

The War on WikiLeaks and Assange

Helping government authorities discredit Julian Assange and destroy WikiLeaks, mainstream media outlets twisted a recent interview to make Assange look like a Donald Trump backer, write Randy Credico and Dennis J Bernstein.

By Randy Credico and Dennis J Bernstein

Italian journalist Stefania Maurizi, who now reports for La Repubblica and has worked on WikiLeaks' releases of secret documents, complains that her recent interview with Julian Assange was distorted by the Guardian, the Washington Post and others to assign Assange a pro-Trump agenda.

The Guardian recently "amended" its reporting on her interview with Assange, but for the feisty, seasoned reporter it wasn't nearly enough. "I appreciate the Guardian amending the article, but at the same time the damage is done and I'm not convinced it was a solution," she said.

Maurizi is going to court in September in Great Britain to fight for the release of key documents that related directly to the process of Assange's treatment and his pursuit by various governments collaborating to shut his operations down.

"This is the first time that a reporter has tried to get access to these files," she said in a rare interview on Aug. 1, "which tells you something about the state of journalism these days."

Before joining la Repubblica, Maurizi spent ten years working for the Italian newsmagazine l'Espresso. Maurizi also partnered with Glenn Greenwald to reveal the Edward Snowden files as they pertain to Italy. She is author most recently of *Dossier WikiLeaks*.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us about your multiple struggles to get key documents that will shed light on the entire Assange affair.

Stefania Maurizi: I have spent the past two years struggling to access the documents on the Julian Assange case. I was finally forced to go to court and sue the UK government to get them to hand over the documents. This is the first time that a reporter has tried to get access to these files, which tells you something about the state of journalism these days.

Dozens of newspapers have talked with Assange over the past ten years and yet no one has attempted to get full access to these documents about the case. Here we have a high-profile publisher who is being arbitrarily detained by two of the most respected Western democracies, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and no one is

trying to get to these documents. It is incredible to me.

Randy Credico: Are any newspapers in London writing amicus briefs on your behalf?

SM: Honestly, I don't know. I can imagine there is some embarrassment about the fact that no newspaper has yet asked for these documents.

DB: What kinds of information do you expect to be in these documents? What could be the case in terms of freeing Julian Assange?

SM: First of all, I want to access the full correspondence between the UK authorities and the Swedish prosecutors. In 2015 I filed a Freedom of Information Act request and I obtained some documents from the Swedish authorities which made very clear that the UK put pressure on the Swedish authorities not to question Mr. Assange in London, which he and his lawyers had requested, but rather to extradite him to Sweden. This is why we have been in this legal quagmire for five years now with Julian stuck in arbitrary detention at the Ecuadorian embassy.

Julian Assange has never refused questioning. He has fought against extradition because he knows that extradition to Sweden would result in extradition to the United States. So the UK authorities advised the Swedish prosecutor against questioning him in London, which would have avoided this arbitrary detention.

I know for certain that there are thousands of documents pertaining to this case. I want to be able to access any documents pertaining to the exchange between the US and UK authorities and I want to access any documents about the exchange between the UK and Ecuador. I believe that there is a strong public interest in shedding light on this important and high-profile case. Can you imagine a high-profile editor in Europe under arbitrary detention? And yet no one is asking for the documents in this case!

RC: Why did you write *Dossier WikiLeaks*?

SM: That book is based on my access from 2009 to 2011 to the WikiLeaks documents about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Guantanamo files and those pertaining to the diplomacy cables. I read something like 13,000 pages of the diplomacy cables. Basically, I attempted to share with my readers the most important revelations contained in these documents.

For example, I acquired some solid information about how the US tried to stop the Italian prosecutors investigating the extraordinary rendition of Abu Omar. Or how the US authorities tried to pressure the Italian government to buy the Lockheed Martin fighter. Or how they tried to block the International Criminal

Court.

This is the kind of information that many reporters dream of getting access to and for the first time with WikiLeaks we were able to. I really appreciate WikiLeaks' publication strategy of making these documents available exclusively to certain media partners like myself and then later to the general public, to activists, journalists, lawyers, etc.

I believe that information needs to be free and accessible to everyone without restrictions. Of course, there is information which should be kept secret, regarding the security of nuclear facilities, for example. But these documents are different. These secrets are used by countries like the United States to protect themselves from inquiry, from prosecution, from embarrassment. These secrets are less legitimate.

