

Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

Local news matters

Local news media: right now, it's both the most disrupted sector and the most important for us to get right. Good news? It's also where the most exciting experimentation is carrying local media through the digital transition.

That's the conclusion from the first big [comparative look at local news](#) around the world that I've researched and written for the International Press Institute Global Network of journalists, editors and media builders.



It's a real-time qualitative report based on in-depth discussions with more than 30 journalists, editors, media leaders and entrepreneurs who are transitioning legacy media and creating new local-media voices – about half in the United States and half in Asia, the Pacific, Africa and Europe – together with readings of their comments and self-reflections in blogs, speeches and articles.

Getting local news media fit for purpose in the 21st century is critical for Australia's diverse communities. Local news media has been the core of Australian media since the very local Sydney Gazette first launched in 1803. From the dominant city-based papers to the evening State-based news on television, they've provided the vehicle through which most Australians have come to understand what's happening equally around the world and around the corner.

I outline the findings which are fascinating and hopeful below.

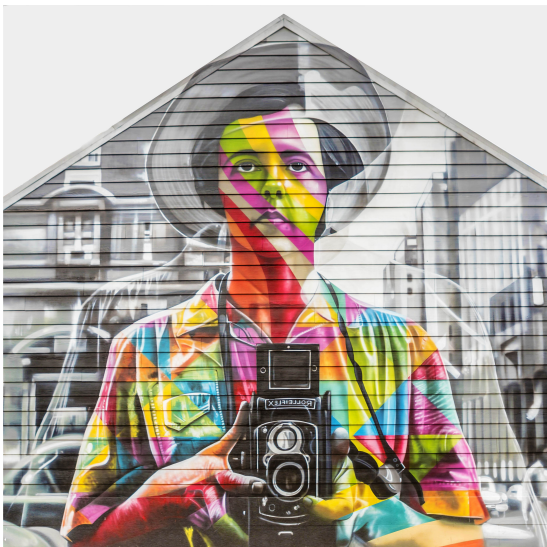
Also in this issue, Sacha Molitorisz considers the current controversy over Facebook removing Craig Kelly's accounts, while Anne Kruger looks at the intersection of misinformation and censorship in India. Chrisanthi Giotis reports on an Iftar dinner for Ramadan that brought together 20 ABC journalists and 20 members of the Australian-Muslim community, while Derek Wilding provides an update on developments at the Australian Press Council.



Jacqui Park

Head, Network Strategy and Innovation, IPI Media
and CMT Research Fellow

Around the corner, around the world



'Local' is a tricky concept. It can range from mastheads in small country towns to capital city talk radio. In this report, we recognise that any news outlet that targets a geographically constrained audience – no matter how large its population – tends to face the same challenges, which are both different and more intense than media that are effectively national (including once were city media like, say, *The New York Times*).

My new report finds that successful local media have a clear sense of their mission, editorial vision and audience (or potential audience). This confidence is guiding a reimagining of journalism to meet the needs of their community.

Local media both reflect and create their communities with a journalistic and business understanding of the intricacies of local culture and diversity by embedding themselves in the community, by looking like the community, and by being their community's champion in telling their stories to one another and the world.

Not all change has been positive. Some traditional local news media businesses have sought short term survival by cutting costs and raising prices particularly through short-sighted hedge funds and private equity. Linking mastheads in chains that share largely commodified news copy, have common designs and chase national ads has sacrificed the core value that local news brings. This has created gaps and news deserts (although that, in turn has opened up opportunities for new voices).

But, on balance, the local news media that is emerging from this disruption is a more socially useful, more engaged – a better – journalism. Here's a few examples:

- Organisations are experimenting with a co-op ownership model that gives audiences a bigger say; for example, Ohio's *The Devil Strip* (taken from local slang for road-side nature strip), the *Bristol Cable* and *L'Ora de Pellice* in Italy's Piedmont.
- Engaged readership requires a journalism that holds institutions to account and provides difficult-to-access information as a service rather than a reporting for the record. *Detroit's Outlier*, for example, uses text to alert tenants to foreclosures.
- The trust that the connected-ness of local media builds puts local news media in the centre of the battle against misinformation and disinformation by fact-checking, deep reporting and debunking disinformation/misinformation. For example, when rumours spread that Antifa had taken over the area outside Walmart in Akron, Ohio, the local news site, *Mahoning Matters*, sent reporters to debunk the claim live.
- Local media take the time to go deep rather than emulating the traditional model of fast coverage of spot news, making trends/events/developments relevant to local audiences, including scaling national reports and data back to the relatable local size, some using AI like *Radar* in the UK.



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Craig's list of banned accounts

In 2014, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg said that he believed [connectivity was a basic human right](#). Four years later, in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica debacle, Zuckerberg changed his tune.

'For most of our existence, we focused on all of the good that connecting people can do,' [Zuckerberg told US Congress](#).

'And as Facebook has grown ... we have to go through ... and make sure we're taking a broad enough view of our responsibility. It's not enough to just

connect people. We have to make sure those connections are positive.'



Ethically, Facebook had grown up a little by recognising that the right to connectivity and the right to free speech must have limits. This was underscored in 2019, when [Facebook curbed](#)

[its Live feature](#) following the livestreaming of the Christchurch massacre. And on Monday, Facebook Australia [banned Federal MP Craig Kelly's](#) official Facebook page, which had more than 100,000 followers. This was a big deal. As [QUT's Tim Graham noted](#) in January, Kelly's Facebook posts attracted more than 5 million interactions over the previous year.

