

## Is the CIA hunting Assange's supporters?

Break-ins, surveillance, wiretapping: In the support scene of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, oddities have been piling up for years. Who is behind it is unclear - but those affected have suspicions.

[source: <https://archive.ph/2023.02.23-141119/https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/mutmassliche-jagd-auf-julian-assanges-unterstuetzer-im-schleppnetz-a-403c1e32-939d-4534-985d-2dd8e30573d7>]

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The implant is about four by six centimeters, gold-rimmed and contains a welded-in double battery. It was stuck on the circuit board of a - actually - tap-proof crypto-phone, provided with a stainless steel cover, on it the serial number 0317410-03311.

"How neatly they soldered," says Andy Müller-Maguhn as he shows photos of the implant, a so-called Field Programmable Gate Array, on his computer. It is equipped with U.S.-made chips and cannot be detected with a normal frequency locator.

He discovered it by chance in his apartment in Southeast Asia, hidden in a stationary phone through which he used to speak quite a few times with Julian Assange and journalists from around the world. "They were in my private rooms - that doesn't feel so great, to be honest."

Müller-Maguhn has considered whether to speak at such length to SPIEGEL, for which he has freelanced for years. Edward Snowden, the NSA, the CIA, the BND: The name of the 51-year-old, who was once a spokesman for the Chaos Computer Club, appeared under quite a few articles. He knows a lot about surveillance.

### Break-ins and intimidation

But since he seems to be under surveillance himself, he has become cautious. Especially since there is much to suggest that the oddities in his environment are connected to one of the world's most famous prisoners: Julian Assange. The WikiLeaks founder has been squatting in a London maximum-security prison since April 2019, fighting extradition to the United States, where he faces up to 175 years in prison in an espionage trial. With legal action well advanced, his fate could soon be sealed.

This is bad news also for Assange's companions, of whom Andy Müller-Maguhn is one of the most prominent. The German manages donations to WikiLeaks through the Wau Holland Foundation, and he regularly visited Assange when he was still hiding in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. He is named in the so-called Mueller Report on alleged Russian influence on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Mueller-Maguhn has not traveled to the United Kingdom or the United States for a long time.

The German is not the only one from WikiLeaks' circle of influence who has been experiencing strange things for years. Among them break-ins, intimidation and even alleged death threats.

At one point, a lawyer in London lost her laptop; at another, a journalist researching Assange's case had medical data stolen. The office of Assange's Spanish defense lawyers was broken into in a bizarre way. In Ecuador, a Swedish software developer has been held in the country for nearly four years on flimsy grounds. Elsewhere, Assange supporters who prefer to remain anonymous reported similar spooky incidents.

That they are connected cannot be proven. Nor has it been possible to determine the authors beyond doubt in any case so far. It could be a matter of coincidences. "But who is to believe that?" asks Assange's lawyer Aitor Martínez, who is certain that it is a concerted campaign by U.S. authorities, whose often dubious methods WikiLeaks has exposed quite a few times. "It's a vendetta against Julian Assange," says the Spaniard. And the focus is not only on companions and family members of Assange, but also on lawyers and journalists, who by law should be particularly protected from wiretapping.

Neither Martínez nor Müller-Maguhn nor other supporters of Julian Assange have clear evidence for their accusations. But plenty of circumstantial evidence, affidavits, documents that paint an oppressive picture.

To better understand the context, Müller-Maguhn says, it's worth remembering how embarrassing and embarrassing past WikiLeaks revelations have been, especially for the United States.

In 2010, the disclosure platform - in cooperation with media such as the New York Times, the Guardian and SPIEGEL - published the Afghan War Diary and the Iraq War Logs. The latter is a collection of a good 390,000 secret documents from the Iraq war that began in 2003, the largest data leak in U.S. military history.

### Potentially fair game

Things get even worse for Barack Obama's administration when whistleblower Edward Snowden reveals the full extent of the global U.S. surveillance apparatus three years later. Snowden acts on his own initiative, but a WikiLeaks employee helps him escape via Hong Kong to Moscow. Julian Assange thus finally becomes a public enemy of the USA.

