

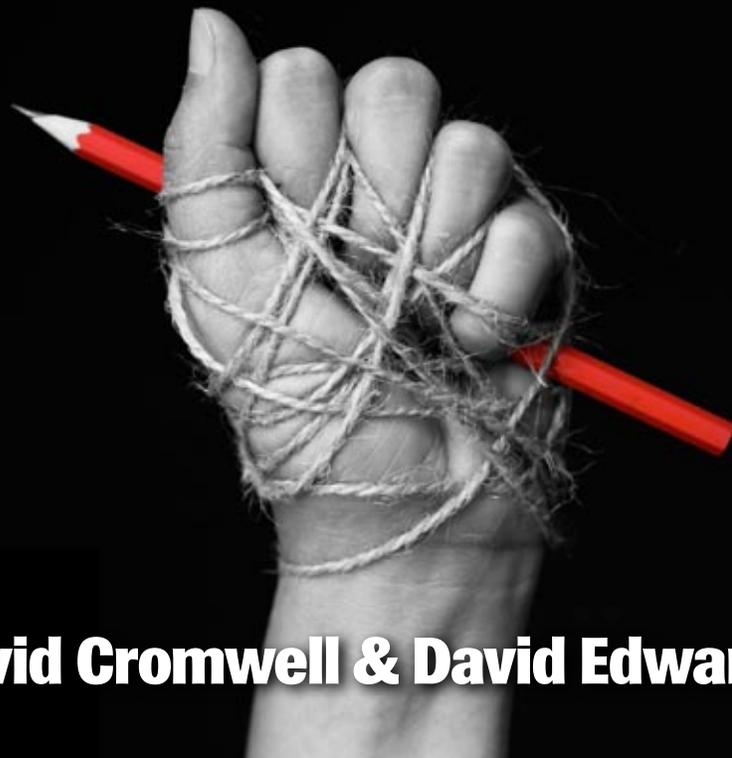
# Extra

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## 'ABSOLUTE AND ARBITRARY POWER'

How the media is helping to kill  
Extinction Rebellion and Julian Assange



**David Cromwell & David Edwards**

# 'ABSOLUTE AND ARBITRARY POWER'

## How the media is helping to kill Extinction Rebellion and Julian Assange

By DAVID CROMWELL & DAVID EDWARDS

**T**he use and misuse of George Orwell's truth-telling is so widespread that we can easily miss his intended meaning. For example, with perfect (Orwellian) irony, the BBC has a statue of Orwell outside Broadcasting House, bearing the inscription: *'If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.'*

Fine words, but suitably ambiguous: the BBC might argue that it is merely exercising its 'liberty' in endlessly channelling the worldview of powerful interests – crass propaganda that many people certainly 'do not want to hear'.

Orwell's real intention is made clearer in this second comment: 'Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed: everything else is public relations.'

In this line attributed to him (although there is some debate about where it originated), Orwell was talking about power – real journalism challenges the powerful. And this is the essential difference between the vital work of WikiLeaks and the propaganda role performed by state-corporate media like the BBC every day on virtually every issue.

On September 6, the *Mail on Sunday* ran two edi-

torials, side by side. The first was titled, 'A sinister, shameful attack on free speech'. It decried the Extinction Rebellion action on Friday September 4 to blockade three newspaper printing presses owned by Rupert Murdoch's UK News. The second editorial, as we will see below, was a feeble call not to send Julian Assange to the US, on the eve of his crucial extradition hearing in London.

Extinction Rebellion's protest, lasting just a few hours, temporarily prevented the distribution of Murdoch newspapers, such as the *Sun* and the *Times*, as well as other titles printed by Murdoch's presses, including the *Daily Mail*, *Mail on Sunday* and the *Daily Telegraph*.

The *Mail on Sunday* editorial predictably condemned the protesters' supposed attempt at 'censorship', declaring it: 'a throwback to the very worst years of trade union militancy, which came close to strangling a free press and which was only defeated by the determined action of Rupert Murdoch.'

The paper fumed: 'The newspaper blockade was a shameful and dangerous attempt to crush free speech, and it should never be repeated.'

This was the propaganda message that was repeated across much of the 'mainstream media', epitomised by the empty rhetoric of Prime Minister Boris Johnson: 'A free press is vital in holding the government and other powerful institutions to account on issues critical for the future of our country, including the

Photo: Matt Brown, via Wikipedia



**PERFECT IRONY:** Martin Jennings' statue of George Orwell outside the BBC's Broadcasting House headquarters in London.



**WHOSE FREE SPEECH?:** Front pages on the morning after Extinction Rebellion shut down some newspaper deliveries. However, just five companies control 80 percent of the media in the UK.

fight against climate change. It is completely unacceptable to seek to limit the public's access to news in this way.'

