

# Australian cyber conference “disinvites” US whistleblower and Assange supporter

Oscar Grenfell  
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In an act of politically-motivated censorship, the organisers of CyberCon, one of Australia’s largest cyber security conferences, “disinvited” US whistleblower Thomas Drake and Australian academic Dr Suelette Dreyfus just days before they were to deliver presentations at the event.

Drake and Dreyfus had been scheduled to speak at the Melbourne conference, which attracts several thousand participants each year, since November 2018. They were told last week that their talks were “incongruent” with the conference and had been summarily cancelled. Drake was informed of the decision only shortly before he was due to fly from the United States for the event.

There is no question that the cancellation was a political decision, likely involving government agencies. It was undoubtedly motivated by the principled support of Drake and Dreyfus for persecuted whistleblowers and publishers, and their own records of activism in defence of internet freedom.

Drake is a former employee of the US National Security Agency (NSA), who spoke-out in the mid-2000s against what he described as the organisation’s wasteful spending and its turn to procuring technologies aimed at mass communication intercepts.

Drake was charged with 10 felony counts, which the Justice Department was later compelled to drop in 2011. He refused to cooperate with an FBI investigation into other whistleblowers and has continued to publicly denounce mass surveillance and other attacks on democratic rights.

Dreyfus, an academic at the University of Melbourne, is a computer and informations expert who has advocated for decades to improve whistleblower protections.

She was an early collaborator of Julian Assange and

is one of the few Australian academics who has consistently condemned the US, British and Australian persecution of the WikiLeaks founder for his role in the exposure of American war crimes and global diplomatic conspiracies.

Drake and Dreyfus have both stated they were told by the Australian Information Security Association, which organised the conference, that the cancellation of their talks was at the request of a “conference partner.”

Partner organisations include the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), the country’s electronic eavesdropping agency, which collaborates closely with the NSA and other members of the “five eyes” spying network in mass surveillance operations.

Other government-funded bodies also participated in the event. The powerful Home Affairs ministry, which has been at the forefront of a broader campaign of online censorship, gave a closed-door briefing on its 2020 “cyber-security” strategy, which the media was barred from attending.

In comments to the *Guardian*, Drake condemned the censorship as “Orwellian.” “This is the first time ever I’ve been censored at a conference. How ironic it is here in Australia,” he said.

The former NSA employee explained: “If you are a whistleblower, you are persona non grata. I think there was significant pressure at the last minute at what appears to be a review of the entire agenda.”

Dreyfus placed the cancellation in the context of a broader assault on whistleblowers in Australia, telling the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): “There’s now a culture of fear about speaking up. Nothing highlights this quite so much as disinviting speakers who have been confirmed.”

Drake’s planned presentation was entitled “The Golden Age of Surveillance.” An abstract of the talk,

posted on a website created to oppose the conference's censorship, stated: "What does it mean for our society to increasingly live in a virtual matrix where more and more of our lives are under the persistence gaze of the digital panopticon? What does it say when our post 9/11 world has turned surveillance into a global growth industry feeding the demands for data about us of all kinds, no matter where you live?"

The abstract continued: "Mr. Drake has already lived that future and will share his experience from the frontlines of freedom on just how deeply society has backdoored and buried itself in the insatiable appetite to know virtually everything about anybody at any time driven by fear and safety."

Drake's comments would have been particularly relevant, under conditions in which the Australian government is playing a central role in a further crackdown on social media, including pressuring the major technology companies to remove content arbitrarily branded "violent" or "extremist."

The conference, moreover, occurred just months after the Australian Federal Police raided the Sydney offices of the ABC and the home of a senior Newscorp journalist over media exposures of war crimes in Afghanistan and secret plans to expand domestic ASD surveillance.

In a clear sign that the authorities and the conference organisers have decided that these subjects would not be broached at the event, Ted Ringrose, another participant, was told that he would need to edit his speech because it had been deemed as "too biased."

According to the *Guardian*, Ringrose, a partner with legal advice firm Ringrose Siganto, had been set to compare Australia's draconian anti-encryption legislation to measures imposed by the Chinese police-state.

Dreyfus had been set to speak on the importance of anonymous digital dropboxes in facilitating secure whistleblowing. An abstract of her talk also indicated that she would review the passage of a number of laws allegedly protecting whistleblowers in the European Union and elsewhere.

The censorship of her talk was of a piece with the broader attempt to silence critical voices. It may also have been influenced, however, by her close association with Assange.

Since the WikiLeaks founder's arrest by the British

police on April 11, and the unveiling of an unprecedented 18 charges against him by the Trump administration, the entire Australian political and media establishment has done everything it can to suppress discussion of Assange's plight.

In 1997, Dreyfus and Assange co-authored *Underground*, an acclaimed account of the computer hacking scene in the 80s and 90s. Between 1997 and 2000, Dreyfus and Assange, along with Ralf Weinmann, created "Rubberhose," a deniable encryption archive aimed at helping dissidents and activists resist the attempts by authoritarian regimes to extract encryption keys through coercion and torture.

Following the establishment of WikiLeaks in 2006, Dreyfus spoke alongside Assange on a number of platforms.

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* article last April, she condemned the refusal of the Coalition government and the Labor opposition to defend Assange, who is an Australian citizen. She wrote that the WikiLeaks founder was "both a journalist and a publisher; he has led fearless news reporting over more than a decade."

Dreyfus continued: "Traditional media outlets have now copied many innovations by Assange. These include installing anonymous digital drop boxes, publishing large redacted data sets in support of investigative news stories, hiring data science journalists, and encouraging reporters to improve their cyber security to protect sources."

Even the possibility of Dreyfus referencing Assange's role in pioneering measures such as digital drop boxes designed to protect whistleblowers, was undoubtedly too much for the conference organisers and their "partners" in the Australian government and intelligence agencies.



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