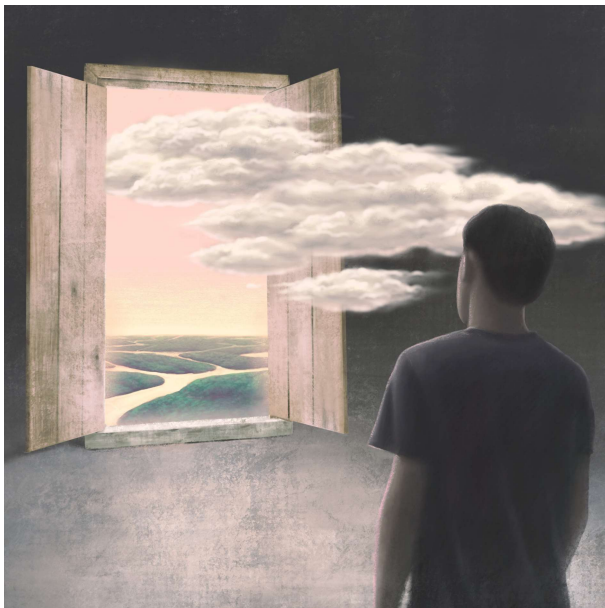


Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

On the move during lockdown



With much of the nation in lockdown, you might have expected Australia's news media to be in stasis too. Instead, there's movement aplenty.

On Wednesday, [Guardian Australia](#) [launched](#) its rural and regional reporting network, a three-year project with the Centre for Media Transition, funded by [the VFFF](#). The project's [first piece of journalism](#) detailed how a possible bumper year for farmers is being threatened by labour shortages and Covid rules. The by-line

belonged to UTS postgraduate student [Natasha May](#), the first of five UTS students who will spend a year reporting from regional and rural Australia. As soon as lockdowns allow, Natasha will be based at *The Gilgandra Weekly*.

Also on Wednesday, the Walkley Foundation held a virtual event, 'Why Philanthropy is backing local journalism.' Panellists for the 90-minute event included Elizabeth Green from [Chalkbeat](#) and David Bornstein from the [Solutions Journalism Network](#). And it was encouraging to hear that, despite all the pressures on news media, there are green shoots. As if to illustrate the point, former BuzzFeed Australia editor and current CMT Advisory Board member Simon Crerar proceeded to reveal details about *PS Media, an initiative he's

working on with Margaret Simons, Robert Wise and Karen Mahlab. *PS Media will foster local news, aiming to stem the worrying spread of ‘news deserts’.

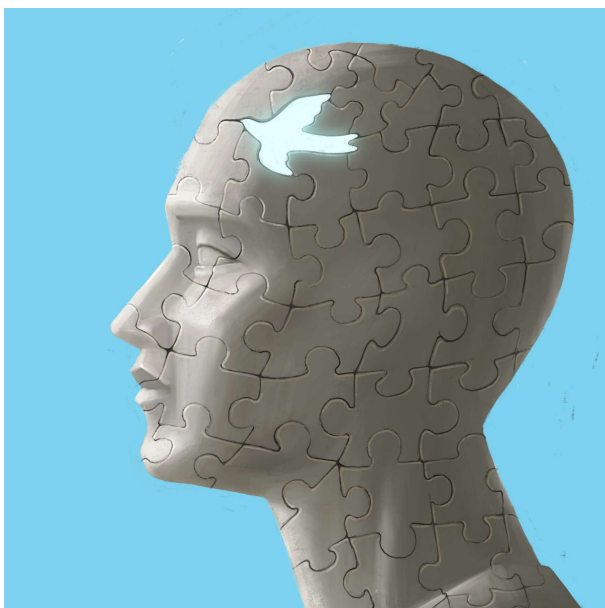
Journalism research is on the move too. On Monday, the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, or PIJI, [released its research](#) into Australian philanthropy and news media. Based on about 40 interviews, the research found that potential funders lack an awareness of the acute need for support, and that current tax and charity laws are a major restraint. And just this morning we held our half-day symposium into the ethical conundrums faced by reporters in conflict zones. The symposium is part of an ongoing research partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross, involving interviews with Sophie McNeill, Stan Grant, Kate Geraghty and more. We’ll tell you more about that in coming newsletters.

But first, in this newsletter: Monica Attard laments the Twitter trolling of Leigh Sales; Derek Wilding ponders the High Court’s decision in the Voller defamation case and dissects the Media Diversity Inquiry; Prue Clarke, the CMT’s newest addition, details her podcast about the failures of the US media following 9/11; and finally, well, I won’t give any spoilers about today’s final item ... except to say that you’ve been an inspiring colleague, Chrisanthi, and the CMT won’t be the same without you.



Sacha Molitorisz
UTS Law/FASS Lecturer

The rabid trolls of Twitter



Covid has brought out the best and worst of Australian society. The best includes Australians turning out to get jabbed for their own and the greater good, and our health workers tirelessly treating the infected and helping their families.

