



Psychologists for Social Responsibility Statement on the Arrest of Julian Assange and the Detainment of Chelsea Manning

Psychologists for Social Responsibility decries the recent arrests and detentions of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning. PsySR joins a growing number of human rights organizations¹ and civil liberties groups² that are strongly opposing Assange's extradition to the US. Democracy depends on a free press and the free flow of information. Whistleblowers and those who publish their disclosures bring inconvenient truths to the public's attention, and must be protected.

Julian Assange was recently arrested by the UK police inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he was granted political asylum in 2012. This incident happened a month after the former U.S. Intelligence Analyst Chelsea Manning was sent to jail for refusing to testify at a grand jury targeting Assange and WikiLeaks. Assange is a divisive figure but focusing on his character or on his embroilment in other controversies distracts us from the issues at hand.

We are aware that Assange has been arrested under a U.S. extradition warrant for conspiracy to publish classified information with whistleblower Chelsea Manning revealing U.S. government war crimes in 2010.³

PsySR notes that this development is related to WikiLeaks' publication of the collateral murder video, the trove of U.S. classified military records of the Afghan war--revealing around 20,000 deaths by assassination, massacre and night raids⁴--and the Iraq War Logs, which informed people in Iraq and the international community of about 15,000 civilian casualties previously unreported.⁵

WikiLeaks has provided information vital for democracy to function. The publication of The Guantánamo Files revealing the treatment of Guantánamo prisoners in Cuba was particularly important.

PsySR takes our profession's duty to do no harm seriously and is committed to psychologists honoring human dignity and protecting human rights. We have thus been very concerned about the extent to which our profession depends on military and intelligence agencies for funding and employment. It has led at times to psychologists' involvement in torture and abuse.

WikiLeaks' release of 779 classified reports on current and former prisoners of the U.S. military prison in Guantánamo shed light on unethical detention and interrogation practices that were carried out during the Bush administration's "War on Terror".

Thousands of pages of previously unreported documents dating from 2002 to 2008 informed the public about how innocent men were often detained by mistake and prisoners were exploited during interrogations. Documents released by Wikileaks revealed how the Behavioral Science Consultation Teams, consisting partly of psychologists, had a major say in the methods approved for use on the prisoners.⁶

The released documents provided information critical for PsySR members to make their case against the American Psychological Association (APA) who was alleged to be colluding with the Department of Defense and the CIA. WikiLeaks' efforts to release the full, unredacted, Guantánamo Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) manual provided PsySR members with evidence that was essential to achieving some degree of accountability and ethical policy change within the APA.

The arrest of Assange also occurs in a disturbing broader context of President Trump's growing hostility toward the press. On numerous occasions, Trump and his administration have expressed outrage and taken unjustified action towards news media organizations and journalists for their professional attempts to hold power to account by seeking unexposed truths and reporting their findings to the public. In other instances, the administration has ignored or encouraged attacks on journalists internationally.

The White House suspended the press credential of CNN correspondent Jim Acosta after he confronted President Trump during a news conference.⁷ In August 2017 then Attorney General Jeff Sessions threatened to prosecute media outlets publishing classified information.⁸ Journalists covering Trump rallies have been assaulted, apparently encouraged by a general climate of anger and contempt for the press.⁹ Reporters who have attempted to cover the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border have been targeted by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency.¹⁰ Journalists have been jailed in Turkey, China and Egypt, without adequate response by the U.S. government.¹¹

We are particularly concerned about the recent murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Kashoggi and the Trump Administration's unwillingness to determine responsibility and impose sanctions as required by the Magnisky Act.¹² These actions are only the tip of the iceberg of a chilling disregard shown by the Trump Administration for the free press.

The prosecution of Assange is regarded by many experts on free speech rights as an attack on freedom of the media.¹³ We consider this arrest an attempt by the Trump Administration to prosecute a foreign national living outside of the U.S. who served the public interest by providing information that formed the basis for a multitude of stories published by well-established media organizations. Such a prosecution —possibly under the Espionage Act — would add to current Administration actions that weaken vital First Amendment safeguards against tyranny. If the U.S. government brings criminal charges against a foreign national for publishing truthful information, it will set a perilous precedent for international press freedom. It could enable extra-territorial prosecution of media worldwide.

