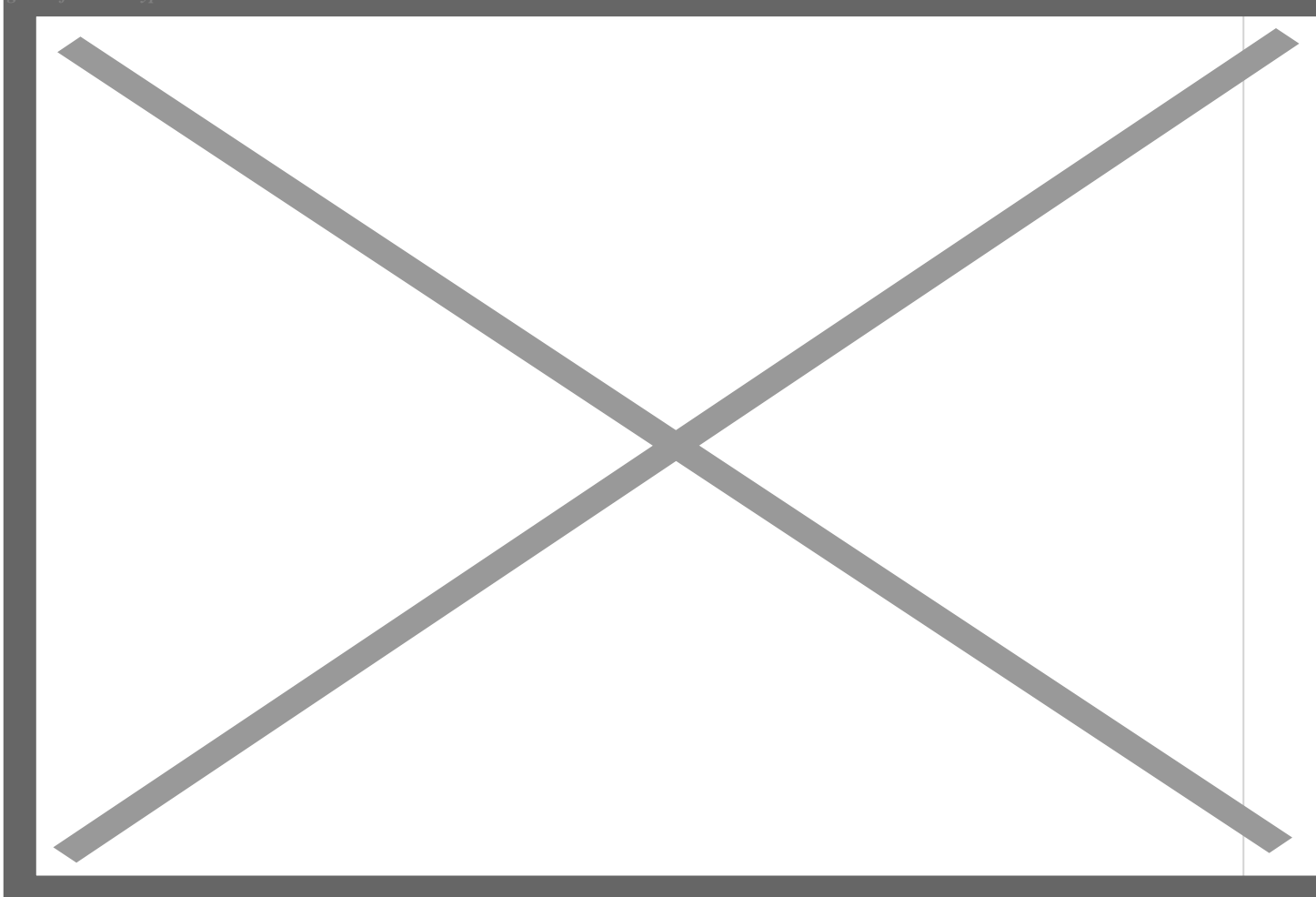


Journalism on Trial: Assange Appeals His Extradition to the U.S.

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BY EVE OTTENBERG

The British high court did not make it easy for the press to cover Julian Assange's anti-extradition hearings in late February. For those of you who may have forgotten, Assange just appealed his extradition to the United States, where he faces brutal punishment for practicing journalism. But the British high court doesn't want you to remember. How else to explain it making press coverage of the proceedings so extraordinarily difficult?

It wasn't just that reporters couldn't hear anything. It's much bigger than that. As former British diplomat Craig Murray wrote after attending these hearings, the proceedings against Assange have been a "travesty and a charade marked by undisguised institutional hostility." This theme of Assange's trials and unjust incarceration in maximum security Belmarsh Prison involves limiting press access. The reason is obvious. When somebody does something wrong, they try to conceal it. And the U.K. and U.S. governments are doing something wrong, namely, shackling, silencing, endangering the life of and bundling a journalist off to Northern Virginia, where he will likely be convicted of bogus crimes, because that journalist, Assange, has been deemed a political enemy. How bogus? One for instance: The U.S. accuses him of endangering the lives of American government agents and foreign intelligence sources, yet has never named one harmed. No matter, Assange is to be convicted of phony crimes. How do we know he'll likely be convicted? Because Northern Virginia is home to employees of the imperial U.S. security state, so people who regard Assange as an anti-American demon will swarm the jury pool. His lawyers will be hard-pressed to find impartial jurors.

