

We must resist censorship of every kind. By: *Lachlan Murdoch*, From: *The Australian*. 24 October, 2014.

It is an honour for me to stand before you tonight, in this beautiful and important library, to deliver the Sir Keith Murdoch Oration.

Sir Keith died 62 years ago on October 4th 1952. He was 67 years old. He devoted his life to the newspapers he published and to their staff, to the community around him, particularly here in Victoria, to his young family, and, of course, to Dame Elisabeth.

I will forever be in awe of the enduring love and devotion that Dame Elisabeth, herself an incredibly strong but generous soul, had for her husband half a century after he passed away. I am happy that they are together somewhere tonight.

What most of us here tonight know of Sir Keith we have only read in books, or in some article, or been told by friends. Most of it we may have forgotten.

We may have forgotten the hardships he overcame during his life: His stammer; his ill health; all sorts of economic woes. But we remember he was a journalist, and then an editor, and that sometime in his younger years he wrote an important letter to a prime minister that changed history and saved Australian lives.

Next year will mark the 100th anniversary of the allied assault on Gallipoli, and a hundred years since the young Keith Murdoch penned his now famous letter to Prime Minister Andrew Fisher.

One hundred years seems like ... well it is ... a very long time. But the events of September 1915 in particular have a remarkable relevance to today, especially in regard to press freedoms and to freedom of speech. These are the freedoms that fundamentally underpin our democracy. But here in our Commonwealth they have never been guaranteed, and they should never be taken for granted. Not 100 years ago and certainly not today.

“Our liberty depends upon the freedom of the press and that cannot be limited without being lost,” wrote Thomas Jefferson.

This year, Freedom House’s annual index of media freedom found that global press freedom has fallen to its lowest level in over a decade.

It might surprise you that today Australia ranks 33rd, just behind Belize, on the Freedom house index. Twenty years ago we ranked 9th.

Journalists and editors can face physical harassment, economic ruin, and even imprisonment, as a consequence of their reportage.

And that’s just here in Australia.

I'll come back to this point later, but first let's imagine a time not so different than ours. A world in crisis. A young journalist eager to serve his country reporting events on a distant battlefield, and a powerful establishment intent on controlling the media for fear of losing public opinion.

At the outbreak of World War 1 there were mixed feelings about the role of the press in battle theatres.

Lord Kitchener, British Secretary of State for War, had been opposed to embedded correspondents throughout his career, and he disallowed any official war correspondents at the beginning of the war. But this position weakened slightly with the Dardanelles Expedition as Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty and a former war correspondent himself, was a supporter of the press, and of the Gallipoli offensive.

Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, the British correspondent, noted that the prohibition on war correspondents "gave rise to the widespread belief that truth was being concealed and that many grave events were being purposely hidden by authorities."

But Gallipoli would be a great success, it was reasoned, and coverage of the campaign's victory would be a necessary propaganda win at home and abroad. And to ensure that only the right message would be delivered, the few correspondents chosen would have to agree to the strict censorship of their work.

In a breakthrough in the impasse over war correspondents, the British press was offered two places for official correspondents to cover the pending victory of the Dardanelles Expedition, and Australia was offered one.

A young Keith Murdoch was eager to be chosen to cover the war. His two brothers had enlisted and were fighting on the western front, and now he too could do his part.

Twenty journalists applied to the AJA, The Australian Journalists' Association, of which Keith Murdoch had been a founding member, for the one position to travel with the ANZAC forces. The members of the association, the precursor to the MEAA, would vote on whom to send.

Sir Keith narrowly lost the poll to Charles Bean, a 34-year-old leader writer from the Sydney Morning Herald, by a couple of votes.

The contrast between Bean and the younger Murdoch was in some ways quite stark.

An Oxford graduate, Bean was meticulous and diligent.

He did not believe it was the journalists' place to question authority or question strategy ... maintaining it was his role to report, not to criticise.

By contrast, as one of his biographers wrote, "Murdoch, with his idealism and independence of spirit, almost certainly would have found it irksome to face the restrictive regime inherent in the position of official correspondent."

Losing that vote set up the circumstances that allowed Keith Murdoch to visit the Dardanelles in a different capacity, and changed the course of his life and the lives of who knows how many young Australians on the battlefield.

Disappointed by his loss to Bean, Sir Keith was offered the job as head of the United Cable Service in London.

With a wave of young men enlisting to serve, including his two brothers, Keith was torn as to which way he could best serve Australia. He turned to his friend Andrew Fisher for advice.

The Prime Minister did not mince words. He stated Murdoch could perform a much better service for his country in London than in the trenches.

Fisher was also mindful of the need for Australians, particularly political leaders, to be well informed about the situation overseas.