At this point, the Australian is living in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he fled in 2012 to avoid possible deportation to the United States. Then-Vice President Joe Biden called him a "high-tech terrorist."

While Obama's administration prosecutes whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden to the fullest extent of the law, it faces a problem in dealing with WikiLeaks. Assange registered his platform as a media company in good time and proclaimed himself editor-in-chief; he has been showered with journalism awards. Media enjoy special constitutional protections in the U.S., too.

Then comes 2017, which has a special place in this story. It brings not only a new president, Donald Trump, in January, but also a new WikiLeaks revelation: "Vault 7." It's one of the biggest coups in the platform's history, thousands of pages of top-secret

information about the CIA's electronic surveillance tools, a terrible embarrassment for Trump's nominee for CIA director, Mike Pompeo. And he's not taking it lying down.

On April 13, 2017, Pompeo gives a speech to a Washington think tank. WikiLeaks, he says in it, "moves like a hostile intelligence agency and talks like a hostile intelligence agency." The organization, he said, cooperates with states like Russia and therefore should be classified like a hostile intelligence service as well.

Pompeo's comments are not only rhetorically remarkable, but also legally significant. By redefining WikiLeaks as an intelligence agency, he is enabling his CIA to take much tougher action against the organization from now on. Anyone too close to Assange is thus potentially fair game.

Citing several U.S. intelligence sources, a Yahoo News investigative team reported years later that Pompeo had told his people at the time that there were "no limits." They had discussed total surveillance of WikiLeaks, considered kidnapping Assange or even killing him. Pompeo rejects that, but also acknowledges "parts" of the Yahoo article were "true." The 59-year-old, who made it to Secretary of State under Trump, is now considered a possible presidential contender for the 2024 elections.

What no one knew at the time was that Julian Assange would no longer be able to do anything in his embassy exile in Knightsbridge without being spied on. The Spanish security company UC Global, which is responsible for the embassy, apparently spies on the famous guest around the clock - allegedly on behalf of the CIA. The allegations, which are denied by the company, have been made by three former UC Global employees; so they are in a lawsuit against the CIA filed by four American journalists and lawyers in a New York court in August 2022.

People who visit Assange at the embassy, according to the suit, fall unsuspectingly before camera traps; copies of their passports, recordings of private encounters end up in the wrong hands. Among those affected are celebrities such as Yoko Ono, Pamela Anderson, Michael Moore, but also journalists such as Snowden investigator Glenn Greenwald and employees of SPIEGEL, as well as quite a few lawyers. Freedom of the press? Client confidentiality? Apparently no longer count everywhere in the Pompeo era.

And one person in whom the watchdogs seem to be particularly interested is the German computer specialist Andy Müller-Maguhn. Probably not only when he visits Julian Assange in London.

### Cat-and-mouse game

In the beginning, he doubted his own perception, Müller-Maguhn says today. The fact that he was always questioned at length when entering London, and that cars occasionally followed him on trips from the embassy, he understood as part of a cat-and-mouse game. But then, since mid-2017, the incidents had increased. And with the implant in his Asian crypto-phone, which he discovered in March 2018, a line had been crossed, he said.

What has followed since then has led to the "edge of surreality," Müller-Maguhn says. Once, in June 2019, he was waiting for his wife in Milan when he spotted an "unkempt guy" across the street pointing a telephoto lens at him through a plastic bag. "When he sees me looking at him, he takes off."

Once, Telekom contacted him to offer him a new contract because of the high data consumption of his crypto phone. But he hardly uses the device at all. The data volume consumed in one month was more than eight gigabytes. When he had the device examined, it turned out that it had connections to IP addresses that he had never dialed. Müller-Maguhn suspects that a Trojan was planted on him. He can't prove it.

