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War on journalism still raging a year after AFP raids

One year on from police raids of the home and offices of journalists, there has been unsatisfactory progress on press freedom in Australia, says the union and industry advocate for Australia's journalists.

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance says the raids, in retaliation for news stories that were true, revealed the depths the government would stoop to in order to suppress the public's right to know.

"A culture of secrecy has been allowed to take hold in Australia that has been reinforced by laws which effectively criminalise journalism," said the federal president of MEAA Media, Marcus Strom. "It is long past time for politicians to wind back laws that inhibit the public's right to know.

"Journalists are not above the law but bad laws must be reformed if freedom of expression, and press freedom, is to be upheld."

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) raided the home of a Canberra News Corp Australia journalist Annika Smethurst on June 4, 2019 and the Sydney offices of the ABC the following day. Plans to raid the offices of News Corporation on June 6 were cancelled after the global condemnation of the AFP's actions.

Just last week, Smethurst finally learned that the AFP would not be laying charges against her for reporting that discussions were taking place to allow the Australian Signals Directorate to commence domestic spy operations against Australians.

But a year after their offices were raided, ABC journalists Dan Oakes and Sam Clark are still waiting to hear if they will be charged for their investigative report, *The Afghan Files*, that revealed war crimes allegations had been made against Australian forces operating in Afghanistan.

"The June 2019 raids grabbed global attention about the state of press freedom in Australia," Strom said.

"Dawn raids of journalists are the type of thing you would expect to see in a despotic police state, not a country prides itself as being a liberal democracy."

Strom said that there has been a creeping overreach by the Australian parliament, granting government agencies sweeping powers to combat the so-called 'war on terrorism': "Politicians have cited 'national security' so government agencies can reach into our homes, offices, phones and computers in order to control the possession and flow of information. But what we are actually witnessing is a war on journalism.

"Current laws allow governments to hide information from the public and punish any who reveal that information.

"This cloak of secrecy shields the government from scrutiny and embarrassment, particularly when a whistleblower reveals instances of wrongdoing. Governments are now empowered to hunt down the whistleblower and the journalist. The new laws that can be used against them provide for prison terms of up to 20 years for telling the truth."

Media organisations, including MEAA, are seeking six reforms to the spate of bad laws:

- The right to contest the application for warrants;
- Exemptions for journalists from laws that would put them in jail for doing their jobs;
- Protections for public sector whistleblowers;
- A new regime to limit which documents can be stamped “secret”;
- A properly functioning freedom of information regime; and
- Defamation law reform.

More detail on the raids, and press freedom in Australia, is available in MEAA’s annual press freedom report: pressfreedom.org.au

Media contact: Mike Dobbie – ph: 03 9691 7101; mike.dobbie@meaa.org

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