Incredible as it seems today, Fisher, the Prime Minister of Australia, had received little notice of the Gallipoli invasion. He was told our sons, our brothers, were on the way to battle, but kept in the dark as to where and against whom they would be fighting.

In 1915 Australia had a population of about 4.9 million. Of that 4.9 million 420,000 of us enlisted for service. That was equal to almost 40 per cent of all the men in this country aged between 18 and 44.

Sixty one thousand did not return. They rest at Somme, or Harbonnieres, or at Lone Pine. Another 140,000 returned home injured. Our young nation lost a generation of stockmen, of engineers, of professionals, of entrepreneurs.

As my father said, standing at this lectern 13 years ago, the “real value of any society lies in its human capital.”

The First World War was, and remains, the greatest human trauma in the life of Australia.

Of our entry into the war Billy Hughes wrote in his 1929 book ‘The Splendid Adventure’: “No one complained because we were not consulted. The Empire was at war”.

Australians landed at Anzac Cove on the 25th of April. Prime Minister Fisher learned of this fact on the 8th of May. No cables had been sent informing Fisher of the dangerous assault. No justification was given, even in courtesy, for the use of our troops.

Thousands soon lay dead on the beaches and in the steep gullies of Gallipoli. Bean and Ashmead-Bartlett had witnessed the tragedy unfold, but could only file highly sanitised versions of their reports.

Amid the chaos the censors never failed in their task.

Journalists effectively faced four censors: the official censor, the intelligence chief, the Chief of Staff and the Commander in Chief.

Often the correspondents found the entirety of their copy struck out, despite not disclosing any detail of true military value.

And as disaster unfolded on the peninsula, selected censorship of cables descended into an exercise of face-saving for the generals in charge.

“I thought there were limits to human stupidity but now I know there are none,” Ashmead-Bartlett wrote. “The censorship has now passed beyond all reason.”

It’s important to understand that not only was the Australian public kept in the dark, Australian politicians, including the Prime Minister, were also the victims of this censorship.

But as the casualties mounted, by August of 1915 questions were being raised in Australia about the accuracy of reports from Gallipoli.

The Prime Minister was deeply concerned about the fate of our troops and the massive loss of life in the Dardanelles campaign.

So as Keith Murdoch left Melbourne to take up his role at the United Cable Service in London, Fisher asked him to travel by way of Gallipoli.

Officially my grandfather was to report on problems with postal services to Australian troops. But the Prime Minister wanted all the facts about the campaign that had been kept from him. He wanted them honestly and he wanted them unfiltered by others.

No one could have predicted then, that Keith Murdoch’s short stop at Gallipoli purportedly to report on postal services would place him in the middle of one of the great censorship scandals of the century.

When Keith arrived at Anzac Cove on the 3rd of September 1915, Bean and the British correspondents had been there since the April landing. Bean, wretchedly sick himself, filled Sir Keith in on the situation on the peninsula.

Just about everything that could go wrong had.

The troops who were not dead or injured suffered from debilitating disease. Dysentery was rampant, spread by the flies and maggots that alone thrived in the trenches. The men lacked water and fresh food. They were exhausted. A spent force hemmed in on a few steep acres and under constant fire.

Keith visited Lone Pine, and the British command at Suvla Bay. He walked alone for miles amongst the trenches talking with everyone he came across. On the 6th of September Bean was strong enough to take Sir Keith to Quinn’s post, where the allied and Turkish trenches were only metres apart. It was a fierce place and death was everywhere. The men’s strength and morale was at a desperate low.

On arrival at the Dardanelles Keith had signed the war correspondent’s declaration that he would not “impart to anyone military information of a confidential nature ... unless first submitted to the Chief Field Censor.”

But after talking to Bean at Anzac Cove and later to Ashmead-Bartlett at Imbros, and seeing first-hand the unfolding disaster of Gallipoli, Sir Keith had seen enough.

The truth needed to be revealed, but he and the other correspondents had pledged not to publish or impart any information without first going through the military censors.

Sir Keith reasoned that rather than publish a fulsome expose about Gallipoli, in breach of his promise, he could privately report the truth to the British authorities in London when he arrived there in several days time. This, he felt, would raise the alarm, so to speak, without breaching his covenant.

But there was a problem. He feared that no one would believe an unknown Australian's account of the situation, if for no other reason than that he had only been on the ground at Gallipoli for a few short, albeit shocking, days.

So, my grandfather persuaded the well-respected and widely known Englishman Ashmead-Bartlett to write a letter to the British Prime Minister.

Ashmead-Bartlett thought about whether his report would be in breach of the censorship rules but concluded that Murdoch "declares, and I think quite rightly, that unless someone lets the truth be known at home we are likely to suffer a great disaster."