The worst has been largely on social media. This week, ABC TV’s 7.30 anchor Leigh Sales [called them out](#). And she didn’t miss her mark. Sales wrote: ‘... the bullying and harassment now comes, not in an occasional phone call from a real person,

but at a furious pace on social media from politicians' acolytes, lackeys, fans and proxies, mostly — but not always — operating anonymously. It is non-stop, personal, often vile, frequently unhinged and regularly based on fabrications.'

Sales wrote this piece after her colleague and friend Lisa Millar, who co-presents the ABC's national morning show, left Twitter following vile abuse from viewers, who had slammed her journalism and claimed she was leaning right, largely because of her deceased father, an LNP politician. Sales also cited how former Q&A host Hamish McDonald left the platform (and indeed the ABC) because of Twitter abuse, and how Stan Grant, who is not even on Twitter regularly cops racist abuse on the platform.

'Let's not duck the common thread here — it is overwhelmingly left-leaning Twitter users who are targeting ABC journalists for abuse,' wrote Sales. 'Of course, there are right-wing attacks too but the most ferocious campaigns are reserved for any journalist who questions, in even the most anodyne manner, the policies or public statements of Labor politicians.' And questioning Covid restrictions and policies is what brings out the 'militantly pro-lockdown, pro-COVID zero and pro-Labor premiers, and even the tamest of questions in those directions prompts an onslaught.'

In response to the piece, several Twitter dwellers have renewed their attacks on Sales, some in the same abusive way Sales is reacting to. Even positively tweeting Sales' story has brought attacks.

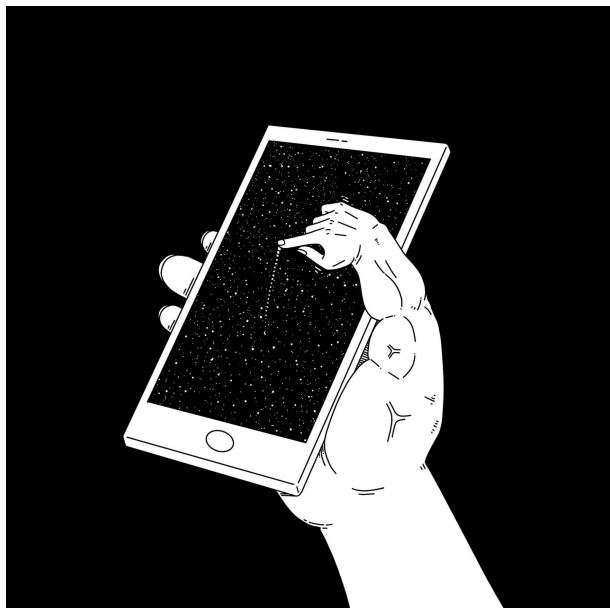
Journalism is about conveying information - and critically interrogating that information. Questioning policy positions is journalism, whether the policy comes from left- or right-leaning governments. The kind of criticism Sales and other journalists have received for questioning government decisions that reduce our freedom to move – even if for valid public health reasons – indicates that the critics might think what a journalist does is only journalism if it supports their own beliefs. The same applies to the critics on the right who don't show an ability to see beyond their own political lens.

Journalists are notoriously thin-skinned, but abusing or threatening them for doing their job isn't fair or right. Reserve your reasoned, unthreatening criticism for the ones who blatantly advocate.



Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

The High Court gets active on social media



The [decision of the High Court](#) in the case by Dylan Voller against three news organisations has been widely reported – though it may not be the last time this court sees this case. Last week’s decision was just on the issue of publication – whether the news organisations could be regarded as publishers of the comments posted by third party users in response to news articles about Mr Voller that the publishers posted on their Facebook pages. Rejecting an argument regarding the need to establish intention to publish the material, five of the

seven judges found that the news organisations were indeed publishers of the comments. The matter now goes back to the Supreme Court to decide whether the material was defamatory and whether there are any defences.

The decision may not be surprising, but it is still concerning. It shows the common law is well established and may not deal with this problem in a way that many of us would like it to. I don’t mean that publishers should have no liability for third party comments, but I suspect that many in the community would think it reasonable for the publisher to have a real opportunity to address a problem that’s raised with it.

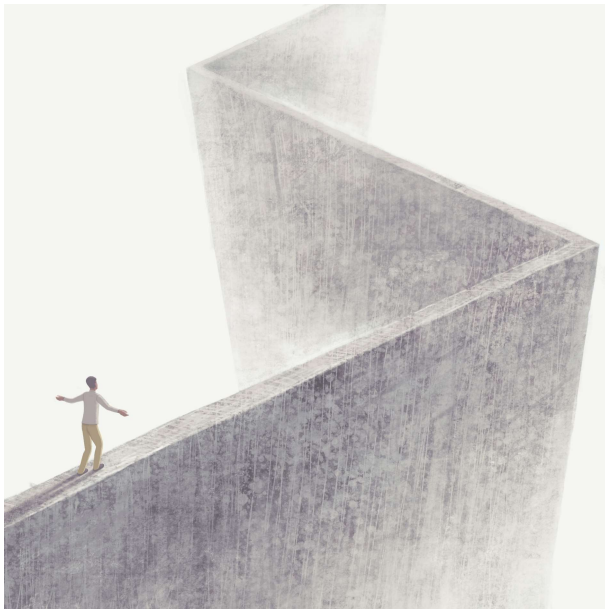
Thankfully, the problem is currently on the policy agenda as [Stage 2](#) in the national review of defamation law being conducted by the Council of Attorneys-General.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

