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Swedish media climate regarding the Assange case

Ms. Robinson:

You have asked me to describe the current media climate in Sweden concerning the suspicions of criminal conduct that have been raised against Julian Assange and the related extradition hearing now taking place in London.

I am quite willing to do so, as the issues involved are of great importance and they have long been of special interest to me. Among other things, I have designed and led courses in media studies as a university lecturer in sociology in the United States, my former homeland.

In 1988 I immigrated to Sweden, where I am now a citizen. For the past eighteen years, I have been editor and publisher of Nordic News Network, an Internet-based service that has published numerous analyses of Swedish media, arranged seminars and public meetings on that and related subjects, etc., often in co-operation with media researchers and other social scientists. In that capacity, it has been essential to monitor a wide variety of Swedish media, and the Assange case is an issue to which I have paid particular attention.

Due to time constraints, I am not at this moment able to offer a thorough analysis of the manner in which Swedish media have reported on that and related issues. But I can convey some general impressions, having closely followed the case since it became a major international news item in August last year.

In my view, what is most striking about coverage of the Assange case by mainstream Swedish media is how little effort they have made to report on its development. That applies especially to the accumulating evidence that the accusations against Mr. Assange may be false or misleading, and that the behaviour of the Swedish prosecutor in charge of the case may have been highly improper.

For example, I have yet to see or hear any substantial attempt by leading Swedish media to report on the original police interviews, the transcripts of which were made available on the Internet last week. Thus, the many news consumers who rely on those media have not, for example, been informed that:

- One of the two female accusers has provided contradictory accounts of the events in question, continued to associate with Mr. Assange in an openly friendly manner, and rejected repeated offers for him to be quartered elsewhere than at her flat — even *after* the alleged assault of which she later accused him.
- The other female accuser confided to interviewed witnesses that: she never intended for Mr. Assange to be charged with rape; she felt “run over” by the police and others who became involved; she became so distraught upon learning that a warrant had been issued for Mr. Assange’s arrest that she was unable to complete the interview; that she has never endorsed the written summary of the interview (it was not recorded *verbatim*); that the policewoman who conducted the interview was subsequently denied access to her notes and instructed by a superior to sign an altered account; etc., etc.

Little of this or any of the other evidence tending to exculpate Mr. Assange has been reported in the mainstream Swedish press. In some instances, it has been grossly distorted, as with a signed leader in *Dagens Nyheter* which asserted that, "There is evidence which supports the women's version of events, while Assange is left all alone with his story." (Hanne Kjöllér, "Julian Assange: Falskskyltad apostel". *Dagens Nyheter*, 8 Feb. 2011.)

What the interview transcripts and other evidence reveal is just the opposite. But this bizarre interpretation can be expected to have a significant impact on public opinion, as *Dagens Nyheter* is Sweden's most influential daily newspaper and is often used as a source and reference by other media. Its editorial profile is centre-liberal, in British terms perhaps somewhere between *The Times* and *The Telegraph*. It may also be noted that, in Sweden, leaders tend to be taken quite seriously and are often referred to as respected sources of analysis and opinion.

In short, Swedish media have largely ignored the mounting evidence tending to discredit both the accusations against Mr. Assange and the behaviour of the Swedish prosecutor. Instead, the main theme has been that two young Swedish women have made serious charges which must be taken seriously, and that Swedish officials can be trusted to pursue the matter in a fair and unbiased manner. It is therefore unnecessary, apparently, to report in detail why doubts have been raised about the prosecutor's conduct.

The clear bias against Mr. Assange in favour of his two alleged victims has become increasingly blatant in response to the extradition hearing in London. There have been a number of outraged media reactions to what has been portrayed as a vile and dishonest attack on the honour and reputation of Sweden by Mr. Assange's attorneys and friendly witnesses.

Among the latter have been some highly qualified Swedish experts whose testimony has presented an impediment to indignant outrage. That problem has been dealt with by dismissive and disparaging commentary, and even with the use of unflattering photographs as in the following example:



*Brita Sundberg-Weitman
Aftonbladet 2011-02-08*



*Brita Sundberg-Weitman
Google Images*

The photo on the left was used by *Aftonbladet* on February 8th with the fairly obvious intent to portray retired judge Brita Sundberg-Weitman and her testimony in a negative light. The photo on the right, readily available from Google Images, is a far more accurate representation of her appearance — but would not have served the obvious editorial purpose.

Aftonbladet is a tabloid with the largest readership in Sweden and is historically associated with the Social Democratic Party (corresponding roughly to Labour in the U.K.). It is the most left-leaning of the major Swedish news media, *somewhat* similar in outlook to *The Guardian*, and more inclined than the rest to criticize U.S. foreign policy, for example. As an indicator of the general media tendency, it is therefore especially significant that *Aftonbladet* has adopted an increasingly negative attitude toward Mr. Assange and the arguments presented on his behalf.

An ominous related development has been the intervention of Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt in the case. Quite recently, Mr. Reinfeldt volunteered the assurance that there would be no political interference in the extradition proceedings. But he has in recent days issued strong and widely publicized condemnations of the negative impression of the Swedish judicial system which has emerged from the hearing, intimating that it is part of a devious effort to deny justice to Mr. Assange's two alleged victims.

Such comments are clearly intended to influence Swedish public opinion against Mr. Assange, and it may be assumed that there will be more of the same in the months ahead. This suggests that (a) Prime Minister Reinfeldt fully intends to politicize the case in collaboration with the Swedish media, and (b) his word is not to be trusted in matters of extradition. Hostile or indifferent public opinion toward Mr. Assange will be a valuable political asset for Mr. Reinfeldt in the likely event that the United States requests the extradition of Mr. Assange from Sweden.

The potential consequences for Mr. Assange, should he be extradited to Sweden, are fairly obvious. Among other things, there is already a clearly negative bias against him in the mainstream media, and it can be expected to intensify if the matter proceeds to trial. The ground has been prepared for a media witch hunt, and past experience strongly indicates that it will not be deterred by mere facts and indisputable evidence.

That may come as a surprise to observers in the United Kingdom where, it is my understanding, Sweden is widely regarded as a paragon of rationality. As an immigrant and observer, I am inclined to agree with that view in most regards — especially in comparison with my country of origin. But “rationality” is definitely not a term that I would apply to mainstream Swedish news media. In my view and that of many others, they often adopt a wolf-pack mentality that can be very disturbing to witness, and can have devastating consequences for “the hunted”. There are some appalling examples of “trial by media” in recent Swedish history and, as noted above, a clear tendency in that direction seems to be developing with regard to Mr. Assange.

It has been especially odd to read and hear all the patriotic defences of Sweden's honour in response to the criticisms made during the U.K. extradition hearing. Normally, Swedish journalists are the first and loudest to criticize their country's imperfections, real or imagined. That they have chosen to be outraged by well-documented criticisms of the way in which this case has been handled by Swedish officials — that is most strange in my experience, and suggests a special animosity toward Mr. Assange.

It all bodes ill for the fate of Mr. Assange if he is extradited to Sweden and prosecuted for the increasingly dubious offences of which he has been accused.

That, in brief, is my impression of the current media climate in Sweden. Given sufficient time, I will gladly attempt to provide a more thorough assessment at some future date.

Yours sincerely,

Al Burke
Lidingö, Sweden
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