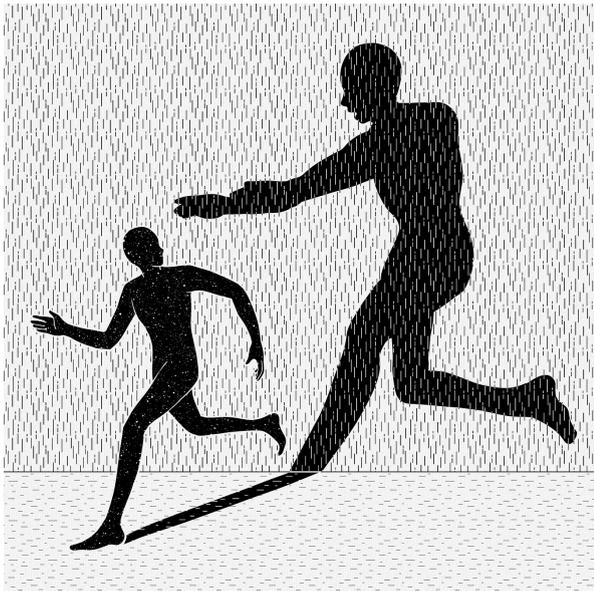


Hi there

## Making music this week



*Twisted statistics...* First Draft alerted its [CrossCheck](#) members over the weekend to commercial radio ads authorised by Clive Palmer that cherry-picked from a Therapeutic Goods Administration report to grossly misrepresent the number of deaths related to Covid-19 vaccines (see more on our [vaccine insights hub](#)).

*Heard it through the grapevine...*

Meanwhile our researcher Stevie Zhang is gaining global recognition for their lead on how to cover the so-called 'lab leak

theories' - a geo-political issue that has ensnared Australia. Stevie's report is reproduced below.

*War, what is it good for...* Sacha has more on an upcoming symposium on conflicting ethics of reporting in conflict zones to be held by the Centre and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

*Desperately seeking ...defamation...* Monica Attard makes sense of the flurry of high-profile defamation cases hitting the headlines in Australia.

*Stayin' alive...* Tim speaks on the challenges for news media to survive digital

transformation in new research conducted for the Media for Democracy Monitor 2021 report.

And we leave you with reading list for those who get to enjoy a long weekend.



**Anne Kruger**  
First Draft APAC Director

## Reporting on an unproven lab-leak theory

Over the past weeks, unproven theories that SARS-CoV-2 might have originated at China's Wuhan Institute of Virology have crept back into headlines.

Among other chatter, the news items that pushed the so-called lab-leak theory back into public view were [reports that three staff members of the lab sought hospital care in November 2019](#), just before the first cases of the coronavirus were reported; [US President Joe Biden's](#)

[calls for a renewed investigation into the origin of the virus](#); as well as [Dr. Anthony Fauci's email correspondence](#). While the [US-led investigation](#) focuses on whether the virus was accidentally leaked from the lab, online reactions following these news events included a heavy dose of speculation that the virus was deliberately engineered as a bioweapon. The multiple forms of the theory muddy the waters, as it becomes [increasingly difficult to determine which exact theory, and its plausibility](#), is being discussed.

None of these news items served as groundbreaking evidence. However, they were portrayed by some outlets and commentators as proof that many in the the media were wrong to have downplayed the lab-leak theory in the first place. As [First Draft argued](#) earlier, incremental releases of new findings should not be treated as proof. Since the lab-leak theory so far remains unproven, it's misleading to suggest through op-eds, TV appearances or social media posts that the media "got it wrong."



What makes it challenging to report on the theory without causing further confusion or amplifying misleading information is that it is inextricably tangled in the geopolitical dynamics of US-China relations and US domestic politics. When the theory was repeated by former President Donald Trump while he was in office, mainstream media widely — and rightfully — criticized it for its conspiratorial and Sinophobic tone — but [this overshadowed legitimate concerns](#) that were still being examined by scientists. Journalist [Jon Allsop noted in the \*Columbia Journalism Review\*](#) that some journalists failed to understand the complex relationship between the conspiratorial and racist actors abusing the theory for their own means, and the facts underpinning the theory’s credibility in the scientific community. Furthermore, [scientists say](#) the volatility of the current conversation could harm efforts to study the virus’ origins and reach any definitive conclusion about this theory or others.