'We don't allow anyone, including elected officials, to share misinformation about COVID-19 that could lead to imminent physical harm or [misinformation about] COVID-19 vaccines that have been debunked by public health experts,' a Facebook spokeswoman said. 'We have clear policies against this type of content and have removed Mr Kelly's Facebook page for repeated violations of this policy.'

For good measure, Facebook then banned Kelly's backup Facebook page, plus his Instagram. 'When we remove people for violating our policies, we don't allow them to circumvent this with additional accounts,' a Facebook spokeswoman [said on Wednesday](#). 'We have removed Craig Kelly's second Facebook page and Instagram account for violating our policies on this.'

Kelly, now an independent following his resignation from the Liberal Party, was outraged. 'It is completely unacceptable that a foreign entity can de-platform an Australian MP,' he said.

Not that Kelly has been de-platformed altogether. At the time of writing, his Twitter account was still active, with nearly 15,000 followers. And Anne Kruger – whose First Draft team have been closely monitoring cases of vaccine misinformation – notes that Kelly's Telegram followers have skyrocketed following his removal from Facebook. As Anne says, this is a common complication with de-platforming, as those banned and their followers simply 're-platform' on alternative sites that fly under the mainstream radar in terms of accountability.

In any event, legally, a company can 'de-platform' anyone it likes, even in the US, where the First Amendment protects free speech. In January, [Twitter banned Donald Trump](#) following January's [uprising against democracy](#) in Washington DC. To its credit, [Twitter published its reasons](#).

By contrast, Facebook explained this week's ban with just a few short and unattributed sentences. Banning a politician's account is a serious step. As Facebook dispenses its own version of justice, it needs to demonstrate that its bans are neither arbitrary nor unfair. Justice requires fairness, consistency and transparency, and if Facebook wants to get serious about tackling misinformation, it needs to publish its reasons.



Sacha Molitorisz
Lecturer in Law/FASS

With [news](#) that Twitter [removed](#) tweets critical of the Indian government's handling of Covid-19 as a devastating second wave [overwhelms](#) the country, what information has been circulating? First Draft APAC research found while a small number of the removed tweets contained misinformation about the Covid-19 crisis, the majority did not and instead criticised the BJP-led government. Some of the tweets viewed by First Draft used the hashtag [#ModiMadeDisaster](#).



[TheWire.In](#) has [collected examples](#) of how government leaders and politicians downplayed Covid-19 just as the second wave was mounting.

'Modi' was trending on Australian Twitter last week with tweets such as [this](#) calling for the Indian Prime Minister's resignation.

Meanwhile the official Twitter account of the High Commission of India in Canberra [accused](#) The Australian of publishing a 'baseless' article after the newspaper reprinted [a piece](#) from [The Sunday Times UK](#) titled 'Modi leads India into Viral apocalypse'. The tweet posted:

'Urge [@australian](#) to publish the rejoinder to set the record straight on the covid management in India and also refrain from publishing such baseless articles in future'.

The tweet attracted over 3,300 quote tweets – however many comments agreed with the report published by The Australian.

By Thursday, Facebook was also looking into [reports](#) of temporarily hidden posts with the hashtag [#ResignModi](#). Buzzfeed [reported](#) that Facebook spokesperson Andy Stone told them: 'We temporarily blocked this hashtag by mistake, not because the Indian government asked us to, and have since restored it.'

As the [FT reported](#), cases and deaths have now surged in India above the previous peak.



Anne Kruger
[First Draft](#) APAC Director

Feasting on news stories



Everyone loves a good Iftar event, the shared feast in the evening each night of Ramadan, when the fast is broken - but this one was particularly special.

This one brought together 20 ABC journalists with 20 members of the Australian-Muslim community at the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia, in Auburn, Sydney. The event included sets of questions distributed among the tables, a Q and A panel with the hosting role handed over to one of the young

Muslim women who organised the event (watch out Hamish!) and a session devoted to creating and pitching news stories with three of the stories pitched by the community members commissioned, on the spot, by ABC editors.

Both myself and First Draft Australia bureau Editor Esther Chan attended. The CMT was invited in recognition of the catalysing role of my research with [Frame Reflection Interviews](#) in the trusting relationship that has been created. To read more about the Tackling Islamophobia project and research check out [this article](#) in Social Sciences.

The energy during the night was fantastic. I look forward to some exciting journalism to come.



Chrisanthi Giotis
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Update on the Press Council

In our last issue, we mentioned that the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) was considering withdrawing from the Australian Press Council (APC). Last week, MEAA members voted to do exactly that, and on Wednesday May 21, the union announced it would give the APC [notice](#) of its resignation.

The notice period is lengthy – as a ‘constituent body’, it needs to give four



years' notice. It will need to continue paying membership fees for the first three years. In the fourth year, it has no obligation to pay fees, but neither is it entitled to vote at Council meetings. This is a membership rule set out in the APC Constitution that was strengthened under former Chair Julian Disney at the time of the Finkelstein Inquiry and the Convergence Review in order to give the Council more security over funding.

The union was forthright in setting out its reasons for leaving, including this: 'the Press Council is no longer fit-for-purpose for the modern cross-platform industry'. It also said it would 'engage with industry stakeholders to discuss what shape a robust regulatory environment would take'.

At CMT, we've long argued that the cross-platform environment means there's a case for reviewing the fragmented state of media standards schemes in Australia. As it happens, we have some research on various international models for press complaints that we started back in 2017, when we moved at full speed into digital platform regulation.

We're now updating that research and plan on releasing a report in June. We hope it will help inform the public debate the MEAA is calling for.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

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