"I finally came to a decision," Ashmead-Bartlett wrote "to give Mr Murdoch the letter and to risk the consequences to myself."

Sir Keith left with the letter and other letters of introduction to people "who might be useful in organising a campaign to save the army on Gallipoli."

But Sir Keith's escape with Ashmead-Bartlett's letter was short lived.

General Sir Ian Hamilton who was in command of the forces at Gallipoli heard of Ashmead-Bartlett's letter and arranged to have Keith stripped of it when his ship stopped at Marseilles.

British military intelligence met Keith before he could disembark. They rifled his room and demanded Keith hand over Ashmead-Bartlett's letter or be arrested.

On the assurance that it would be delivered unopened to the British Prime Minister, Sir Keith surrendered the sealed letter.

He knew it would never make it to Downing Street.

So as he sailed on to London he wrote his own account of the situation for Prime Minister Fisher.

The letter — now in the National Library of Australia — was a combination of what he remembered of Bean's and Ashmead-Bartlett's words, the misery and hopelessness Keith had seen for himself on the Gallipoli peninsula, the British incompetence he witnessed, and the views of an impassioned Australian.

The letter was not written for publication and was as such, not a work of journalism. A “scrappy” account Keith called it. It was, as Fisher had wanted, a raw and unfiltered account of what he had seen and heard, and felt. Two days after cabling the letter to Fisher, Sir Keith forwarded a copy to British Prime Minister Asquith.

Three themes emerge. That Hamilton had failed as a military strategist, that the approaching winter would weaken our troops further, and that no advance could be made without a “new” army to fight it. “As an army of offence we are done,” Keith wrote.

But worse was still to come. “Already the flies are spreading dysentery to an alarming extent ... When the autumn rains come and unbury our dead, now lying under light soil in our trenches, sickness must increase. Even now the stench of many of our trenches is sickening. Alas, the good human stuff that lies there buried, the brave hearts still, the sorrow in our hard-hit Australian households.”

“Supposing we lose only 30,000 during winter from sickness. That means that when spring comes we shall have about 60,000 men left. But they will not be an army. They will be a broken force, spent.”

On reading these words Asquith had the letter printed and circulated as a State Paper for the Committee of Imperial Defence.

Just weeks later, on the 14th of October, the British Cabinet met and decided to abandon the campaign. Kitchener advised Hamilton he had been relieved of his command.

Bean was astounded: “It is a shock to find that what the whole system cannot do after months of close attention ... a single visitor can do within days ... that is to make up the mind of the British Government.”

One man did indeed make a remarkable difference, despite the censors working to efficiently stop any unauthorized publication of reports on Gallipoli. Of course today, their job would be much harder.

In 1915, news had to be cabled, or physically carried out. Today, of course, news can be disseminated in literally thousands of different ways.

Journalists today file electronically, not just by email but through streaming live images through Skype or Facetime. Pictures taken seconds before can be seen in newsrooms half the world away. Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, BuzzFeed, Tumblr, Instagram, even Snapchat are used to amplify a story to devastating effect.

These are tools available not only to journalists but to everyone with a mobile phone. Every journalist has these tools, yes, but also every soldier, every citizen, every teenager, taxi driver, mum, dad, troll, and yes, terrorist.

The liberal essayist A.J. Leibling wrote in the New Yorker in 1960 that “Freedom of the Press is guaranteed only to those who own one.”

This thought is now redundant. In our pockets we have a publishing tool more powerful than any printing press in history.

Of the 5 billion mobile phones in use today, 1.8 billion are smart phones, capable of publishing and receiving media. Currently smartphone sales are running at about 400 million units per quarter.

We are only just at the beginning of an era of human connection where the frictionless flow of ideas and ideology can either catalyse the advancement of knowledge or, just as easily, spread errors, falsehoods, defamations, ignorance, and hatred.

Over 2 billion pieces of user-generated content are created every day. There are 277,000 tweets every minute. Ten per cent of the world's images were recorded in the last six months. In fact, 90 per cent of the world's digital data has been created in the last two years.

But the creation of the internet has not, in itself, made the world a better place. It cannot force any of us to be better human beings. But, through the knowledge it facilitates, the internet can help us to choose to be better. Choice is the nature of freedom. And knowledge is at the very root of free choice. It is also at the very core of our democracy.

It's interesting to think about what would have happened if the internet, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook had been around in 1915.

Would Bean, or Ashmead-Bartlett have tweeted the conditions our men faced to a global audience and hastened the end of the campaign long before Sir Keith arrived at Anzac Cove? If not, would Sir Keith have bothered writing the Gallipoli Letter when he could just have easily posted his thoughts on Tumblr?