Unfortunately, there is no one easy answer about how to cover this theory. The best thing news organizations can do is to lay out all the facts. Chief among them: investigations into the origin of the virus are ongoing, and right now there is no definitive answer.



**Stevie Zhang**  
[First Draft](#) research reporter

## Ethics in conflict



Journalists tend to be guided by ethical principles, such as those contained in the [MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics](#).

Sometimes, however, these principle-based codes are at odds with journalists’ own intuitions. This tension can be particularly acute for reporters in conflict zones, where reporting can have life or death consequences. Do you need to break the rules to keep your sources safe? Do you pay interviewees, even when the rules say you can’t? How can you help people in conflict zones best tell their stories?

I'm thrilled to announce that we've partnered with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to host a symposium on Friday September 17, titled *Conflicting Ethics in Conflict Reporting*. To be held at UTS, the symposium will open with a keynote address from former ABC foreign correspondent and now human rights researcher [Sophie McNeill](#), whose eye-opening book *We Can't Say We Didn't Know: Dispatches from an age of impunity* was published last year.

After the keynote, panel discussions will include *Sydney Morning Herald* photojournalist [Kate Geraghty](#), the ABC's former Beirut correspondent and current deputy foreign editor, [Matt Brown](#), *The Saturday Paper's* [Hamish McDonald](#), UTS Law's [Gabrielle Simm](#), author and academic [Stan Grant](#) and the Australian head of mission for the ICRC, [David Tuck](#).

Monica Attard, Chrisanthi Giotis and I will also be presenting the findings of new research, for which we'll be interviewing reporters about their specific experiences of conflicting ethics in conflict reporting.



**Sacha Molitorisz**  
UTS FASS/Law Lecturer

## Tis the season..for lawsuits

It must be defamation season. Next month, [major reforms to defamation law](#) come into effect [in NSW, Victoria and South Australia](#). These reforms include the sorely-needed introduction of a public interest defence. But first, we're seeing a flurry of high-profile cases brought under the old law.

Arguably the biggest of them all has been settled – somewhat. Former Attorney General Christian Porter has withdrawn his case against the ABC and one of its highest profile journalists, Louise Milligan. After ABC journalists claimed victory on Twitter



and Porter claimed victory at a media door-stop, ABC managing director David Anderson was recalled to Senate Estimates - which he'd attended only the week before - to answer questions about how much the settled case had cost taxpayers.

The Porter case was the subject of [a Fourth Estate program](#) on 2SER last week, where I was joined by *The Sydney Morning Herald's* [Kate McClymont](#) - who has herself reported and experienced a few defamation trials - and *Crikey's* [Amber Shultz](#). They agreed on one thing: the winner wasn't Christian Porter. The relevant article is still online, and Porter settled with no damages (though even this is also now subject of a spin war).

Then there's former special forces soldier and Victoria Cross recipient, Ben Roberts-Smith who claims his reputation has been 'smashed' and 'destroyed' by stories published in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2018 alleging war crimes and domestic violence. Roberts-Smith is [seeking damages](#) including aggravated damages for past and future economic loss; Nine newspapers is seeking to rely on a defence of truth. While much of Roberts-Smith's lawyers' opening address was given in camera because of national security concerns, Roberts-Smith himself has started giving evidence.

And then there's Daniel Taylor, whose name you might not know. Taylor is also known as Daniel Ibrahim, son of well-known Kings Cross figure John Ibrahim whose name most do know. In 2019, *The Sunday Telegraph* ran a 24-page spread titled, 'Inside the house of Ibrahim Unauthorised', in which Daniel Taylor claims he was portrayed as the 'wise guy son' of John Ibrahim. Taylor's lawyer told the court 'wise guy son' has [another meaning](#) - someone who is 'involved in organised crime'. Nationwide News denies any of the claimed defamatory meanings are actually conveyed; but as a fall-back defence, the newspaper argues it is 'substantially true' to say Taylor is involved in organised crime.