Furthermore, we recognize Assange's arrest sets another serious precedent for the disregard of internationally-recognized refugee rights, and raises alarming signs on the erosion of civil liberties. The United Nations formally ruled that Assange's confinement inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London constitutes arbitrary detention and demanded that he be released and compensated for the UK government's violation of his rights.¹⁴ The UN has repeatedly issued statements demanding that the UK honor its international obligations and allow Assange to leave the embassy without fear of arrest and extradition.¹⁵

Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention states, "No Contracting State shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his membership of a particular political opinion."¹⁶ UN human rights experts believe Ecuador's turning over of Assange to the British authorities under financial pressure from the US¹⁷ violates international law.

Just before the UK police took Assange out of the embassy, Nils Melzer, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, warned Assange's arrest may amount to a "serious human rights violation."¹⁸ The UN Special Rapporteur on arbitrary, summary or extrajudicial killings, Agnes Callamard, also noted how this decision by the Ecuadorian government has exposed Assange "to a real risk of serious violations of his human rights."¹⁹

We are concerned about the ramifications of the way in which the Ecuadorian government terminated Assange's asylum. If a group of states is able to have someone's refugee status revoked by the pressure of a persecuting state, international refugee law no longer functions and this makes refugees around the world vulnerable to human rights abuses.

We are also concerned for the health and safety of Manning, and that she not be again subjected to the torturous practice of solitary confinement, or deprived of the protections and health services appropriate for an incarcerated transgender individual. The decision to imprison Manning for contempt of court for refusing to testify before a Grand Jury is unconscionable in light of the abuse she previously suffered in US prisons, particularly since she suffered this abuse as punishment for patriotically blowing the whistle on criminal activities by the US military.

We are an organization that is committed to advancing peace and social justice through the ethical use of psychological knowledge, research, and practice. This statement is solely based on PsySR's principled stance for defending democratic rights.

We regard the arrest and detention of Assange and his source Manning in the context of much larger issues. It represents an assault on the heart of democracy, freedom of expression and due process. We do not consider this to be a political issue, defined as left vs. right or one ideology against another, but as an issue that concerns our fundamental human rights.

April 14, 2019

¹. <https://www.amnesty.org.au/julian-assange-must-not-be-extradited-to-the->

- us/?utm_source=TWITTER&utm_medium=social&utm_content=20190412021700&utm_campaign=20190412&Post_ID=2247782196; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/11/us-assanges-possible-extradition-threatens-journalism>
- ². <https://freedom.press/news/civil-liberties-groups-condemn-trump-admins-indictment-julian-assange/>
 - ³. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edva/pr/wikileaks-founder-charged-computer-hacking-conspiracy>
 - ⁴. https://wikileaks.org/wiki/Afghan_War_Diary,_2004-2010
 - ⁵. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/22/true-civilian-body-count-iraq>
 - ⁶. <https://wikileaks.org/gitmo/>
 - ⁷. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/07/cnn-jim-acosta-reporter-credentials-revoked>
 - ⁸. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-sessions-leaks/trump-administration-goes-on-attack-against-leakers-journalists-idUSKBN1AK1UR>
 - ⁹. <https://cpj.org/2019/02/cpj-concerned-bbc-attacked-trump-rally.php>
 - ¹⁰. <https://cpj.org/blog/2019/04/cbp-journalists-stop-search-migrant-border.php>
 - ¹¹. <https://cpj.org/reports/2017/12/journalists-prison-jail-record-number-turkey-china-egypt.php>
 - ¹². <https://cpj.org/blog/2019/03/us-congressional-foreign-affairs-jamal-khashoggi.php>
 - ¹³. <https://medium.com/s/oversight/former-new-york-times-chief-lawyer-rally-to-support-julian-assange-even-if-you-hate-him-639b2d89dd92>; <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/04/more-than-a-data-dump-julian-assange/>; <https://twitter.com/davidakaye/status/1063445428337864706>
 - ¹⁴. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17013>
 - ¹⁵. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24042&LangID=E>
 - ¹⁶. <https://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf>
 - ¹⁷. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/08/health/world-health-breastfeeding-ecuador-trump.html#click=https://t.co/xPQTgvDUBV>
 - ¹⁸. <https://twitter.com/NilsMelzer/status/1114218030127513601>
 - ¹⁹. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/04/1036491>