



## Charging Assange criminalizes journalism and helps the powerful | Aaron Maté

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**Aaron Maté (AM):** WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is facing extradition to the US after being seized from the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where Assange has taken asylum for more than six years. Assange is accused of conspiring with his source Chelsea Manning to conceal her identity as she accessed the Pentagon computer system. Now it appears their effort wasn't even successful. But regardless, protecting a source is one of the most core elements of journalism and that's why we're hearing press freedom advocates say that this indictment would criminalize the act of journalism itself.

**News speaker on MSNBC:** The arrest of Assange puts all journalists and publishers at risk of prosecution. Publishing classified information is not a crime.

**AM:** The indictment even faults Assange for publishing documents without a security clearance. Something journalists do all the time so it's not a stretch to say that this indictment sets a very dangerous precedent. And that's not a surprise given all we hear about Donald Trump's war on the media. Though it might be a surprise that many of those who claim to oppose Donald Trump, and to oppose his attacks on the press, are not just not opposing the indictment of Assange but celebrating it.

**Hillary Clinton:** It's not about punishing journalism, it's about assisting the hacking of the military computer to steal information from the United States government. The bottom line is, he has to answer for what he has done – at least as it's been charged.

**AM:** In welcoming the indictment of Assange, leading Democrats and pundits are joining forces with the most reactionary elements of Donald Trump's administration. To them, destroying Julian Assange has long been an obsession.

**Mike Pompeo:** It's time to call out WikiLeaks for what it really is: a non-state hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia. They have pretended America's First Amendment freedoms shield them from justice. They may have believed that but they are wrong.

**AM:** It is no secret why powerful figures like Mike Pompeo or Hillary Clinton want to destroy Assange. From the Iraq war logs that exposed U.S. war crimes, to the State Department cables that exposed U.S. destabilisation campaigns around the world, to the Democratic Party emails that showed corruption and DNC bias against Bernie Sanders, Julian Assange and WikiLeaks exposed the secrets of the powerful. Accordingly the powerful want to silence him. Trump is facing no resistance here from the resistance. In fact, top promoters of the Trump Russia conspiracy theory want Assange to face punishment for, they say, helping Russia influence the 2016 election.

**Rachel Maddow:** If U.S. prosecutors are gonna charge Assange with anything other than the one count that's already in this indictment: chop chop.

**AM:** The idea that Julian Assange worked with the Russian government and possibly with the Trump campaign has been a key pillar of the Trump Russia conspiracy theory, but all the available facts undermine it. When Roger Stone was indicted for lying about his efforts to contact WikiLeaks, the indictment from Robert Mueller showed that Stone had no actual contacts to WikiLeaks. In fact, the only known contact between WikiLeaks and Roger Stone was WikiLeaks telling stone to stop making false claims of association between them. It's true that WikiLeaks exchange some messages with Donald Trump Jr. But those messages underscore the fact that Trump and the Trump campaign had no privileged access to WikiLeaks information.

That's why the indictment of Roger Stone underscored the fact that the Trump campaign was trying to press Roger Stone – a person who had no contact to WikiLeaks – for information on WikiLeaks; information that he did not have. It's true that Assange also exchanged messages online with a persona named Guccifer 2.0 who the US government says was a front for Russian intelligence. The details there are still unclear, and one of the reasons why we don't know the full story is because the US government has made no effort to interview Assange. During his lengthy exhaustive investigation Robert Mueller never tried to speak with Julian Assange or WikiLeaks. Assange has made offers to speak with congressional committees but those have been rebuffed. Now both Mueller and Congress might have been following the lead of former FBI director Jim Comey who personally intervened to break off potential talks between Assange and the US government. There are other facts that undermine this notion of Assad and Russia being in cahoots. It's true that Assange had a program on RT, the Russian owned network. It's also true though that in the fall of 2017 WikiLeaks published extensive files about surveillance inside of Russia.

So certainly when it comes to Julian Assange and the 2016 campaign there are many details that are unclear and facts that need to come out. But the way to do that is not through this extradition effort by Trump's Justice Department. The way to do that is for Assange to have his freedom, something he has been denied for more than six years. If Assange is brought to the US then we are not just legitimizing a US effort to exert its power in any country that it wishes. We're also cosigning a brazen attack on press freedom. Now, there are many people who loathe Julian Assange for different reasons, and to them it might feel good to see him in handcuffs, no matter what the reason. But think about what we've just been through with the Trump-Russia investigation. It certainly comforted many people to believe – as we were told endlessly for two plus years: that Donald Trump and Russia conspired and that Robert Mueller was going to prove it, possibly even drag out Donald Trump from the White House. But the exact opposite happened. Robert Mueller found no Trump Russia collusion and in the process handed Trump a massive re-election campaign gift heading into 2020. If Julian Assange, who is known around the world for challenging the powerful, is extradited to the US, that's a whole new victory for Donald Trump, Mike Pompeo and the other powerful figures that want to silence him. For those of us in the public who claim to oppose Donald Trump's assaults on democracy, the question for us is that – if Donald Trump carries out this brazen attack on media freedom with chilling implications for the future – do we want to stand by and cheer him on?