

Australian media denounces exposure of Indonesia spying operations

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) recent joint reporting of Australian espionage operations targeting Indonesian political figures has been furiously denounced by other media outlets for breaching "national security" and the "national interest." The reaction underscores the extent to which the media establishment has been integrated into the state-intelligence apparatus.

On November 18, after being approached by the *Guardian* with documents leaked by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden, the ABC co-released the story, revealing Australian phone tapping of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, his wife and eight senior political figures. The report triggered a still-unresolved diplomatic crisis for the Australian government, with the Indonesian president suspending military and intelligence cooperation.

The *Australian*, Murdoch's flagship national newspaper, has been among the most explicit in outlining the deeply antidemocratic positions underlying the criticisms of the ABC. An editorial last Thursday, entitled "Jakarta spying is crucial for both nations' security," declared that the ABC ought to have suppressed the Snowden leaks. "Anyone with the most perfunctory understanding of international affairs," the editorial declared, "would have realised at first glance that making these documents public would severely damage relations between Indonesia and Australia and thereby, inevitably, doing harm to both countries."

The *Australian* added that the materials leaked from the NSA "were classified top secret because they were considered important for the nation's security" and "public disclosure was always going to trigger consternation." Given the "harm this story would generate," according to the *Australian*, "the question

for the ABC was what public good it might serve."

These references to the "nation's security" and "public good" repeat the standard ideological cover with which the ruling elite seeks to obscure and defend its geostrategic and economic interests. As far as the *Australian* is concerned, any information that in any way tarnishes these interests ought to be censored, kept secret from ordinary people in Australia and internationally. The previously promoted democratic conception of the media as a "Fourth Estate," tasked with exposing the powers-that-be and informing citizens of the activities carried out by national governments in their name, was junked long ago. Especially during the past 12 years, under the banner of the so-called war on terror, the mainstream media has embraced its role as an effective auxiliary arm of the state.

The *Australian's* editorial on Thursday raised the spectre of ABC personnel being put on trial for harming "national security." It insisted: "People who share such [top secret] documents or their contents are liable for prosecution under the Crimes Act."

The reference to the anti-democratic Crimes Act, under which individuals face up to seven years' imprisonment for leaking official secrets, is a provocative attempt to whip up the kind of political witch-hunt directed against the *Guardian* by the British government for its publication of documents leaked by Snowden. Raids on the *Guardian's* editorial offices, threats to arrest journalists and the forced destruction of computer drives, have been accompanied by ominous references to Al Qaeda "lapping up" the Snowden revelations.

The *Australian's* incitement of similar moves against the ABC has been accompanied by an effort to downplay the significance of what was exposed. Its

editorial staff write that the “story seems more about titillation and mischief-making than revealing wrongdoing or matters of concern,” adding that “we struggle to see the public interest in these revelations—they have exposed no travesty, overreach or malfeasance.”

As far as the Murdoch press is concerned, anything goes for the intelligence agencies when conducting operations in the name of “national security.” Snowden has revealed that Canberra functions as an integral component of the US global surveillance network, which targets foreign governments and ordinary people alike, in blatant violation of US constitutional protections and international law. The phone tapping operations in Jakarta are just the tip of the iceberg—far more material is set to emerge, detailing illegal Australian intelligence operations in the Asia-Pacific region. None of this, for the *Australian*, constitutes “matters of concern” or “malfeasance.” No, the only crime is to publicly reveal the existence of such operations.

The *Australian* editorial was followed by frothing pieces by foreign editor Greg Sheridan and columnist Janet Albrechtsen. Albrechtsen, a former board member of the ABC, demanded that ABC managing director Mark Scott resign, insisting: “The reckless publication of criminally-obtained information with the predictable and escalating consequences now unfolding make his position untenable.”

Sheridan hysterically decried that the ABC was “acting for a foreign, anti-Western axis of a committed left-wing newspaper and an espionage traitor.” He fulminated: “This is not an act of journalism. This is an act of ideological commitment. It is an act of propaganda.” He called for the ABC to be stripped of the contract for the Australian Network international television service, and for the public broadcaster to be privatised.

For its part, the ABC has sought to accommodate the right-wing onslaught. The ABC’s director of news Kate Torney this week wrote an article defending the publication of the Indonesian spying story, adamantly insisting that it “simply isn’t true” that “the ABC simply published everything that Edward Snowden released without any consideration of the balance between the public interest and the interests of national security.”

Torney further explained: “We did not publish everything we had access to. We took advice from Australia’s intelligence authorities on the matter, and redacted sensitive operational information which may have compromised national security ... The allegation that we recklessly dumped unfiltered data doesn’t stand up to the most cursory examination.”

In other words, the ABC itself collaborated with the intelligence agencies to censor material deemed too sensitive to publish. The only difference between the *Australian* and the ABC is how strictly the state’s “national security” interests ought to be interpreted.

The Indonesian spying story has shed light on the collapse of elementary democratic conceptions within the media establishment, a process also evident in the US and other advanced capitalist countries. Amid escalating social inequality at home and an eruption of militarism abroad, the wealthy and upper-middle class milieu that directs the major media outlets increasingly identifies its interests with those of the state and fears the explosive implications of an informed and politically conscious populace.



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