



Julian Assange Extradition Case Raises Concern Over Freedom of Speech

Few individual rights have been safeguarded as closely as the freedoms of speech, press, and expression, all of which are enshrined under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and exist in 165 countries worldwide according to the World Population Review. Universally, these freedoms are an important part of maintaining a healthy and lively democracy in which ideas and information can be shared. However, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's long-fought extradition case has raised concerns over speech and press freedoms. Recently, London's High Court held two days of hearings, which will decide whether Assange can appeal the U.S. request for extradition to stand on trial for 17 counts of espionage charges. These were levied against Assange for his alleged role in encouraging and aiding U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning, who seized hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables and military files that were subsequently published on WikiLeaks. Assange's wife, Stella Assange, noted that such an extradition would be a death sentence, due to the 52-year-old's deteriorating physical and mental health. These health concerns, it is feared, could get worse upon arrival in the notoriously harsher U.S. prison system. The court's decision is not expected to arrive for at least another month, but if the decision is to extradite Assange, then his council plans to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in an attempt to halt the process.

One of the reasons that Assange's extradition case has been highly controversial is because it is unclear whether he had played a direct role in obtaining the documents and whether the publication of the documents was harmful. U.S. lawyers attempting to extradite Assange claim that he had put lives at risk by publishing unredacted documents. However, there is substantial evidence that suggests that he was not the one who redacted the documents. Independent journalist, Chris Hedges, revealed that Assange had initially redacted the files, but the unredacted versions were first published by the website Cryptome. Furthermore, there is no evidence that anyone named in the documents has come to harm and other allegations have been debunked as well. If this is the case, then what Julian Assange is being charged with is being a journalist and not a conspirator.

If Assange is prosecuted by the U.S., he will surely face prison time and his case will set a dangerous precedent for investigative journalists worldwide. He would be charged under the 1917 Espionage Act, which was never intended to target publishers and journalists. The secrecy-busting journalism that Assange provided through the WikiLeaks publications exposed U.S. war crimes and abuses in both Iraq and Afghanistan. According to Amnesty International, "News and publishing outlets often and rightfully publish classified information to inform on matters of utmost public importance. Publishing information that is in the public interest is a cornerstone of media freedom. It's also protected under international human rights law and should not be criminalized." The worry is that the potential precedent set by this case could be used as justification for other countries to silence opposition voices and conceal important information. Historically, certain U.S. actions have backfired as they have been used by repressive regimes to justify their own actions. Julia Hall, an Amnesty International expert on counterterrorism and criminal justice in Europe, contends that "the risk to publishers and investigative journalists around the world hangs in the balance. Should Julian Assange be sent to the United States and prosecuted there, global media freedoms will be on trial, too."

The fundamental problem with the extradition case is that it prioritizes security over freedom; however, given that there is no evidence that Assange was directly involved in the breach, the case has very little to do with security and everything to do with political motivations. To some analysts, the U.S. is seeking political retribution by jailing the man deemed responsible for bringing violations to light. It is in the United States' best interest to maintain fair and democratic practices so as not to appear hypocritical when condemning oppressive entities. At a time when global events and crises necessitate fair and independent journalism, this case has become all the more important.