



ALLIANCE *for*
JOURNALISTS'
FREEDOM

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SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Press freedom Inquiry: Question on Notice

During oral evidence before the inquiry on Wednesday, August 12, 2020, Senator MARIELLE SMITH asked Professor Peter Grete, "can you think of any examples where the current crisis of the pandemic has been used as a justification for secrecy?"

Answer: To date, there is no evidence that Australian governments have attempted to use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase secrecy, limit press freedom, or introduce some form of censorship. In fact, the evidence suggests that the relationship between the Australian media and our governments has largely been a model of the way the system *should* work, with the press generally doing well in publishing accurate information, as well as holding Commonwealth, state and territory governments to account for the way they have been handling the pandemic.

However, many press freedom groups have reported a far more troubling trend around the world. The International Press Institute has been [tracking media freedom violations](#) during the pandemic, and at the time of writing, they counted 421 examples around the world. The vast majority of those violations have been in the Asia-Pacific region, where there have been 102 cases of journalists who've been arrested or charged for their coverage of coronavirus, compared with 88 in the rest of the world. The IPI also counted 29 cases of restrictions on access to information in the Asia Pacific region compared with 28 everywhere.

The IPI's tracker monitors countries that have passed 'fake news' regulations in response to the pandemic. In the Asia Pacific region, they identified Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam as all having passed such laws since coronavirus emerged. Others analysts such as Professor David Robie from Auckland University of Technology, [add Papua New Guinea and Fiji](#) to the list.

In its latest [World Press Freedom Index](#), Reporters Without Borders (RSF) sees a similar trend. It said, "it is the Asia-Pacific region that saw the greatest rise in press freedom violations..." (It went on to say, "Australia (down 5 positions at 26th) used to be the regional model but is now characterised by its threats to the confidentiality of sources and to investigative journalism".)

In its report, RSF makes it clear that, "there is a clear correlation between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and a country's ranking in the Index."