

PRESS FREEDOM IN AUSTRALIA

Responding to the recent Australian Federal Police raids on journalists, DANIELLE JOHANESEN calls for all library and information professionals to add their voice to the call for freedom of the press in Australia.

In June this year, the Australian Federal Police executed warrants at the Canberra home of NewsCorp journalist Annika Smethurst and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Sydney. The raids rang alarm bells over press freedom and public interest journalism in Australia and were widely condemned both here and internationally.

Unlike other countries, Australia does not enshrine freedom of the press or freedom of speech in the constitution. This means journalists have no inherent protection when publishing stories in the public interest which are critical of the government. In fact, Australia offers less protection to journalists than many other western democracies.

In the 2019 annual index of press freedom by Reporters Without Borders, Australia was ranked 21 behind countries like Germany, Canada and New Zealand (rsf.org/en/ranking). The score indicates significant issues with press freedom in Australia attributed to 'draconian legislation', such as our defamation and secrecy laws.

The ability to report on the government, especially when the story is unfavourable, is vital to a robust democracy. Public interest journalism contributes to the flow of information and ensures people are getting the full picture on government activities.

It would be harmful to everyone if media organisations or journalists were unable to report on stories in the public interest. And for libraries, it would result in being unable to support their communities to make informed decisions and fully participate in democracy.


Libraries exist to ensure people can access the information they need and ALIA mandates this human right in its constitution. The principles of journalism in providing a record of events, disclosing information and ideas are the same as libraries – contributing to people's knowledge by having access to information.

Indirectly, the ALIA constitution addresses the role of libraries in supporting press freedom. In its statement on Free Access to Information (bit.ly/2APWick), it says libraries need to work towards the amendment of any laws or regulations that inhibit us meeting the obligations of providing access to information.

As a profession this means we all must act to lobby the government to change the laws that criminalise journalism. Organisations and individuals can follow ALIA's lead and contact the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the Minister of Home Affairs, the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts, and your local member of parliament to express their concerns about these risks.

Libraries must continue to provide access to authentic and reliable information from reputable sources. Providing access to a range of news sources via print, radio, television and online is essential to give people a broad range of information, analysis and opinion. Being able to demonstrate how these news sources are reliable is also key. Libraries can do this by teaching people skills to evaluate the reliability of an information source whether it is a newspaper report or something they read on the internet.

Librarians and libraries should be alarmed by these recent events and the government's attempts to legislate away the public's right to know. Journalism is not a crime and we need to shout this from the rooftops for the sake of democracy.

Editor's Note: *Journalism is not a crime and ALIA supports the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance's #JournalismIsNotACrime campaign. You can join the campaign and find out more at (bit.ly/2XNkmU0).* 

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