

Assange is free – but the fight for freedom of expression has only just begun

The WikiLeaks founder had to plead guilty to “conspiracy”.
As a result, freedom of the press is under threat as never before

by Michael Straumann,* Switzerland



Michael Straumann.
(Picture ma)

The world held its breath when Julian Assange was finally released after 1901 days of solitary confinement. But at what cost? Almost two months have passed since his release, and the quality journalism media has already turned to business as usual. The Assange case must be our

daily memorial. It requires a meticulous reappraisal. This is no less than a scandal of the century for journalism and a declaration of bankruptcy for the West, which likes to present itself as a “community of shared values”.

In the book “1984”, the protagonist *Winston Smith* had to confess his guilt to “Big Brother” towards the end of the plot. Like *Julian Assange*, he finally confessed to spying on the state after long periods of torture.

An end with terror?

Assange’s release is good news for all journalists, civil rights activists and activists who have campaigned for his freedom, day in and day out. The worst fears have not been realised: The Australian journalist was not extradited to the United States, where he would have faced 175 years in prison. Nor did the concerns materialise that he would sooner or later die in the high-security wing at Belmarsh due to his desolate state of health.

It was a very moving moment when Julian Assange arrived at Canberra Airport to embrace his wife, *Stella*, and father, *John Shipton*, most intimately. All’s well that ends well, you might think.

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The Assange family reunited.

(Picture from 22 July 2024. https://x.com/Stella_Assange/status/1815335325717459424)

But no! Two downers dampen the joy for Assange and his family.

For one thing, it is shameful that he had to spend so long in unlawful torture. It is worth remembering *Nils Melzer*, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, who *pointed out in November 2019*² that Assange is being tortured psychologically. He and his medical team visited him in his cell in May 2019 and found symptoms in him that are all “typical of prolonged psychological torture”.

The public outcry over Assange’s already miserable condition was limited. Western politicians and mainstream journalists reacted mainly with shrugs. Only “alternative” media and lone opposition politicians highlighted and criticised the arbitrary treatment of the *WikiLeaks* founder. It was only later that the Australian government intervened to pressure the British government to release Assange. In September 2021, as a candidate for the chancellorship, the current German foreign minister, *Annalena Baerbock*, called for his “immediate release”.³ When the Green Party came to power in Germany, the issue of Assange suddenly went quiet.

Over the past three years, unease about his detention under torture has increased somewhat in the mainstream media. However, the media re-

ports that critically examined his prison conditions are no longer to be dismissed as mere fig leaves. It is to be hoped that Assange will recover from his traumatic experiences as well as possible and will not have to spend the rest of his life as a psychological wreck.

On the other hand, Assange had to agree to a deal with the US government. He was forced to plead guilty to one charge, namely “conspiracy to obtain and disclose information affecting US national defence”. *Robert Kennedy Jr.* is right when he says⁴ that the US security apparatus has succeeded in “criminalising journalism and extending its jurisdiction to non-citizens”.

The fact is that this arbitrariness has created a precedent in the West. From now on, every journalist must expect repression if they expose government crimes and offend against the reason of state. The temporarily suspended ban on the “Compact” magazine, issued by the Ger-

man Ministry of the Interior under *Nancy Faeser*, should also be seen in this context. Western governments have tasted blood. EU Commission President *Ursula von der Leyen*, who called for even closer international cooperation at this year’s WEF meeting to combat “misinformation” and “disinformation”,⁵ can be pleased.

Source: <https://www.straumedien.ch/p/assange-ist-frei-aber-der-kampf-um>, 23 July 2024

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteen_Eighty-Four

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/11/un-expert-torture-sounds-alarm-again-julian-assanges-lifemay-be-risk>

³ <https://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/profile/annalena-baerbock/fragen-antworten/wie-stehen-sie-zum-fall-julian-assange>

⁴ <https://x.com/RobertKennedyJr/status/1805389415663255819>

⁵ <https://x.com/disclosetv/status/1747224916296946077>