Johnson's comments could have been pure satire penned by Chris Morris, Mark Steel or the late Jeremy Hardy. Closer to the grubby truth, a different Johnson – Samuel – described the 'free press' as 'Scribbling on the backs of advertisements'.

As our organisation Media Lens has repeatedly demonstrated over the past 20 years, it is the state-corporate media, including BBC News, that has endlessly 'limited the public's access to news' by denying the public the full truth about climate breakdown, UK/US warmongering, including wars on Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, the arming of Saudi Arabia and complicity in that brutal regime's destruction of Yemen, UK government support for the apartheid state of Israel even as it crushes the Palestinian people, the insidious prising open of the NHS to private interests, and numerous other issues of public importance.

When has the mythical 'free press' ever fully and properly held to account Boris Johnson or any of his predecessors in 10 Downing Street? Who can forget that Tony Blair, steeped in the blood of so many Iraqis, is still held in esteem as an elder statesman whose views are sought out by 'mainstream' news outlets, including BBC News and the *Guardian*? As John Pilger said recently: 'Always contrast Julian Assange with Tony Blair. One

will be fighting for his life in court on 7 Sept for the “crime” of exposing war crimes while the other evades justice for the paramount crime of Iraq.’

Health Secretary Matt Hancock, who has presided over a national public health disaster with soaring rates of mortality during the coronavirus pandemic, had the affront to tweet a photograph of himself with a clutch of right-wing papers under his arm, declaring: ‘Totally outrageous that Extinction Rebellion are trying to suppress free speech by blockading newspapers. They must be dealt with by the full force of the law.’

It is Hancock himself, together with government colleagues and advisers – not least Johnson and his protector, Dominic Cummings – who should ‘be dealt with by the full force of the law’. As Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet* medical journal, said of Boris Johnson in May: ‘you dropped the ball, Prime Minister. That was criminal. And you know it.’

Extinction Rebellion (XR) explained succinctly via Twitter their reason for their ‘totally outrageous’ action: ‘Dear Newsagents, we are sorry for disruption caused to your business this morning. Dear Mr. Murdoch, we are absolutely not sorry for continuing to disrupt your agenda this morning. @rupertmurdoch #FreeTheTruth #ExtinctionRebellion #TellTheTruth’

An article on the XR website, simply titled, ‘We do not have a free press’, said: ‘We are in an emergency of unprecedented scale and the papers we have targeted are not reflecting the scale and urgency of what is happening to our planet.’

One of the XR protesters was ‘Steve’, a former journalist for 25 years who had worked for the *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *the Telegraph* and the *Times*. He was filmed on location during the protest. He explained that he was participating, in part, because he is worried about the lack of a future for his children. And a major reason for how we got to this point is that journalists are: ‘stuck inside a toxic system where they don’t have any choice but to tell the stories that these newspapers want to be told.’

He continued: ‘Every person who works on News International or a *Mail* newspaper knows what story is or isn’t acceptable for their bosses. And their bosses



**OUTRAGEOUS!:** Matt Hancock, the UK's health minister tweeted this picture of himself with an armful of right-wing newspapers under his arm after the ER action.

know that because they know what’s acceptable to Murdoch or Rothermere or the other billionaires that run 70 per cent of our media’.

Steve said he left that system because he ‘couldn’t bear the way it worked’.

The most recent report by the independent Media Reform Coalition on UK media ownership, published in 2019, revealed the scale of the problem of extremely concentrated media ownership. Just three companies – Rupert Murdoch’s News UK, *Daily Mail* Group and Reach (publisher of the *Mirror* titles) dominate 83 per cent of the national newspaper market (up from 71 per cent in 2015). When online readers are included, just five companies – News UK, *Daily Mail* Group, Reach, *Guardian* and *Telegraph* – dominate nearly 80 per cent of the market.

As we noted of XR’s worthy action: ‘Before anyone denounces this as an attack on the “free press” – there is no free press. There is a billionaire-owned, profit-maximising, ad-dependent corporate press that has knowingly suppressed the truth of climate collapse and the need for action to protect corporate profits.’

Zarah Sultana, Labour MP for Coventry South, indicated her support too: ‘A tiny number of billionaires own vast swathes of our press. Their papers relentlessly campaign for right-wing politics, promot-

ing the interests of the ruling class and scapegoating minorities. A free press is vital to democracy, but too much of our press isn't free at all.'

By contrast, Labour leader Keir Starmer once again demonstrated his establishment credentials as 'a safe pair of hands' by condemning XR's protest. Craig Murray commented: 'At a time when the government is mooting designating Extinction Rebellion as Serious Organised Crime, right wing bequipped muppet Keir Starmer was piously condemning the group, stating: "The free press is the cornerstone of democracy and we must do all we can to protect it."'