In the fall of 2020, he sends sealed documents by express mail to a lawyer abroad. Instead of arriving overnight, the mail arrives unsealed three days later. When asked, DHL only explains that "this shipment was opened on the instructions of German customs. Shortly afterwards, he leaves his Berlin apartment to go shopping; when he returns, there is an object stuck in his door lock that can no longer be opened. The police suspect an attempted burglary. It's Nov. 3, 2020, the day of the U.S. presidential election. "Funny coincidence," says Müller-Maguhn.

Now he's had enough. Toward the end of the year, the Assange friend hires a lawyer and files charges in the case of the implant in his Asian apartment, the suspected Trojan horse and the attempted break-in. He makes the possibly manipulated phones available to the Berlin State Criminal Police Office, without much hope that the authors can be identified.

His surprise is all the greater when the Federal Prosecutor's Office finally informs him that it has initiated an investigation into the suspected spying on telecommunications. Andy Müller-Maguhn's supposed paranoia now has a file number: 3 ARP 692/20-3.

"The point all these years has been to let me know abundantly clear: We're out to get you." Müller-Maguhn calls it "intimidation surveillance." By "we," he means U.S. intelligence agencies and their allies. He once read that one of the methods of the British intelligence service MI6 was to drive opposing individuals into a "stage of despair." In his own case, Müller-Maguhn says, half-amused, he hasn't quite succeeded yet. But he knows people who are closer to giving up.

One of them has been living against his will for almost four years, a good 10,000 kilometers away from Berlin - in Ecuador's capital, Quito.

Ola Bini says he often saw these men in the park while jogging, dressed like normal walkers but with well-toned bodies and walkie-talkies. He says there was often a police car parked outside his front door; once he photographed a car with an antenna sticking out of the back window, pointed at his apartment. "I don't know what my opponents are capable of," Bini says as he rides his bicycle to a café in Quito one Sunday morning to talk. Bodyguards accompany him; they had been provided for him by a human rights organization.

Ola Bini is probably one of the best-monitored people in Ecuador. Three or four security services are on his heels, says the 40-year-old. Yet even without the constant surveillance, he would have little chance of escaping: Every Friday, he has to report to the public prosecutor's office and is not allowed to leave the country. "This situation is destroying me psychologically," he says.

The wind has changed

The nightmare began on that April 11, 2019, when Julian Assange was arrested in London. Ola Bini was sitting in the waiting room of Quito airport that afternoon, about to fly to Tokyo to train in a martial art. Police officers took him into custody.

The Swede arrived in Ecuador in 2013. He fights for a free Internet, a multinational IT company had sent him, they trained young Ecuadorians in Internet security. He is admittedly friends with Assange and has visited him "more than 15 times" in his London embassy asylum, according to his own account. Most recently, he said, he had contact with Assange in January or February 2019. However, his work in Ecuador had nothing to do with it, Bini asserts: "I never worked with Julian Assange, I was never a member of WikiLeaks."

Ecuador's authorities did not believe him. There, the wind has shifted on the Assange issue since left-leaning President Rafael Correa left office in May 2017. Why the successor government of Lenín Moreno wanted to get rid of the WikiLeaks founder at all costs; whether and what influence the U.S. had on this has been the subject of wild speculation ever since.

For eight hours, Bini says, he was detained at the airport, not allowed to inform a lawyer or the Swedish embassy. Finally, he was sent to a kind of remand prison. "I was put in a cell with eight or 10 people and had to sleep on the floor." In prison, he was finally allowed to see a lawyer. "They accused him of destabilizing the government, they would provide the evidence later," says his defense lawyer. Later, they accused him of "attacking computer systems."

When, after nearly three months, there was no evidence, his lawyer filed a petition with the Supreme Court for a detention review. Bini was found to be right on all counts and got out of jail. But the investigation continued, and Bini had to remain in the country until a verdict was reached. His lawyer reported death threats, friends and colleagues had been harassed as well.

