

Submission to Senate Committee dealing with Press Freedom:

I submit that the Australian public broadcasters, i.e. the ABC and SBS, should be fully and properly funded so that they can continue to do their sterling job of serious investigative reporting on behalf of the Australian public.

Our rule of law fits well with how I was brought up and who I am - a believer in all the values that a well-developed democratic system stands for. I expect I speak to everyone on this august Senate Committee that we each value and treasure our freedoms, constrained only by the need to fit within fair community courtesies.

The first time I heard about a whistleblower when in my teens, I thought it appalling that someone had criticised his employer's processes, until I listened and read intently about the matter. An unfair rule had been introduced that worsened the situation of those who were already disadvantaged through no fault of their own, and a grey area opened up in my mind.

Commercially owned media are constrained somewhat by their client advertisers, whereas the people's broadcaster (the ABC) has the moral duty to uphold the values of our democracy by fearlessly reproducing verified information to the Australian people.

In this 'digitally disrupted' world, the internet rules mean that social media companies can allow unverified 'facts' to be promoted on their platforms and those companies will not be held in any way responsible. All the more reason for having quality investigative journalism which reports confidently and fearlessly and is uncompromised by a particular advertising mogul's money.

Sometimes that information comes from a secret source; sometimes the ABC, or SBS, has to check other secret sources to verify what's been shared. And sometimes, that information might be to the detriment of a particular government department or government minister. And that secret source might be a whistleblower. (Think: Andrew Wilkie. Is there anyone in this country today who thinks Mr Wilkie was wrong in his assessment in 2003?)

In recent times, however, we have seen a gradual, almost imperceptible diminution, in the right to blow that whistle. Our fearless public broadcaster is being trammelled (? word) by the threat of legal restraints so that those who might have informed are no longer willing to do so, and we, the people of Australia, including you, our elected Senators, are the poorer for it. We are less well informed. We are kept in the dark. And in the dark, those in power have more capacity to become corrupted - not intentionally - it creeps in with a chink here and chink there.

At this stage, the powerful become, in a way, impregnable, and the democratic process suffers as a direct consequence.

This is especially noticeable when members of the public are asked to “give up their freedoms” for the greater good - the favourite push-back line being: “if you’ve done nothing wrong then you’ve nothing to fear”. Quite true, but nevertheless insidious.

And that insidiousness lies at the heart of the issue. So long as our broadcasters can reveal the secrets that governments collect, they have the effect of preventing governments from collecting unnecessary data on all of us innocent, normal, 98.8% (or whatever) of the population. One day, that stored information will come back to haunt *all* of us. We seem to be moving to a world of living in fear - a new norm, and that brings with it increased monitoring of the population by the government.

But there is no imperative for this.

Instead we need our, stress *our*, public broadcasters to be able to shine the light into dark corners and to have their sources protected with anonymity. Their accountability is addressed by a *properly funded* broadcaster applying rigorous standards. I say ‘properly funded’ because if the cut-backs to its funding continue, its ability to expose corruptions will be, not only compromised, but curtailed. The Australian public demands, *I demand*, quality journalists, who should be kept in their jobs with decent salaries commensurate with the skills they have honed over years, able to delve and report cogently, able to connect with the occasional whistle-blower and be sure that their reporting is unfettered other than with journalistic morality.

The public broadcaster’s high standards are *completely* absent in social media. Maybe something will be done in a jurisdictional sense to drive adoption of quality values to which the so-called social media giants must subscribe, but this is no excuse to impose rights to invade people’s homes or offices.

I adjure this Senate Committee to find clearly and unambiguously in favour of preserving journalistic and whistleblower freedoms, and at the same time *increase* funding to the ABC and SBS. In these times of unverified mis-information in social media, we need our public broadcasters’ qualities more than ever to present information we, all the Australian public, can trust. A true democracy.

Angela Williamson

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