption and criminality." His fortune was the "product of a whole period of American capitalism dominated by swindling, speculation and fraud, creating nothing of value besides ever-greater heaps of debt," a social regression spearheaded by Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

Nobody outside of Trump, his entourage and hard line supporters have protested the publication. The material is clearly true, newsworthy and in the public interest. It is widely accepted that the American, and indeed the world population, have a right to know of the business dealings and sordid shenanigans of the president and candidate of one of the two official parties in next month's US election.

These basic principles of press freedom, an informed electorate, and the responsibility of journalists to publish important information, whatever the political fallout, have been lauded in the American media over the past days.

All to the good. But one can only wish that the *New York Times* and other corporate publications upheld these lofty ideals on all occasions, and not only when it is in their interest and the interest of the Democratic Party, with which they are aligned.

Indeed, it is likely that the only journalist currently facing US prosecution for his publishing activities may have something to say on the matter, if he were not prevented from doing so by imprisonment in London's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, what United Nations officials have deemed to be state-perpetrated "psychological torture," and the current ordeal of a British extradition show-trial aimed at dispatching him to his US persecutors.

To describe the contrast between the official media's favourable response to the publication of Trump's leaked tax returns, and its venomous attitude to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, as being an exercise in gross hypocrisy would be to understate the case. Assange has been pilloried, slandered and thrown to the wolves by every

corporate publication for *Tinfoil* what the Trump's tax returns, only more consistently and without political favour.

The double standard is summed up by "An Editor's Note on the Trump Tax Investigation" which accompanied the *Times*' exposure on Monday.

In it, executive editor Dean Baquet wrote: "We are publishing this report because we believe citizens should understand as much as possible about their leaders and representatives—their priorities, their experiences and also their finances." The importance of this was heightened by the fact that "The records show a significant gap between what Mr. Trump has said to the public and what he has disclosed to federal tax authorities over many years."

Baquet, having boasted of the *Times*' commitment to source protection, concluded with a stirring paean to the American Constitution, and its press freedom protections: "Some will raise questions about publishing the president's personal tax information. But the Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that the First Amendment allows the press to publish newsworthy information that was legally obtained by reporters even when those in power fight to keep it hidden. That powerful principle of the First Amendment applies here."

No supporter of a free press will disagree. But they may ask: if these principles apply in 2020, why did they not apply in 2016?

In that US election year WikiLeaks published a series of releases, including internal correspondence of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the work emails of John Podesta, the campaign chair of Democratic Party front-runner Hillary Clinton.

The DNC emails established, from the horse's mouth, that senior officials within the organisation had sought to undermine the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, in violation of their own rules, to ensure that Clinton was selected as the Democratic Presidential candidate.

Amid the vast trove of material in the Podesta emails were excerpts of Clinton's secret speeches to Wall Street banks. At some of the functions she addressed, for which she was rewarded with hundreds of thousands of dollars in speaker's fees, Clinton told the assembled oligarchs that she had a "public" and a "private" position. They need not be concerned by her occasional references to social inequality, because in office, her "private position," of doing everything to ensure the wealth of the corporate elite, would prevail.

One cannot help but recall Baquet's great concern over the discord between Trump's statements to the American public, and the contents of his meagre tax filings.

Other documents confirmed earlier revelations that the private "Clinton Foundation" had functioned as a massive cash-for-access scheme, including when Clinton was secretary of state in the Obama administration. With a striking frequency, businessmen, foreign officials and dignitaries would be granted an audience with the secretary of state, after, or immediately before, making a substantial donation to the "Clinton Foundation." Often, they would leave having secured whatever assurances or favours they were seeking.

There was never any contention that the WikiLeaks' publications were based on false information. Their veracity was demonstrated by the fact that they triggered the resignation of several DNC officials, including its chairwoman Donna Brazile.

The response of the US media, including the *Times*, was immediately one of intense hostility to the WikiLeaks disclosures. "Was this not an attempt to influence the outcome of the election?" they asked. "Wasn't Assange simply motivated by hostility to Clinton," who had reportedly asked a colleague several years earlier, "Can't we just drone this guy?"

