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AFP raids an attack on press freedom, says journalists' union

Last night's police raids in search of the source of government documents leaked to the media again show how press freedom in Australia is under attack and needs to be an election issue, says the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance.

MEAA chief executive officer Paul Murphy said the raids of the offices and home of a Labor staffer in Melbourne were a disturbing new twist in pursuit of whistleblowers and legitimate public interest journalism.

The Sydney Morning Herald, The Australian Financial Review, The Australian, the ABC and the Delimiter website are named in search warrants.

"The raids are a heavy-handed and over-the-top response to media stories which have embarrassed the government," Mr Murphy said. "Once again, the government wants to shoot the messenger rather than address the issues raised by journalists in their reporting.

"AFP Commissioner Andrew Colvin is correct that the AFP has acted lawfully, but we contend there is something wrong with the law when police search warrants can be used to pursue legitimate whistleblowers. Both major parties have voted to bring into force legislation which has complete disregard for the public interest and instead targets whistleblowers and journalists.

"As Edward Snowden recently commented, specifically about the situation in Australia, 'Sometimes the scandal is what the law allows'."

Mr Murphy said the AFP also needs to be open about whether journalists' metadata has been accessed without their knowledge.

"The access of journalists' phone and internet records potentially puts them inadvertently in breach of the journalists' code of ethics and the obligation to protect confidential sources," Mr Murphy said.

"The answers given by Commissioner Colvin to these questions today were completely unsatisfactory. We were told that it was necessary to pass the metadata retention laws for national security purposes, but I am sure most Australians would be appalled to learn that the metadata laws are being used in this way."

Mr Murphy said the current election campaign highlighted the role of journalism in exposing the policies and actions of all political parties to public scrutiny so people can make an informed decision at the ballot box.

"Australia was once a bastion of press freedom and freedom of expression but now governments are pursuing journalists and their sources, criminalising legitimate journalism in the public interest and denying the public's right to know with pressure mounting to further deny information from becoming public," Mr Murphy said.

"There is a great deal of effort being expended by government to avoid legitimate scrutiny. And it's getting worse. These attacks on press freedom undermine democracy."

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