

Handmaiden to the Establishment: Peter Greste's Register of Journalists

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Asia-Pacific Research, October 04, 2024

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Justice](#), [Media](#)

When established, well fed and fattened, a credible professional tires from the pursuit. One can get complacent, flatulently confident, self-assured. From that summit, the inner lecturer emerges, along with a disease: false expertise.

The Australian journalist **Peter Greste** has faithfully replicated the pattern. At one point in his life, he was lean, hungry and determined to get the story. He seemed to avoid the perils of mahogany ridge, where many alcohol-soaked hacks scribble copy sensational or otherwise. There were stints as a freelancer covering the civil wars in Yugoslavia, elections in post-apartheid South Africa. On joining the BBC in 1995, Afghanistan, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa fell within his investigative orbit. To his list of employers could also be added Reuters, CNN and Al Jazeera English.

During his tenure with Al Jazeera, for a time one of the funkiest outfits on the media scene, Greste was arrested along with two colleagues in Egypt accused of aiding the Muslim Brotherhood. He spent 400 days in jail before deportation. Prison in Egypt gave him cover, armour and padding for journalistic publicity. It also gave him the smugness of a failed martyr.

Greste then did what many hacks do: become an academic. It is telling about the ailing nature of universities that professorial chairs are being doled out with ease to members of the Fourth Estate, a measure that does little to encourage the fierce independence one hopes from either. Such are the temptations of establishment living: you become the very thing you should be suspicious of.

With little wonder, Greste soon began exhibiting the symptoms of establishment fever, lecturing the world as UNESCO Chair of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland on what he thought journalism ought to be. Hubris struck. Like so many of his craft, he exuded envy at WikiLeaks and its gold reserves of classified information. He [derided](#) its founder, **Julian Assange**, for not being a journalist. This was stunningly petty, schoolyard scrapping in the wake of the publisher's forced exit from the Ecuadorian Embassy in London in 2019. It ignored that most obvious point: journalism, especially when it documents power and its abuses, thrives or dies on leaks and often illegal disclosures.

It is for this reason that Assange was convicted under the US Espionage Act of 1917, intended as a warning to all who dare publish and discuss national security documents of the United States.

In June this year, [while celebrating Assange's release](#) ("a man who has suffered enormously

for exposing the truth of abuses of power”) evidence of that ongoing fixation remained. Lazily avoiding the redaction efforts that WikiLeaks had used prior to Cablegate, Greste still felt that WikiLeaks had not met that standard of journalism that “comes with it the responsibility to process and present information in line with a set of ethical and professional standards.” It had released “raw, unredacted and unprocessed information online,” thereby posing “enormous risks for people in the field, including sources.”

It was precisely this very same view that formed the US prosecution case against Assange. Greste might have at least acknowledged that not one single study examining the effects of WikiLeaks’ disclosures, a point also made in the plea-deal itself, found instances where any source or informant for the US was compromised.

Greste now wishes, with dictatorial sensibility, to further impress his views on journalism through Journalism Australia, a body he [hopes will set](#) “professional” standards for the craft and, problematically, define press freedom in Australia. Journalism Australia Limited was formerly placed on the Australian corporate register in July, listing Greste, lobbyist Peter Wilkinson and executive director of The Ethics Centre, Simon Longstaff, as directors.

Members would be afforded the standing of journalists on paying a registration fee and being assessed. They would also, in theory, be offered the protections under a [Media Reform Act](#) (MFA) being proposed by the Alliance for Journalists’ Freedom, where Greste holds the position of Executive Director.

A closer look at the MFA shows its deferential nature to state authorities. As the Alliance for Journalists’ Freedom [explains](#), “The law should not be protecting a particular class of self-appointed individual, but rather the role that journalism plays in our democracy.” So much for independent journalists and those of the Assange-hue, [a point well spotted](#) by Mary Kostakidis, no mean journalist herself and not one keen on being straitjacketed by yet another proposed code.

Rather disturbingly, the MFA is intended to *aid* “law enforcement agencies and the courts identify who is producing journalism”. How will this be done? By showing accreditation – the seal of approval, as it were – from Journalism Australia. In fact, Greste and his crew will go so far as to give the approved journalist a “badge” for authenticity on any published work. How utterly noble of them.

Such a body becomes, in effect, a handmaiden to state power, separating acceptable wheat from rebellious chaff. Even Greste [had to admit](#) that two classes of journalist would emerge under this proposal, “in the sense that we’ve got a definition for what we call a member journalist and non-member journalists, but I certainly feel comfortable with the idea of providing upward pressure on people to make sure their work falls on the right side of that line.”

This is a shoddy business that should cause chronic discomfort, and demonstrates, yet again, the moribund nature of the Fourth Estate. Instead of detaching itself from establishment power, Greste and bodies such as the Alliance for Journalists’ Freedom merely wish to clarify the attachment.

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