Starmer had also commented: 'Denying people the chance to read what they choose is wrong and does nothing to tackle climate change.'

But denying people the chance to read what they would choose – the corporate-unfriendly truth – on climate change is exactly what the corporate media, misleadingly termed 'mainstream media', is all about.

Media activist and lecturer Justin Schlosberg made a number of cogent observations on 'press freedom' in a Twitter thread: '9 times out of 10 when people in Britain talk about protecting press freedom what they really mean is protecting press power'.

He pointed out the 'giant myth' promulgated by corporate media, forever trying to resist any attempt to curb their power; namely that: 'Britain's mainstream [sic] press is a vital pillar of our democracy, covering a diversity of perspectives and upholding professional standards of journalism...the reality is closer to the exact inverse of such claims. More than 10 million people voted for a socialist party at the last election (13 million in 2017) and polls have consistently shown that majority of British public oppose austerity'.

Schlosberg continued: "The "diversity" of our national press [...] covers the political spectrum from liberal/centre to hard right and has overwhelmingly

## Read our Previous ColdType Extras on the trials of Julian Assange



### Julian Assange must be freed, not betrayed – By John Pilger

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### The Last Stand of Julian Assange – By Jonathan Cook

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backed austerity economics for the best part of the last 4 decades... [moreover] the UK press enjoys an unrivalled international reputation for producing a diatribe of fake, racist and misogynistic hate speech over anything that can be called journalism’.

He rightly concluded: ‘ironically one of the greatest threats to democracy is a press that continues to weave myths in support of its vested interests, and a BBC that continues to uncritically absorb them.’

## Assange In the US Crosshairs

**A**longside the *Mail on Sunday*’s billionaire-owned, extremist right-wing attack on climate activists highlighting a non-existent ‘free press’, the paper had an editorial that touched briefly on the danger to all journalists should WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange be extradited from the UK to the US: ‘the charges against Mr Assange, using the American Espionage Act, might be used against legitimate journalists in this country’.

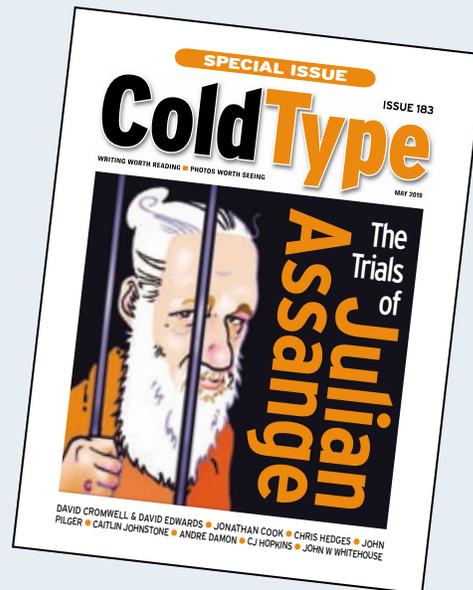
The implication was that Assange is not to be regarded as a ‘legitimate journalist’. Indeed, the billionaire Rothermere-owned newspaper – a more accurate description than ‘newspaper’ – made clear its antipathy towards him: ‘Mr Assange’s revelations of leaked material caused grave embarrassment to Washington and are alleged to have done material damage too.’

The term ‘embarrassment’ refers to the exposure of US criminal actions threatening the great rogue state’s ability to commit similar crimes in future: not embarrassing (Washington is without shame), but potentially limiting.

The *Mail on Sunday* continued: ‘Mr Assange has been a spectacular nuisance during his time in this country, lawlessly jumping bail and wasting police time by taking refuge in embassy of Ecuador. The *Mail on Sunday* disapproves of much of what he has done, but we must also ask if his current treatment is fair, right or just.’

The insinuations and subtle smears embedded in

## Read our special 40-page issue of ColdType THE TRIALS OF JULIAN ASSANGE



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these few lines have been repeatedly demolished. And there was no mention that Nils Melzer, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, as well as numerous doctors, health experts and human rights organisations, have strongly condemned the UK's appalling abuse of Assange and demanded his immediate release.

Melzer has accused the British government of torturing Assange: 'the primary purpose of torture is not necessarily interrogation, but very often torture is used to intimidate others, as a show to the public what happens if you don't comply with the government. That is the purpose of what has been done to Julian Assange. It is not to punish or coerce him, but to silence him and to do so in broad daylight, making visible to the entire world that those who expose the misconduct of the powerful no longer enjoy the protection of the law, but essentially will be annihilated. It is a show of absolute and arbitrary power'.

