

OPINION

'Extraordinary': There's a new name on the list of media-unfriendly nations

By **Simon Spanswick**

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This week, journalists, filmmakers and media executives from around the world will gather in London for two important events. The first is an enjoyable celebration of success – the AIBs – that rewards the world’s best investigative journalists and factual storytellers. It’s a competition that the Association for International Broadcasting has hosted for the past 14 years.

The second centres on a far more serious and worrying subject: a meeting of leading broadcasters and publishers that the AIB is convening to explore the challenges faced by media organisations as they react to increasing infringements on media freedom in an ever greater number of territories. Nothing too surprising, considering the state of the world we see, hear and read about every day in our news. Yet what is extraordinary is that alongside the usual suspects of Iran, states in Central Asia and dictatorships across Africa where media freedom is a distant dream, Australia will feature prominently in our discussions, and for all the wrong reasons.

This year, there’s a greater distance between Australia and the rest of the world than there has been for a long while. It’s not a geographic distance. Instead it is the gulf that’s opening up between Australia and Western democracies on media freedom. In 2019, Australia has taken a significant step away from other developed nations as media institutions in the country have been subject to what amounts to intimidation.

Australia has long held the privilege of being one of the most important and influential nations in the Indo-Pacific region. It is highly regarded as a liberal democracy with associated strong institutions and rule of law. Yet this is an image which is in danger of becoming illusory.

Earlier this year, when the Australian Federal Police raided the home of News Corp journalist Annika Smethurst and the Sydney headquarters of the ABC, alarm bells sounded in media companies across the world. Radio New Zealand, the Britain’s BBC and Canada’s CBC were some of the first to respond to the raids that they described as a direct attack on press freedom in Australia: “deeply troubling”, “an affront to vital work”, “raises serious concern about freedom of the press which should be inviolable in any democratic country”, were some of the comments of the editors-in-chief at these respected broadcasters.

More usually it is the flagrant abuse of media freedom in tyrannies around the world that trigger such reactions. Rarely, if ever, are they caused by the actions of authorities or governments in developed countries.

The events this past winter represented an unprecedented and unwarranted attack on Australia’s media. By extension the raids were an attack on the Australian public whose right to know about the workings of their government is in danger of being eroded through such actions and by legislation that seeks to reduce the protection journalists should have when carrying out their work.



Australian Federal Police raided the home of journalist Annika Smethurst. NINE

The chilling effect on the free press and media will not have gone unnoticed by regimes in the Indo-Pacific region. Nations which do not have the benefits of free and fair media, and where there is little prospect of such natural liberties being bestowed on the public, are now able to use the actions of the AFP and the legislative framework that the Australian government has created as an excuse to prevent news organisations and individual journalists from doing their jobs. “Since Australia restricts the press, we are entitled to as well” they can now say, feeling entitled and empowered to hamper the work of those who strive to hold power to account.

This aggravates an already febrile environment that some countries’ leaders are exploiting to suppress a free media. An example is the Philippines. There, independent news organisation Rappler and its staff have been targeted by the Duterte government in a concerted effort to stifle criticism while the President describes reporters as “spies”, and has openly said that journalists are not safe from assassination. The insidious and corrosive nature of constant attacks on the country’s independent media is designed to create discord and distrust among the population, whether or not they are Duterte supporters. It’s a contemporary version of the old Soviet playbook that sought to exploit political differences and sow chaos and mistrust. The difference is that today the number of platforms on which confusion can be created has multiplied exponentially and the number of countries where it’s happening is growing. Comparing the Duterte government and the Australian government in the same article should send warnings to all readers.

If governments are given free rein to obstruct the media in its mission to report the truth, to challenge those in authority and to uncover misdeeds – whether by parliamentarians, government officials, business leaders or ordinary people – there is a genuine threat to democracy.

The Association for International Broadcasting has made detailed submissions to the two Australian parliamentary inquiries that were launched in the wake of the AFP raids. The AIB and its members across the world believe it is essential that the inquiries gain an understanding of the depth of international dismay about the current state of media freedom in Australia. None of us seeks to lecture the government or the people of Australia. Instead we seek to deliver the vital international context that is essential for lawmakers in Australia as they shape the future relationship between the press, the people and the government and create the legislative environment that enables the country to lead by example in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

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