

Australian media chiefs seek to divert anger over police raids

By Mike Head
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Last Wednesday, three weeks after police raids on journalists in Australia, the chief executives of the country's three largest media conglomerates took to the stage together at the National Press Club, supposedly to defend press freedom.

Two large-scale Australian Federal Police raids in two days, just after the election victory of the Liberal-National government, provoked widespread public anger and consternation, including among journalists and other media workers in Australia and internationally.

Squads of police spent eight hours poring over and seizing files at the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and seven hours ransacking the Canberra home of a News Corp political editor, Annika Smethurst—even rifling through her bedroom and bathroom drawers.

The raids were intended to send a chilling message to all whistleblowers and journalists. Both operations targeted the publication of leaks exposing crucial elements of Australia's US-linked military-intelligence apparatus—war crimes committed by the Australian Special Forces as part of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, and plans to legalise internal mass surveillance by Australia's electronic spy agency.

The purpose of the media chiefs' joint appearance was to cover up these issues and divert popular outrage into a plea to the government for a continued close partnership in preventing public access to such incriminating information.

The most revealing aspect of this duplicity in the chief executives' presentation, and all the accompanying editorials and media coverage, was that there was no mention of the case that opened the floodgates for such blatant assaults on free speech and basic democratic rights. That is the violent April 11 arrest of WikiLeaks publisher and journalist Julian Assange, who was dragged out of Ecuador's London embassy by British police to

face extradition to the United States.

By authorising police raids against journalists, as well as the individuals leaking damning information, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government directly followed the lead of the Trump administration in charging Assange, an Australian citizen, with 17 counts under the US Espionage Act, for which he faces life imprisonment and possibly the death penalty.

Assange, a genuine investigative journalist and publisher, published thousands of documents that laid bare the truth about war crimes, assassinations, coup plots and mass surveillance committed by the US and its allies, including Australia, around the globe.

At the National Press Club, the Murdoch empire's News Corp Australasia executive chairman Michael Miller, Nine Media chief executive Hugh Marks and ABC managing director David Anderson said their organisations stood united to “defend journalism and the public's right to know the truth.”

Miller declared: “These raids put our democracy in danger, they put our right to be informed in danger and they put people who talk to journalists in danger.”

Yet on the same day, these organisations, together with other corporate outlets around the world, refused to publish an op-ed column by Nils Melzer, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, that condemned the persecution of Assange and thoroughly debunked the government and corporate media lies propagated to blacken his name.

In addition to their deliberate silence on Assange, the three media chiefs said not a word about why the Australian police raids were conducted. At a media conference last month, the Australian Federal Police acting commissioner Neil Gaughan declared the raids were conducted to protect the information that the Australian police and intelligence agencies receive from their “Five Eyes” counterparts.

Five Eyes is a top-level network of intelligence

agencies, dominated by the US, which also includes Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. This network is central to war preparations and operations. It conducts electronic surveillance on rival governments, and millions of people worldwide.

In effect, Gaughan admitted that the police acted under instructions from Washington, as well as Canberra. This is part of an attempt to cover up, not just the past crimes of the US and its allies, but the even greater ones now being planned as Washington threatens Iran, Syria and Venezuela, and escalates its economic war and military confrontation with China.

The media conglomerates are evidently concerned that unless they appear to take a stand against the police raids, their credibility—already shredded by years of complicity in the government-corporate assault on basic democratic rights—will be further eroded.

The three chief executives outlined constitutional and legal challenges to be launched by the ABC and News Corp, seeking to declare the raids unlawful, halt any prosecutions of journalists and arrange the return of seized material.

These lawsuits could drag on for months. Predictably, the judges will accept “national security”—a notoriously vague and sweeping pretext—as the justification for the raids. The courts have a long record of refusing to question such assertions by the military-intelligence apparatus.

Moreover, Australia’s colonial-era 1901 constitution has no bill of rights, and no protection of fundamental democratic principles, such as free speech and media freedom.

The legal challenges cite a weak “implied freedom of political communication” said to be embedded within the constitution. But the High Court, Australia’s supreme court, has repeatedly insisted that this “freedom” can be overridden by any “legitimate” government purpose—such as “national security” or the protection of “international relations” with the US and allied countries.

None of this will be challenged by the media proprietors, who are committed supporters of the US military alliance and every other aspect of “national security.” Miller told the National Press Club: “[W]e also support laws that keep us safe; we believe in being tough on terrorism and strong on border security.”

The media chiefs announced that a decade-old “Right to Know” coalition of the media companies, joined by the industry trade union, the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), has called on the Morrison

government to make six legal changes.

These are the right for media companies and journalists to contest search warrants before they are activated; limited protections for public sector whistleblowers; less labelling of routine documents as secret; a review of Freedom of Information laws; “public interest” exemptions for professional journalists in secrecy and espionage legislation; and less restrictive defamation laws.

Issued in the name of striking a “balance” between “national security” and free speech, these proposals are designed to protect the corporate media and its journalists—who work closely with the political and “security” establishment—not independent, oppositional and critical media platforms, including WikiLeaks and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The latest silence on Assange is no accident. Nearly every major news outlet globally—including the ABC, the *Guardian*, Nine Media and the Murdoch media—has taken part in the conspiracy to defame and denounce Assange. This line-up underscores the need to mobilise the immense strength of the international working class to secure freedom for Assange and the brave whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

That is the aim of the worldwide campaign launched by the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties for the formation of a Global Defence Committee to prevent Julian Assange’s rendition to the US.

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