Melzer also spoke about the price he will pay for challenging the powerful: 'I am under no illusions that my UN career is probably over. Having openly confronted two P5-States (UN security council members) the way I have, I am very unlikely to be approved by them for another high-level position. I have been told, that my uncompromising engagement in this case comes at a political price.'

This is the reality of the increasingly authoritarian world we are living in.

The weak defence of Assange now being seen in even right-wing media, such as the *Mail on Sunday*, indicates a real fear that any journalist could in future be targeted by the US government for publishing material that might anger Washington.

In an interview this week, Barry Pollack, Julian Assange's US lawyer, warned of the 'very dangerous' precedent that could be set in motion with Assange's extradition to the US: 'The position that the US is taking is a very dangerous one. The position the US is taking is that they have jurisdiction all over the world and can pursue criminal charges against any journalist anywhere on the planet, whether they're a US citizen or not. But if they're not a US citizen, not only can the US pursue charges against them but that

person has no defense under the First Amendment.'

In stark contrast to the weak protestations of the *Mail on Sunday* and the rest of the establishment media, Noam Chomsky pointed out the simple truth in a recent interview on RT (note the dearth of Chomsky interviews on BBC News, and consider why his views are not sought after): 'Julian Assange committed the crime of letting the general population know things that they have a right to know and that powerful states don't want them to know.'

Likewise, John Pilger issued a strong warning: 'This week, one of the most important struggles for freedom in my lifetime nears its end. Julian Assange who exposed the crimes of great power faces burial alive in Trump's America unless he wins his extradition case. Whose side are you on?'

Pilger recommended an excellent in-depth piece by Jonathan Cook, a former *Guardian/Observer* journalist (republished in our previous *ColdType Extra*), in which Cook observed: 'For years, journalists cheered Assange's abuse. Now they've paved his path to a US gulag.'

Peter Osborne is a rare example of a right-leaning journalist who has spoken out strongly in defence of Assange. Osborne wrote last week in *Press Gazette* that: 'Future generations of journalists will not forgive us if we do not fight extradition.'

He set out the following scenario: 'Let's imagine a foreign dissident was being held in London's Belmarsh Prison charged with supposed espionage offences by the Chinese authorities.

'And that his real offence was revealing crimes committed by the Chinese Communist Party – including publishing video footage of atrocities carried out by Chinese troops.

'To put it another way, that his real offence was committing the crime of journalism.

'Let us further suppose the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture said this dissident showed "all the symptoms typical for prolonged exposure to psychological torture" and that the Chinese were putting pressure on the UK authorities to extradite this individual where he could face up to 175 years in prison.

'The outrage from the British press would be deafening.'

Osborne continued: ‘There is one crucial difference. It is the US trying to extradite the co-founder of Wikileaks. ‘Yet there has been scarcely a word in the mainstream British media in his defence.’

In fact, as we have repeatedly highlighted, Assange has been the subject of a propaganda blitz by the UK media, attacking and smearing him, over and over again, often in the pages of the ‘liberal’ *Guardian*.

At the time of writing, neither ITV political editor Robert Peston nor BBC News political editor Laura Kuenssberg appear to have reported the Assange extradition case. They have not even tweeted about it once, even though they are both very active on Twitter. In fact, the last time Peston so much as mentioned Assange on his Twitter feed was 2017. Kuenssberg’s record is even worse; her Twitter silence extends all the way back to 2014. These high-profile journalists are supposedly prime exemplars of the very best ‘high-quality’ UK news broadcasters, maintaining the values of a ‘free press’, holding politicians to account and keeping the public informed.

On September 7, John Pilger gave an address outside the Old Bailey in London, just before Julian Assange’s extradition hearing began there. His words

were a powerful rebuke to those so-called ‘journalists’ that have maintained a cowardly silence, or worse. The ‘official truth-tellers’ of the media – the stenographers who collaborate with those in power, helping to sell their wars – are, Pilger says, ‘Vichy journalists’.

He continued: ‘It is said that whatever happens to Julian Assange in the next three weeks will diminish if not destroy freedom of the press in the West. But which press? *The Guardian*? The BBC, The *New York Times*, the Jeff Bezos *Washington Post*?’

‘No, the journalists in these organisations can breathe freely. The Judases on the *Guardian* who flirted with Julian, exploited his landmark work, made their pile then betrayed him, have nothing to fear. They are safe because they are needed.

‘Freedom of the press now rests with the honorable few: the exceptions, the dissidents on the internet who belong to no club, who are neither rich nor laden with Pulitzers, but produce fine, disobedient, moral journalism – those like Julian Assange.’

*David Cromwell & David Edwards* are co-editors of *Media Lens*, the UK media watchdog at [www.medialens.org](http://www.medialens.org).

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