Stefania Maurizi, a reporter allowed in the courtroom on February 20, tweeted "yesterday we journalists were assigned to a Victorian gallery, no table to take notes, use our laptops, NO chance to hear and see what was being discussed in court." That first day, Assange's defense presented two key points – that "U.S. charges could be reformulated so that #DeathPenalty applies," and also raising repeated U.S. references "to the fact that the #FirstAmendment does NOT apply" to Assange. "In both cases, NO guarantees were provided by U.S."

Reporting on day two, Maurizi again tweeted: "Even this morning we journalists cannot cover the case properly; no tables for our computers, no chance to hear properly: audio is so bad." Then the judges suspended the hearing, "because even in the courtroom we cannot hear what is being discussed. I am less than three meters away from U.S. lawyers and yet I cannot hear what they say." Once the proceeding resumed – no improvement. Journalists still couldn't hear properly.

Since this whole Assange legal fiasco is an assault on a free press, I guess we shouldn't be surprised that reporters covering the case are treated so cavalierly. In our bizarre world, where a journalist faces 175 years in prison or even conceivably death for doing his job (too) well, why wouldn't he be treated like Alice in Wonderland by the deranged Queen of Hearts? Assange has basically been caged without charge for over a decade – you expect a reporter who wants to cover this atrocious persecution to be treated professionally? C'mon man, get with the program! This is the wrath of the Empire, of the U.S. security state we're talking about, because that's who Assange offended.

He did so on several occasions, including when he published the video Collateral Murder, which revealed U.S. soldiers in their Apache helicopter shooting Iraqi civilians, children and journalists for sport. He also mortified two fantastically narcissistic bigwigs, Mike "Get Assange" Pompeo and Hillary "Can't We Just Drone This Guy?" Clinton, with sundry revelations about the CIA and embarrassing campaign emails, respectively. With such fearless dedication to truth on Assange's part, no wonder Washington concluded, over a decade ago, that he was public enemy numero uno and had to be permanently dispatched, in a way that would "teach a lesson" to everyone viewing the appalling spectacle.

Well, I'm not sure the lesson is what Washington intended. It appears to be that a free press is an optional, distant last to whatever the Beltway diktat du jour happens to be, that the rule of law is in fact white house whim, and that anybody, anywhere on this planet can be captured, imprisoned and shipped off to the U.S. carceral gulag – the biggest on earth – for just about anything American mandarins

concoct. This despotic state of affairs dates from president George “WMD” Bush’s Global War on Terror. Years have passed since the original insane frenzy that prompted GWOT, but wrecking the rule of law has not. The fourth amendment still lies in tatters and now, with the Assange case, the first does too.

A decision on Assange’s extradition likely won’t come for at least a month. “The two-day appeal hearing,” reported Fox News, February 22, “before a panel of two judges wrapped up after U.S. lawyers delivered arguments.” Assange himself was too ill to be present, so the very politically connected judges, Dame Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson, a former lawyer representing MI6, did not set eyes on him. Let’s hope they’re better than the judges who ruled on Assange so far, judges who have shown little awareness of this case’s earth-shattering implications for a free press and Britain’s nearly thousand-year jurisprudence grounded in the rule of law. Most of that went out the window in the original trial, under the overall very hostile judge Vanessa Baraitser, and it’s didn’t come back in with the last appeal, dismissed summarily by justice Jonathan Swift, who flatly refused to consider fresh evidence.

That was a blinkered decision, because there’s plenty of new evidence and the old evidence was never weighed properly by Baraitser. But Swift was formerly a lawyer for the British government, who represented the security services, and throughout this entire miscarriage of justice, that government has bent over backwards to accommodate its imperial lord, Washington. To cite Murray on Swift, in one legal case Swift met with government officials, “discussed matters relating to the case privately before making judgment. He did not tell the defense he had done this. They found out and Swift was forced to recuse himself.” No wonder Swift, “the former roommate and still best friend of the minister who organized the removal of Julian from the Ecuadorian Embassy,” ruled against Assange. As Murray wrote “what a lovely cosy club is the Establishment.”

The emperor himself, Joe “Pardons Only for Those Who Don’t Need Them” Biden, now owns this sordid business from top to bottom. It originated in Barack “Jail the Whistleblowers” Obama’s vampiric war against sunlight, and got a lot of extra oomph from Donald “Fake News, Unless It Praises Me” Trump’s deranged Justice Department, which brought the indictment, but Biden could have put a stop to it at any point. He didn’t. He will be remembered for that, for gutting the First Amendment, for remaining deaf to pleas from numerous heads of state, who deplored this abuse, this destruction of a journalist for printing the truth. Throughout the Trump years and now the Biden ones, imperial henchmen have treated Assange so cruelly, one can only conclude they would not have been sorry had he died in jail. Indeed, that may have been the plan. Even the press, which initially abandoned Assange, has come around to the realization that this prosecution poses a very real, deadly threat to journalism. Numerous mainstream publications have now protested this juridical abortion. Let’s hope they’re not too late.

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