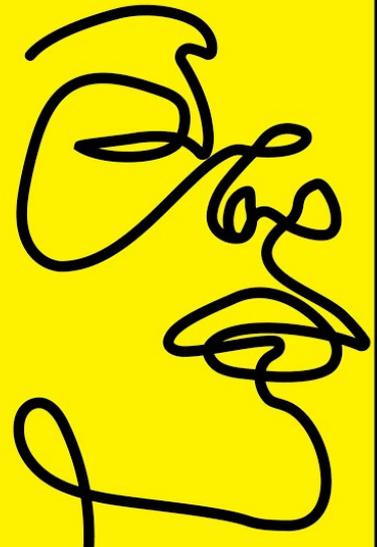
If not for the serious threats to public interest journalism posed by Australia's current defamation laws, you might be tempted to reach for the popcorn.



**Monica Attard**  
CMT Co-Director

# THE MEDIA FOR DEMOCRACY MONITOR 2021

HOW  
LEADING  
NEWS MEDIA  
SURVIVE  
DIGITAL  
TRANSFORMATION



svdj | EMRG | THE MEDIA FOR  
DEMOCRACY  
MONITOR  
The Ecomedia Research Group

Australia's media system has been given an international spotlight in [a chapter for the Media for Democracy Monitor](#) that I've written with CMT's Derek Wilding and University of Sydney's Tim Dwyer. We conducted a point-by-point assessment of Australia's news media through a compilation of academic, government, and industry reports and interviews with on-the-ground news staff.

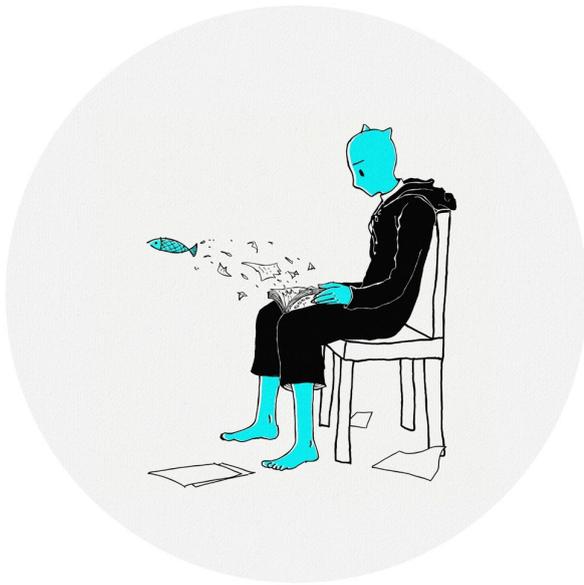
It has been a decade since the last Media for Democracy Monitor country report for Australia. Since 2011, we have seen an erosion of investigative journalism and press freedoms, as legal actions against journalists and their sources have lowered our high ranking in international indexes, and ownership deregulation that exacerbated what was already one of the most concentrated systems of media ownership in the world. Comparing this with nations across the globe, we can see opportunities where our system could be safeguarded from these threats while being able to seize on other opportunities. A special thanks goes out to those newsroom staff that contributed to [the report](#).



**Tim Koskie**  
CMT HDR Student

## What we're reading

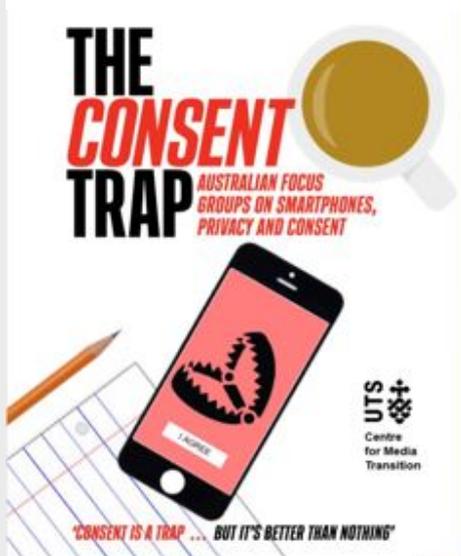
Weekend plans? Nothing like curling up with... well just curling up. But should you decide to unfurl from your curling, here's some reads to keep you well informed:



The June edition of the [Vaccine Misinformation Insights](#) report (and while you're there, check out First Draft's new look website).

[Tech companies don't need to be creepy to make money](#) by Clive Thompson, WIRED contributing editor

#CYMI You can read more of our publications and the reports below on our [website](#).



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*The Centre for Media Transition and UTS acknowledges the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our university now stands. We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these places.*



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