Claims that it was illegitimate to publish true information prior to an election, because it may be detrimental to a candidate, were so obviously antithetical to the most basic tenets of democracy that they had little influence outside the circles of the Democratic Party, the *Times*, and their privileged upper middle-class constituency. Other strategies, including *Times* columnist Charles Blow's memorable assertion that the documents had "simply showed the unappetizing process by which the sausage is made," were transparent and pathetic attempts at damage control on behalf of Clinton and the Democrats.

The *Times* and every other corporate publication changed tack, dropping the mask of impartial reporting, and taking on the characteristics of a pack of rabid hyenas. The DNC and Podesta leaks, they declared, were the result of "Russian hacking." This was true because Clinton had asserted it, and the intelligence agencies had "assessed with a high degree of certainty" that it was the case.

In this McCarthyite narrative, any questioning of the official story, for instance pointing to the record of the intelligence agencies in telling gross lies, was only more evidence of a "Russian conspiracy."

The repeated statements of Assange, that Russia was not the source of the material, were derided. Former British ambassador-turned-whistleblower Craig Murray stated that he had personal knowledge of WikiLeaks' receipt of the DNC leaks, and that their source was a disgruntled insider. He was ignored.

Four years on and the anti-Russian campaign, which aimed to cover-up the exposure of Clinton, divert opposition to Trump into right-wing channels, legitimise censorship and stoke American militarism, lies in tatters. The Justice Department's Mueller investigation into "Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections" concluded without finding any evidence of said "Russian interference."

CrowdStrike, a private company hired by the Democratic Party to examine the DNC computer servers, acknowledged there was no proof that any documents had been exfiltrated from them, i.e., there may not have been any successful "hack," Russian or otherwise. And Roger Stone, the Republican operative who supposedly functioned as a middle-man between the Trump camp and WikiLeaks was successfully prosecuted for falsely claiming that he had any connection to Assange and the publishing organisation he heads.

The *Times* however has not rescinded its lies about Assange and Russia. It has doubled down, publishing articles since 2016, suggesting that WikiLeaks may have served as some sort of "Russian cut-out" or "patsy" all along. As is always the case, the ultimate source of these slanders are the intelligence agencies that have sought to destroy Assange by every means possible for the past decade.

When Assange was arrested by the British police in April, 2019, and charged by the Trump administration with a bogus count of unauthorised intrusion into a US computer system, the *Times* responded with glee. An opinion piece by Michelle Goldberg, on the very day of the arrest, was sub-headed "he deserves his fate." Goldberg repeated all the slanders about "Russian intelligence" and admitted to a "dark satisfaction" over Assange's plight. Dark indeed.

As an afterthought, Goldberg complained that the indictment could impact on "press freedom," by which she meant her activities and those of the *Times*. "So Assange may well deserve to go to prison. What's troubling, however, is that his indictment treats ordinary news gathering processes as elements of a criminal conspiracy," she wrote.

A month later, the Trump administration unveiled 17 additional charges against Assange, over WikiLeaks' 2010 and 2011 publications exposing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, human rights abuses in Guantanamo Bay and global diplomatic conspiracies. This is the first attempt by a US government to prosecute a journalist under the Espionage Act, for publishing the truth.

The *Times*, which was a partner in some of those publications, responded by warning of the danger the prosecution posed to press freedom, undoubtedly with an eye on the fact that they could land in the dock themselves. But it was all couched in terms of Assange being a "bad actor," and hardly anything has been said in the pages of the *Times* since, except more warnings, sourced from the intelligence agencies, that Russia is "up to its old tricks," this time in the 2020 election.

The *Times* and the corporate publications now crowing about the exposure of Trump's record as a tax evader, played a central role in creating the conditions for the swindler in the White House to launch a prosecution against a journalist. The claims of these shells for the intelligence agencies and the government that they are intrepid journalists, who report the news without fear or favour, are a sham.

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