Spooks, lies, whistleblowing

“You HAVE to do better; but we can help.” This was the message to journalists from other campaigners on information and communications at a remarkable event in London in December: Building an Alliance Against Secrecy, Surveillance and Censorship, was convened by the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) to organise resistance to the rapidly expanding threats to independent journalism, political freedom and democracy itself. There were investigative reporters and links between ruling parties and security agencies. There were hackers, lawyers and social groups.

The imperative for collaboration comes from the revelations of Edward Snowden, an American whistleblower who formerly worked for the National Security Agency. The secretive and unaccountable NSA is the US equivalent of the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), and Snowden last year leaked millions of documents confirming that the two agencies were routinely intercepting the phone and online communications of everybody in the country.

“We are looking to journalists because the law has let us down,” said Jacob Applebaum, an American collaborator with Snowden and a prominent hacker and developer of surveillance-protected software. He was one of several to address the conference by Skype, since harassment by the US authorities means he cannot risk coming to the UK. “You need to live in a free society,” he said, “but currently you don’t. Britain is a surveillance state. Even doing research on the internet is dangerous unless you use encryption.”

Also on Skype, from Berlin, was Sarah Harrison of WikiLeaks. “The UK is having what I think is a large crackdown on press freedoms,” she said, calling for a campaign in the UK to demand that journalists not be muzzled by legislation intended for terrorists. Veteran journalist and anti-war activist John Pilger had “so much journalism succumbed to propaganda? Propaganda is no longer an invisible government. It is the government…”

“The information age that we refer to is principally a media age. We have war by media, censorship by media, retribution by media, demonology by media. A surreal assembly line of obedient clichés and false assumptions.”

Gavin Millar QC said we need a “shield law” to establish the rights of people in the face of mass surveillance. At present the police are getting hold of journalists’ phone records and GCHQ is intercepting journalists’ confidential material and compromising their sources – in both cases bypassing the Police and Criminal Evidence Act and the Human Rights Act, which require the authority of judges to access journalistic material.

Fellow QC Ben Emmerson, who is the UN Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights, said the right to privacy under human rights law must be preserved online. “Mass surveillance does not combat terrorism. Prevention of terrorism is regarded as an imperative of the highest importance but states must still comply with international human rights law. Merely to assert that mass surveillance can prevent terrorism does not provide justification in that law.”

Bea Edwards, executive and international director of the Government Accountability Project, a whistleblower protection organisation in the USA, said: “It has been the press who have best protected Edward Snowden and others. We need the press and the public working together to not just address the crimes but to protect the whistleblower.”

Daniel Ellsberg gave an inspiring address, imploring people who wanted to expose wrongdoing to contact journalists. Former White House official Ellsberg leaked the so-called Pentagon Papers in 1971, chronicling the lies and the real truth about the Vietnam War, after agonising for more than five years. “Don’t do what I did,” he said. “Don’t wait for the bombs to drop and people to die. Do what I wish I’d done in 1965 or 1966.”

For more see www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1501spy.html

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LFB supports Nicky Hager

WHEN London Freelance Branch passed a motion in November to support a journalist who was the subject of a police raid at the other side of the world, I didn’t expect any of us would actually get to meet him in person any time soon.

New Zealand-based investigative journalist Nicky Hager’s recently published book Dirty Politics detailed a dirty tricks operation in the office of the country’s Prime Minister John Key, and links between ruling National Party figures and right-wing blogger Cameron Slater. The book showed how the Prime Minister’s administration was feeding information to Cameron Slater in an attempt to smear its opponents. Revelations in Dirty Politics have already led to the resignation on 30 August 2014 of New Zealand Justice Minister Judith Collins over her ties to the blogger.

Days after John Key was re-elected in September, Wellington Police came to Nicky’s family home. A five-hour raid by six detectives followed, in which they took an awful lot of Nicky’s “devices”, paperwork and personal effects. The raid was aimed at tracking down “Rawshark”, Nicky’s source.

Nicky was confident his source would never be discovered, “I don’t think there’s the slightest chance they’ll find my sources.” At the CIJ symposium, Nicky confessed he was “one of the few weirdos left who doesn’t have a mobile phone”. We “can’t leave any electronic tracks at all. Never text [sources]. Never email them. Never call them from a mobile phone.” Nicky suggests that to make that important opening call to a source you “wait till you visit your obscure aunt” and make a call from her landline.

Nicky said LFB and NUJ solidarity is “immensely appreciated”, adding that New Zealand doesn’t even have a journalists’ union: their union is an obscure sub-section of a union that was historically for metalworkers and some other trades. He told the Freelance he was “optimistic” about his case. Nicky’s (encrypted) hard drives are now at the Auckland High Court and are the subject of a legal battle, with the next hearing due on 23 March.

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Nicky Hager at the Centre for Investigative Journalism event in London

Image © Matt Salusbury

Critics’ fund for Wales

The Wales Theatre Awards (Gwobrau Theatr Cymru) have a new crowdsourced Critics Fund to sponsor critics (including professionals) for travel throughout the nation of Wales to review its theatre, opera and dance. The fund also pays for tickets for the events the critics are covering and – in some cases – accommodation. For details, see www.walestheatrewards.com or contact Mike Smith miko@mediasmith.co.uk – the fund does not intend to give any money to people who write for any organisations that should pay them but doesn’t, or that don’t pay expenses, thereby limiting where a reviewer can attend a performance. It’s intended for young journalists and freelances to gain experience of writing reviews.

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