DB: For the last six months, WikiLeaks has been publishing a series of documents on the CIA which they entitle Vault 7. Could you talk about the significance of Vault 7?

SM: Basically, Vault 7 consists of documents concerning the cyber weapons the CIA uses to penetrate our computers, our mobile devices, and so on. For the first time we have solid evidence concerning the use of these kinds of weapons by the CIA. Of course, these documents are of a highly technical nature so we have tried to make them accessible to the general public. But it is very important to have an insight into these tools, so that we can understand what they can and cannot do.

As far as we have been able to determine, they have no magic wand, no wonder weapon. They have come up with some smart solutions, they have some impressive tools, but no magic wand. At the end of the day, we verified the documents as genuine and we made them accessible to the public.

In the case of technical documents, you go to a trusted expert to check whether a procedure makes sense, whether the software makes sense, classification marks, etc. I don't want to go into too much detail on how we verify documents because that might compromise our work. But the tough part of this work is verifying the documents. I can tell you that in my eight years of work with WikiLeaks I have been to court several times and was able to verify that the documents were genuine and my coverage was correct. We have won libel cases in court.

RC: What has motivated you to cover the WikiLeaks case these past eight years?

SM: Before I went into journalism, I got a degree in mathematics. One of my sources in cryptography put WikiLeaks on my radar screen back in 2008, when very few journalists had even heard of WikiLeaks. In 2009 they contacted me and

wanted me to verify the authenticity of some important documents concerning Italy. That was our first partnership together. Since then I have been involved in all of WikiLeaks' releases.

The reason I am very interested in this work is that, first of all, it gives you access to documents which you would never have access to otherwise. In Italy there are families of people who were massacred who sixty years later are still unable to get access to information about their loved ones, they cannot get to the truth. I believe it is very important to be able to get access to unauthorized disclosures or secret documents like CIA and NSA documents. WikiLeaks provides us with unprecedented access to these documents. People at the CIA and the NSA have no accountability, there is no serious oversight. In this case there is a real need for unauthorized disclosures. They want to continue to operate in darkness.

DB: Do you feel that your recent interview with Julian Assange has been distorted by publications such as the Guardian and the Washington Post and across the internet to present Assange as a Trump supporter?

SM: Absolutely. They completely distorted that interview, putting into his mouth things he never said. No one paid any attention to my protests. They were focused on their own interpretations. Finally it took Glenn Greenwald to expose this. The Guardian was forced to amend their article.

DB: How does this throw a spotlight on the political realities faced by Assange in detention?

SM: I have been there from the beginning so I have seen all kinds of attacks on Julian, with high-profile reporters and the international media just parroting what the Pentagon was saying; That Wikileaks had blood on its hands because they exposed the names of Afghan informants. When the US government began complaining that WikiLeaks was putting diplomats at risk, once again the media adopted the government position. The latest is they are crucifying Julian because he has not published Russian documents, saying that he is a Russian spy, etc. But I can tell you that WikiLeaks is obsessed about publishing, they will publish whatever they can get.

There is no way they can kill Julian Assange, it is not possible. We are in Europe, they cannot get to him with drones. But they can certainly destroy his reputation. And when it comes to journalism, reputation is everything.

RC: With all of its power and influence, why are the US government and its allies so obsessed with this one individual?

SM: Julian was able to hit them very hard, to expose them, to expose their

secrets. Here you have an organization exposing the truth behind two wars with facts, without resorting to any propaganda. Never before have they faced such revelations. I can well imagine they are furious.

DB: Why do you think it is so important that Julian Assange be freed and allowed to continue his work?

SM: Access to information is crucial for democracy. Take Afghanistan, we have been there since 2001 and what do we know about what has been going on there? It took Edward Snowden to expose the NSA. Before that we knew very little. This kind of information is crucial for our democracy. Unauthorized disclosures are crucial in the case of democracies and in the case of regimes. WikiLeaks is taking huge legal and extralegal risks to get this information out.

RC: The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has determined that Julian Assange is in fact being arbitrarily detained, that he is a political prisoner and must be released and compensated for all that he has been through. The British have yet to comply with this finding.

SM: This sends a terrible message to other countries which are holding people under arbitrary detention. What can the UK say to Iran or other rogue nations when they detain journalists or political and human rights activists? How can the UK say anything when they have a very high-profile editor under arbitrary detention in London?

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