In January 2022, the trial began. "Finally present evidence," the fed-up judge asked the prosecution on the fourth day of the trial. Unsuccessfully. Finally, the trial was adjourned again and again - until Bini was acquitted on January 31 of this year, completely unexpectedly. A happy ending, however, is still a long time coming: since the public prosecutor's office immediately filed an appeal, the Swede continues to be barred from leaving the country. The day after the verdict, Bini says, "my surveillance even increased," with people who had been tailing him now openly carrying their weapons.

Meanwhile, the constant delays have long since served their purpose: The public gradually lost interest, the prosecutor did not have to face any uncomfortable inquiries. He turned down a request for an interview from SPIEGEL. It may never be possible to clarify who bears responsibility for the four-year legal farce.

"For us, however, there is no question that Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks organization and everyone surrounding Julian are being systematically monitored and intimidated - whether supporters, journalists, lawyers or family members." Aitor Martínez says this in a superheated meeting room on Madrid's Avenida de Menéndez Pelayo, in the office of prominent human rights lawyer Baltasar Garzón.

A coincidence that is hard to believe

Martínez, a youthful-looking Spaniard with a green sweater and black beard, has been Julian Assange's legal representative for almost ten years. As he narrates, water bottles become people, crypto phones become embassy rooms, pens become cameras. He often jumps up, circles the meeting table. At the end, it's already dark outside, he practically just stands.

It's not just Assange's increasingly desperate situation that concerns Martínez. The 41-year-old has personally experienced what it means to defend an enemy of the United States. For him, too, the series of oddities apparently began in the spring of 2017, when CIA chief Pompeo declared WikiLeaks an enemy intelligence agency.

Martínez and his wife were in Paraguay on business at the time. On a street in Asunción, he said, a stranger grabbed his wife's arm and whispered to her in English, "Watch your cell phone!" At the hotel, 230 screenshots of private emails, text messages and pictures suddenly popped up on her cell phone, allegedly sent from Martínez's phone, which he said he hadn't even touched. "Then, when we left in a hurry, a man with a plug in his ear followed us at the airport, waving a friendly goodbye."

Last year, the lawyer says, his Madrid apartment was broken into. Nothing was stolen.

But all that was surpassed, he says, by what happened on the night of Dec. 16-17, 2017.

Assange's legal team had devised a plan to get the London embassy fugitive a diplomatic passport with Ecuador's help so he could be taken to another country unmolested. Under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, a diplomat enjoys immunity when traveling from one sending location to another, Martínez says. Assange's henchmen lurking outside the London embassy would thus, the theory goes, have been doomed to inaction.

The Foreign Ministry in Quito had accepted the plan, "we had identified China, Serbia, Greece, Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela as possible target countries and never, as was later claimed, Russia." By mid-December, he said, everything was ready to go; the 25th was to be Day X. And then, in the middle of the final escape plans, burglars hit Martínez's office in Madrid.

Another coincidence that is hard to believe.

There is a video of the incident because the otherwise professional burglars overlooked a surveillance camera in the law office. And so, at 2:12 a.m. on that December 17, three masked men wearing winter coats and carrying flashlights are seen entering the law firm and hastily making their way through computers, cabinets and drawers.

They appear to be looking for something - a server, Martínez suspects - but can't find it. They leave cash for a Christmas lottery. After six minutes, they leave. But just before the door closes, one hastily returns, disappears into the office kitchen and finally runs off with a leg of ham. "A ham!" exclaims Martínez -, "madness!". His voice now almost rolls over. To this day, he doesn't know who the hotties in his office were.

What he does know is this: "I have handled many delicate cases in my life. I've been threatened, sometimes even by the police. But I've never experienced this level of intimidation." After all these years in the WikiLeaks storm, Martínez has no doubt that U.S. intelligence agencies and their aides are behind the burglaries, thefts, threats that often go unnoticed.

And that is why, he says, the idea that Julian Assange could actually be extradited to the United States is so frightening. While there, there have been repeated assurances that the WikiLeaks founder will get a fair trial.

"But," Martínez says, "what are U.S. assurances actually worth after all this?"