From their own letters and journals we know all these men would have wanted to. Keith Murdoch found Bean and Ashmead-Bartlett desperately distressed at what was happening at Gallipoli and deeply frustrated, even depressed that they could not report on what they saw and heard.

At Imbros Ashmead-Bartlett is said to have told Keith "If I wrote the truth, it would never pass the censors."

These professional journalists, all courageous men, did not breach the military censors because of the control those censors had over the technology of the day, the cables, but because of the legal commitment they had signed not to do so. As you would no doubt expect, they all took that commitment extremely seriously. The internet would not have changed that.

What the Internet has done is make the work professional journalists do far more valuable. The tsunami of content generated every minute online has, if anything, made well-sourced news and careful analysis as important as ever.

Journalists do heroic tasks, often under terrible threat.

Here tonight we are honoured with the presence of some very courageous journalists.

Globally, this year 54 journalists have been killed because of their work. And it's still only October. One hundred and seventy nine journalists are in prison. Of course Australian Peter Greste, who remains in prison in Egypt, is one of them.

But this is nothing new.

Fear of the press has existed since the start of the democratisation of knowledge with the invention of the Guttenberg Press.

In June of 1530 Henry the 8th, worried about reformist ideas spreading to Tudor England from the continent, passed laws to prohibit and control all heretical books and publications. These laws would be enforced by the Star Chamber, a secret court of appointed councillors and judges.

Soon after, the Star Chamber declared publisher John Frith a heretic and ordered him publicly burned at the stake.

Since then certain elites within society have never truly warmed to the popular press. Political, academic and social groups still sneer at the masses, and want to tell them what they can read and what they can watch. "We know better than you" seems to be the common refrain.

Who here remembers the argument put forward by some of our democratically elected leaders in the Republican debate of 1998 and 1999? "We can't possibly have a directly elected head of state," they gasped, "...the mob may elect Ray Martin!" This statement, put forth many times, incredibly shows a lack of faith in the intelligence of the public, a disdain for democracy, and a snobbishness about the mass media all in the one sentence! And who's to say Ray Martin wouldn't have done a great job?

And, because the public can't think for itself, only last year the past government proposed a bill that would have seen a government-appointed body to oversee all of the media, the "Public Interest Media Advocate" or PIMA.

PIMA was envisaged to have wide-ranging, corrosive powers. It could order investigations into any matter a newspaper or other media outlet published or broadcast. Failure to comply with standards could see the removal of the Privacy Act exemptions which are essential for journalists to do their work. And, if all else failed, a single unnamed 'super expert' could apply his or her own undefined "public interest test" and punish an organisation commercially.

PIMA was the most draconian attack on the freedom of the press this country has ever seen in peacetime.

But even now, after failing to repeal Section 18c of the Racial Discrimination act, which dramatically reduces free speech by making it unlawful to offend someone, our current government is introducing legislation that includes jailing journalists for up to 10 years if they disclose information that relates to a "special intelligence operation."

This proscription lasts in perpetuity. Forever. Long after an operation is complete. And breaching it has no defined defences, despite such defences being well understood under Australian law.

Of course, it is left ambiguous what a "special intelligence operation" is, as it is left up to government agencies at the time to decide.

Would the Gallipoli campaign have been a special operation? Would Sir Keith have been arrested with Ashmead-Bartlett's letter to spend the next ten years in jail? And remember, the taking of that letter in Marseilles, a private communication to a Prime Minister, was a tremendous overreach by the military at that time.

"Trust us, we're from the government" seems to be a common theme when attempting to censor the media. But trust is something that should not be a consideration when restricting our fundamental freedoms. Our freedom of speech and freedom of the press are not things we should blindly entrust to anyone.

The first amendment of the Constitution of the United States, adopted as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791, reads in part, that "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press".

Australia has no equivalent constitutional protection of freedom of speech or freedom of the press. Already we have literally hundreds of separate laws and regulations that currently govern the working press. Even a subset of these laws is entirely sufficient to govern how journalists work. We certainly do not need further laws to jail journalists who responsibly learn and accurately tell.

A century ago, Keith Murdoch's Gallipoli letter was Australia's boldest declaration that our nation had a right to know the truth.

Years later he added, a free media must be "dependent on no one for favours."

Censorship should be resisted in all its insidious forms.

We should be vigilant of the gradual erosion of our freedom to know, to be informed, and make reasoned decisions in our society and in our democracy.

We must all take notice and, like Sir Keith, have the courage to act when those freedoms are threatened.

Lachlan Murdoch delivered the 2014 Keith Murdoch Oration at the State Library of Victoria.