



NEWS RELEASE

May 10, 2007

Australia's Right to Know

Australia risks undermining one of its main pillars of democracy if erosions to free speech continue, the country's leading media organisations warned today.

To combat the situation, Australia's largest media organisations have united to form a new coalition to run a public campaign, ***Australia's Right To Know***.

The group includes News Limited, Fairfax Media, the ABC, the commercial television industry body FreeTV, its radio equivalent Commercial Radio Australia, SBS, AAP and Sky News.

A joint statement was issued at a press conference in Sydney today.

The group outlined plans for a major reappraisal of laws and regulations that censor free speech and undermine the right of all Australians to get information that is relevant and important to their lives.

"There has been an alarming slide into censorship and secrecy that has severely reduced what ordinary Australians are allowed to know about how they are governed and how justice is dispensed," said News Limited Chairman Mr John Hartigan.

The industry coalition will commission a major, new national audit on the state of free speech in Australia. The report will form the basis of a campaign of public consultation and discussion with government and opposition parties and the judiciary.

ABC Managing Director Mr Mark Scott said: "Freedom of speech is one of the fundamental pillars of a free and open society. It is as important as parliamentary democracy and the rule of law in guaranteeing the freedom and rights of all Australians.

Fairfax Media Chief Executive Mr David Kirk said: "Most Australians are unaware just how far their basic rights to know about the operations of government and public officials have been eroded. This issue is of profound public interest and warrants national prominence and priority."

In one recent international study on press freedom, Australia's ranking fell from 31st to 35th in the world, behind countries like Bolivia and Bosnia, equal with Bulgaria and only just ahead of Panama and El Salvador.

In a second international study, also released this year, Australia is ranked 39th in the world.

Mr David Leckie, Chief Executive of Network Seven and Chairman of FreeTV which represents Australia's commercial television networks, said: "We are fully in accord and united in our view. We are prepared to stand up for the right of free speech for all Australians with a strong, determined and well funded campaign."

Mr Michael Anderson, Chief Executive of Austereo and Chairman of Commercial Radio Australia, which represents the radio industry said: "What's needed is a sensible and rational debate about the need for reform and a willingness by all sides of politics to acknowledge this and do something about it."

The coalition noted that there are now more than 500 separate prohibitions governing the things that Australians are not allowed to know. Some of these restrictions vary from state to state, making it frequently impossible for the media to report events and issues accurately.

The group said that it expected to get a good hearing from Australia's political leaders but that it would resolutely not be taking sides on the issue in an election year.

Over the past 25 years Labor and Coalition governments at federal and state levels have presided over a serious deterioration in the freedoms we all take for granted, the group said.

"This is not about party politics or currying favour with one party or another. These issues are of national importance regardless of who is in power and we will be urging all major parties to address the problems," the group said.

The industry group intends to appoint an independent chair to lead its coalition and has already started discussions with a number of prominent candidates from the legal profession, academia and the media industry.

End

For further information:

Greg Baxter	- News Limited	(02) 9288 3242 or 0419 461 368
Bruce Wolpe	- Fairfax Media	(02) 9282 3640 or 0412 259 276
Sandy Culkoff	- ABC	(02) 8333 5155 or 0438 292 369
Julie Flynn	- FreeTV	(02) 8968 7100 or 0408 455 456
Joan Warner	- Commercial Radio	(02) 9281 6577 or 0419 410 617
Bruce Meagher	- SBS	(02) 9430 3812 or 0412 254 690
Tony Gillies	- AAP	(02) 9322 8500 or 0414 320 487
Angelos Frangopoulos	- Sky News	(02) 9886 8011 or 0413 878 590