



"Just be fair": when does journalism undermine its own reputation?

By Stefania Maurizi (<https://diem25.org/en/author/stefaniam/>) | 23/05/2018

Stefania Maurizi works for the Italian daily La Repubblica as an investigative journalist. She has worked on all the WikiLeaks releases of secret documents, and the Snowden files about Italy. She has recently started a multijurisdictional Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) litigation effort to defend the right of the press to access the full set of documents on the Julian Assange and WikiLeaks case. Six years since Ecuador granted Julian Assange political asylum, a freedom of information act in the UK is shedding light on what was happening behind the scenes during that period. With few records and a great deal of mystery...

Yorgos Boskos (YB): In a speech to the International Journalism Festival in Perugia last April, you outlined the multijurisdictional Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) litigation effort that you have launched to defend the right of the press to have access to the full set of documents on the Julian Assange and WikiLeaks case. What are the outcomes of this procedure so far?

Stefania Maurizi (SM): The reporters covering Assange's case were just willing to crib from the authorities' declarations. No media has tried to access the full set of documents in his regard. FOIA litigation is an ongoing procedure in Sweden and UK.

Sweden has a very helpful transparency law when it comes to Freedom of Information, enabling me to get hold of 226 pages of documents for the first time. Most of those documents were not redacted. Thanks to those documents, I learned that the UK authorities looked at this case as 'special' in their correspondence with the Swedish prosecutors, and a UK lawyer named Paul Close working for the UK Crown Prosecution Service – the UK Government's entity which supported the Swedish prosecutors' work from the very beginning – refers to the Julian Assange case as not "being dealt with as just another extradition request". I wonder what makes this case special: the documents I have obtained so far don't explain it.

Julian Assange has never refused to be questioned. He offered to be questioned from the very first moment in many possible ways. Thanks to this FOIA, we have learned that the UK is responsible for contributing to creating the legal and diplomatic mess in the case of Julian Assange, because it was the UK authorities which advised their Swedish colleagues against the only investigative strategy that could have led to a quick closure of the preliminary investigation: questioning Assange in London, rather than extraditing him to Stockholm, as the Swedish prosecutors have always tried to do.

That's the reason he is still confined in the Ecuadorian Embassy: because the decision to extradite him to Sweden made him seriously concerned about the risk of being extradited to the US, which is still the most serious risk he faces, even if the Swedish investigation was dropped in May 2017. This risk of being extradited

to the US is real: Assange's fears are completely rational. It is encouraging that the FOIA process has produced a number of documents concerning the Assange case, but it is very suspicious that the UK authorities have admitted that they destroyed key emails linked to the case. Why did they destroy crucial emails about an ongoing case? They haven't provided any evidence of investigating the case and I am going to submit further FOIA requests to the US and Australian agencies

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SM: They targeted Italy using the Metadata programme, and collecting millions of pieces of data of the Italian people. Our embassies were under surveillance. They intercepted Silvio Berlusconi's calls. However, the strange thing is that after all these leaks and revelations, the EU government has done nothing. According to Italian law, the prosecutors were supposed to investigate this case. Instead, they dropped it.

YB: Do you think that the Metadata programme is still running?
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SM: Of course, they carry on as always. Metadata is one of the most important leaks in history. The European Union has done absolutely nothing about this. Metadata has never prevented any kind of terrorist attack



Assange. I hope that the next UK government will comply with Opinion No. 54/2015, as adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), which considers Julian Assange as arbitrarily detained at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

YB: According to the Guardian's latest story, Ecuador spent millions on a spy operation for Julian Assange. An anonymous source had told the newspaper that J.A. hacked into embassy communications. The Guardian provided no evidence for these claims. **By DiEM25 Communications (https://diem25.org/en/author/diem25pt/), 05/05/2023**

SM: The Guardian's reporters didn't put forward any solid evidence or credible source. I think it is a matter of very basic "hygiene" to remain skeptical until we have some solid facts. This is true in general, but in particular when it comes to WikiLeaks, because throughout the last nine years I have heard all sorts of things on Julian Assange. **Read more (https://diem25.org/news-report-family-and-the-ess-nobre-symptom-the-capitalist-disease/)**

Anything goes when it comes to depicting Julian Assange and his organisation as unstable people, radical,



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It would definitely be good to know what happened, because like WikiLeaks or not, this story can prove disquieting: the Guardian reporters claim that they have access to the logs of visitors and to information regarding the purposes of their visits. This information was somehow obtained by a newspaper which, as Greenwald wrote, has a "deeply emotional and personalised feud" with Julian Assange and WikiLeaks.

I don't know what the Guardian's reporters really have in their hands and I don't know what information was actually collected on Julian Assange and his staff and visitors, but unfortunately by publishing this information the Guardian risks opening up a Pandora's box: someone gathers all sorts of information on a media organisation, its editor, journalists, visitors and then this information ends up in the hands of a media which literally hates them. I am not sure where this will end up. It's barbaric.

We know that surveillance technology makes it very easy to do large scale spying with little money, so it does not even take state actors to spy on a media organisation on a massive scale and media organisations are certainly vulnerable, because we journalists meet all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons. Today, WikiLeaks gets targeted, but tomorrow it will be la Repubblica or le Monde or the Guardian itself. Who's next?

YB: Guardian reporters call J.A. a fugitive, alleging in another story that the WikiLeaks founder has become an unwelcome guest in Ecuador's embassy. Any comment?

SM: I have great respect for the Guardian's work in general, but it is tragic to see how the Guardian has treated Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. The Guardian procured massive scoops from Julian Assange and WikiLeaks and the Guardian has ended up imitating at least in part the brilliant model pioneered by Julian Assange, by introducing a submission platform that receives leaks from anonymous sources and by establishing media partnerships to publish revelations with a maximum international impact.

I am not saying that the Guardian should spend its days celebrating WikiLeaks. But it should just be fair. Take the term "fugitive" they used in their latest story on "Operation Hotel": that is precisely the word the UK government uses to refer to Julian Assange. The Guardian is certainly aware that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UNWGAD) established that the UK government is responsible for detaining him arbitrarily since 2010.

It definitely knows that the UK government tried to appeal the UNWGAD's decision and lost. So in the eyes of international law, Julian Assange is a vulnerable person under arbitrary detention by the UK government: he is not a fugitive.

I don't think the media should assist powerful governments in whitewashing violations of international law and



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