



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# What will the post-Assange era look like?



The post-Assange era began long before the Australian **landed** in his home country on Wednesday, after years in prison and 14 years after the release of thousands of secret US documents.

He was greeted with an undivided welcome, even among politicians. Australians were not the only ones who welcomed Assange's release following his partial guilty plea in a US court, viewing it as a relief that a personal drama that had the potential to garner global attention had come to an end.

Julian Assange's release and his return home leave the impression of a personal happy ending, like a good ending to a film in which we hope for the protagonist's salvation rather than an event with long-term global effect.

Both Assange and his WikiLeaks have already played this role, and the fact that he has been free since Wednesday does not mean that he will continue to try to change the world.

A website that has been in communication, law, and security studies textbooks for years no longer has the energy and potential to continue the mission for which it became famous. Its founder, now a free man despite his conviction for violating US espionage laws that he admitted, likely feels the same way.

## A controversial legacy

The legacy Assange leaves behind with his closed case will be no less controversial and contested than his earlier activism.

This is about the "criminalisation of journalism," **said** Assange's lawyer after the proceedings before the US court in the Mariana Islands concluded.

This is the definition Assange's supporters have used for years to describe the nature of the dispute, which they believe is a US government attempt to punish the Australian.

However, neither today, when Julian Assange is finally reunited with his family, nor in the

future, will the other camp agree. For them, Julian Assange will still not be a journalist but a hacker, activist, anarchist, or even a spy.

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The multi-year debate about whether Assange is a journalist, a media person, or not has largely shaped the strategy of the American justice system to bring this case to a conclusion.

Eventually, he accepted a plea deal and faced conviction for conspiracy to violate the Espionage Act. That seems pretty far from the sensitive zone where the US Constitution's First Amendment and the rules of free speech govern.

According to the plea deal, Assange's sin is hacking and espionage, not journalism. He instructed his employee Chelsea Manning as an insider how to access confidential databases under different usernames, which really looks like complicity in data theft.

Some, however, recognised the virtue of journalistic ethics, i.e., Assange's attempt as a journalist to protect the identity of his source.

## Global politicisation

These controversies will live on even after Assange's release. The discussion about whether Assange's agreement with the US judiciary establishes a precedent enabling governments to exert greater influence on the media than they have in the past will also persist.

After the legal conclusion, the politicisation of the entire case does not diminish and remains at its highest level. No fewer than four US presidential administrations have dealt with this case. Starting with George W. Bush's administration, which convicted Chelsea Manning during his tenure; Barack Obama's

administration, which reduced her sentence; Donald Trump's administration, which initiated Assange's extradition in 2017; and Biden's administration, which persistently pursued this case and successfully concluded it (legally) today.

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During this long period, global relations escalated into a complete polarisation between blocs committed to Western values and laws (including media freedom) and their opponents, mainly in the East and South.

In this political division, for the former, Assange continues to pose a threat to human life and the interests of the US through his illegal actions and continuous public support sensitive to attacks on freedom of public speech.

## A hero for autocratic regimes

For the latter, in authoritarian regimes, Assange is a double hero. Assange, often referred to as the "cyber-Prometheus" or the "digital Robin Hood," has made the ultimate sacrifice of his freedom for others to know the truth.

But more significantly, Assange serves as a living example for China and Russia, demonstrating that the West's glorification of free speech is a common hypocrisy and the imprisonment of political opponents is an accepted practice.



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Thus, the post-Assange era will not be free of previous controversies. It will remain an important topic, given that technical advancements in the Internet sphere have blurred the lines between what is acceptable and what is not, as well as what is moral and what is immoral when informing the public.

The mechanisms of regulation, even the development of ethical codes in the field of media or activism, are much slower than in real life, where boundaries are crossed every day.

Julian Assange has taken this confusion to an extreme. The compromise solution, which led to his release, will not deter today's investigative journalists and their media outlets. They are simply not in the same business as Assange was.

The agreement with the US judicial outpost in the middle of the Pacific serves as a symbolic closure to a personal life drama. However, the agreement will be accompanied by a globally polarised political public, citing Assange and his project less and less as time progresses.