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Freedom of information - Snowden Warns Targeting of Greenwald and Assange Shows Governments 'Ready to Stop the Presses—If They Can'

Saturday 1 February 2020, by [CORBETT Jessica](#) (Date first published: 27 January 2020).

“The most essential journalism of every era,” says the NSA whistleblower, “is precisely that which a government attempts to silence.”



Snowden and Greenwald

American whistleblower Edward Snowden in a Hong Kong hotel room with journalist Glenn Greenwald in a scene from Laura Poitras' documentary film Citizenfour. (Photo: Citizenfour/screenshot)

In an op-ed published Sunday night by the *Washington Post* [1], National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden connected Brazilian federal prosecutors' recent decision to file charges against American investigative journalist Glenn Greenwald to the U.S. government's efforts to prosecute WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

“The most essential journalism of every era is precisely that which a government attempts to silence. These prosecutions demonstrate that they are ready to stop the presses—if they can.”
—Edward Snowden, NSA whistleblower

Snowden, board of directors president at Freedom of the Press Foundation, is among those who have spoken out since Greenwald was charged with cybercrime on Jan. 21 [2] [3]. Reporters and human rights advocates have denounced the prosecution as “a straightforward attempt to intimidate and retaliate against Greenwald and The Intercept for their critical reporting” on officials in Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's government.

Greenwald, who is also on Freedom of the Press Foundation's board, is one of the journalists to whom Snowden leaked classified materials in 2013.

As Common Dreams [4] reported last week, the NSA whistleblower, who has lived with asylum protection in Russia for the past several years, is also among the political observers who have pointed out that although even some of Greenwald's critics have rallied behind him in recent days,

Assange has not experienced such solidarity. Assange is being held in a London prison, under conditions that have raised global alarm, while he fights against extradition to the United States.

In his *Post* op-ed, “Trump Has Created a Global Playbook to Attack Those Revealing Uncomfortable Truths,” Snowden wrote of Greenwald’s case that “as ridiculous as these charges are, they are also dangerous—and not only to Greenwald: They are a threat to press freedom everywhere. The legal theory used by the Brazilian prosecutors—that journalists who publish leaked documents are engaged in a criminal ‘conspiracy’ with the sources who provide those documents—is virtually identical to the one advanced in the Trump administration’s indictment [5] of [Assange] in a new application of the historically dubious Espionage Act.”

Snowden—who said in December that he believes that if he returned to the United States, he’d spend his life in prison for exposing global mass surveillance practices of the U.S. government—explained:

In each case, the charges came as an about-face from an earlier position. The federal police in Brazil stated as recently as December [6] that they had formally considered whether Greenwald could be said to have participated in a crime, and unequivocally found that he had not. That rather extraordinary admission itself followed an order in August 2019 from a Brazilian Supreme Court judge [7] —prompted by displays of public aggression against Greenwald by Bolsonaro and his allies—explicitly barring federal police from investigating Greenwald altogether. The Supreme Court judge declared that doing so would “constitute an unambiguous act of censorship [8].”

For Assange, the Espionage Act charges arrived years after the same theory had reportedly been considered—and rejected—by the former president Barack Obama’s Justice Department. Though the Obama administration was no fan of WikiLeaks, the former spokesman for Obama’s Attorney General Eric Holder later explained. “The problem the department has always had in investigating Julian Assange is there is no way to prosecute him for publishing information without the same theory being applied to journalists,” said the former Justice Department spokesman Matthew Miller [9]. “And if you are not going to prosecute journalists for publishing classified information, which the department is not, then there is no way to prosecute Assange.”

Although Obama’s administration was historically unfriendly to journalists [10] and leakers of classified materials, President Donald Trump’s administration has taken things a step further with its indictment of Assange. “The Trump administration,” he wrote, “with its disdain for press freedom matched only by its ignorance of the law, has respected no such limitations on its ability to prosecute and persecute, and its unprecedented decision to indict a publisher under the Espionage Act has profoundly dangerous implications for national security journalists around the country.”

Highlighting another similarity between the cases of Greenwald and Assange—that “their relentless crusades have rendered them polarizing figures (including, it may be noted, to each other)” —Snowden suggested that perhaps “authorities in both countries believed the public’s fractured opinions of their perceived ideologies would distract the public from the broader danger these prosecutions pose to a free press.” However, he noted, civil liberties groups and publishers have recognized both cases as “efforts to deter the most aggressive investigations by the most fearless journalists, and to open the door to a precedent that could soon still the pens of even the less cantankerous.”

“The most essential journalism of every era is precisely that which a government attempts to silence,” Snowden concluded. “These prosecutions demonstrate that they are ready to stop the presses—if they can.”

Journalists and press freedom advocates have shared Snowden's op-ed on social media since Sunday night [11].

Trevor Timm, executive director of Freedom of the Press Foundation, tweeted Monday morning that Snowden's piece "should be read in tandem" [12] with an op-ed published Sunday in the *New York Times* [13] by James Risen, a former reporter for the newspaper who is now at *The Intercept*. Risen also argued that "the case against Mr. Greenwald is eerily similar to the Trump administration's case against Mr. Assange."

And, according to Risen, Greenwald concurred:

In an interview with me on Thursday, Mr. Greenwald agreed that there are parallels between his case and Mr. Assange's, and added that he doesn't believe that Mr. Bolsonaro would have taken action against an American journalist if he had thought President Trump would oppose it.

"Bolsonaro worships Trump, and the Bolsonaro government is taking the signal from Trump that this kind of behavior is acceptable," he said.

Notably, Risen added, "the State Department has not issued any statement of concern about Brazil's case against Mr. Greenwald, which in past administrations would have been common practice."

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P.S.

- Common Dreams. Published on Monday, January 27, 2020:
<https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/01/27/snowden-warns-targeting-greenwald-and-assange-shows-governments-ready-stop-presses>
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Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 51935), [Brazil, Glenn Greenwald - Trump has created a global playbook to attack those revealing uncomfortable truths.](#)

[2] <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/01/22/absolute-red-alert-snowden-joins-journalists-and-rights-advocates-worldwide-rallying>

- [3] <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/01/21/we-will-not-be-intimidated-journalist-glenn-greenwald-defiant-after-being-charged>
- [4] <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/01/22/brazils-greenwald-prosecution-evokes-assanges-continued-imprisonment-uk-say>
- [5] <https://www.washingtonpost.com>
- [6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/world/americas/glenn-greenwald-brazil-cybercrimes.html>
- [7] <https://exame.abril.com.br/brasil/liminar-do-stf-impede-que-glenn-seja-punido-por-obtencao-de-mensagens/>
- [8] <https://theintercept.com/2019/08/08/brazil-supreme-court-glenn-greenwald/>
- [9] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/julian-assange-unlikely-to-face-us-charges-over-publishing-classified-documents/2013/11/25/dd27decc-55f1-11e3-8304-caf30787c0a9_story.html?tid=lk_inline_manual_13
- [10] <https://www.washingtonpost.com>
- [11] <https://twitter.com/elopezgross/status/1221605265964814337>
- [12] <https://twitter.com/trevortimm/status/1221829698356961281>
- [13] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/26/opinion/greenwald-brazil-reporter.html>