Raising standards in Canberra

A retort from Sky News Australia CEO Paul Whittaker – describing the assertion that Sky News is a COVID-19 denier as 'frankly



ridiculous’ – [received a lot of attention](#) last week. Whittaker was before the [latest public hearings](#) of the [Senate Inquiry into Media Diversity](#) in Australia. He rejected the view of YouTube as a ‘neutral platform’, pointing to the take-down of 23 Sky News videos as evidence of YouTube exercising the editorial control of a publisher. This was an expected and familiar argument. If accepted, it may support additional regulatory oversight.

While not generating the same headlines, the session involving government representatives from the ACMA and the Department of Communications was also notable for anyone interested in regulation. Committee Chair Senator Sarah Hanson-Young and Labor Senator Kim Carr grilled government representatives about the other side of media regulation: co-regulation of broadcasters, rather than self-regulation of online platforms. The questioning weaved its way around various aspects of regulation – as these hearings tend to do – but there were three consistent themes.

The first issue was the adequacy of the code of practice covering pay TV in Australia and how the decision by WIN to carry Sky News means that the commercial TV code, not the ASTRA pay TV code, will apply in that environment. The line of questioning from Senators Hanson-Young and Carr left no doubt about their views on code failings. The second issue was responsiveness to complaints about COVID-19 misinformation. Here, the Senators were even more sceptical about the design of the codes scheme and the way complaints sent to ACMA were then sent to Sky News, which has 60 days to respond before the complaints return to ACMA. Finally, there was questioning about the powers of ACMA to act on breaches of the code, including the absence of ‘mid-tier powers’, such as orders to broadcast on-air corrections.

While it only lasted about an hour, this session swiftly traversed all three regulatory aspects of rule-making, compliance, and enforcement. It also aired some concerns [raised by CMT](#) and in [research](#) by myself and my colleague Karen Lee, on broadcasting co-regulation. While we don’t know where this Committee will end up, one point made in defence of ACMA by agency head Nerida O’Loughlin is a point [we’ve made before](#): it’s up to Parliament – not the regulator – to recognise that aspects of the co-regulatory arrangements are due for review. But improving the system doesn’t necessarily mean dumping co-regulation itself.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

An attack on journalistic integrity



On 9/11, I was at the Twin Towers reporting for the *Financial Times* and the ABC, so I know that part of the attacks as well as anyone. But having arrived in the US just a year earlier to study at the Columbia University's Journalism School, I didn't have the long-term perspective of my American colleagues. Even then I was surprised at how the US media, from left to right, abandoned journalistic objectivity and rigour to fuel Islamophobia, back the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq and the vast curbs on civil liberties that followed.

The media succumbed to pressure to see the world in terms of us and them. They were Americans first and journalists second. That was a fatal error.

For a new [Fourth Estate podcast](#), I talk with two dear friends: Doha Madani, a Lebanese-American journalist for NBC who was eight when the planes hit and who says the Islamophobia she and her family suffered after the attacks drove her to become a reporter; and Andrew Rosenthal, long-time editor for the *New York Times* and son of Abe Rosenthal, the legendary *NYT* editor who published the Pentagon Papers.

We explore what went wrong, reflecting on the seeds that were sown and that subsequently grew into the deep mistrust and division roiling America two decades later. And we ask if the American media has learned anything from the aftermath of 9/11.



Prue Clarke
CMT Research Fellow

A three-year lesson in dynamism



Dear readers, indulge me this public opportunity to say goodbye and thank you. The Centre for Media Transition is a special place of ideas and optimism. Both are needed when attempting to research journalism best practice in the shifting sands of today's media landscape. It is a place that nurtures collaboration. Within the team certainly, but also with government and industry.

Researching best practice can sound worthy or elitist, worse yet it can also lead to 'best practicitis', the cookie cutter approach described by Ben Ramalingam in [Aid on the Edge of Chaos](#). That is most certainly not the case at the CMT. Each partnership is a dynamic collaboration responding to immediate needs. With CMT support I have been able to pilot my unique framework for connecting local and global discourses with journalists [at the ABC](#) and [at the Australian Financial Review](#), with a third pilot underway. All are very different projects.

Responsiveness leads to diversity of thought and diversity is always a strength. I know that the CMT will continue to capitalise on this strength and its positive impact in theory and in practice will grow.

I shall always be proud and grateful to have been one of the first CMT Postdoctoral Research Fellows. I look forward to seeing what ideas the new fellows will bring. Whatever their projects may be, they will have an excellent home in which to thrive.



Chrisanthi Giotis
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

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