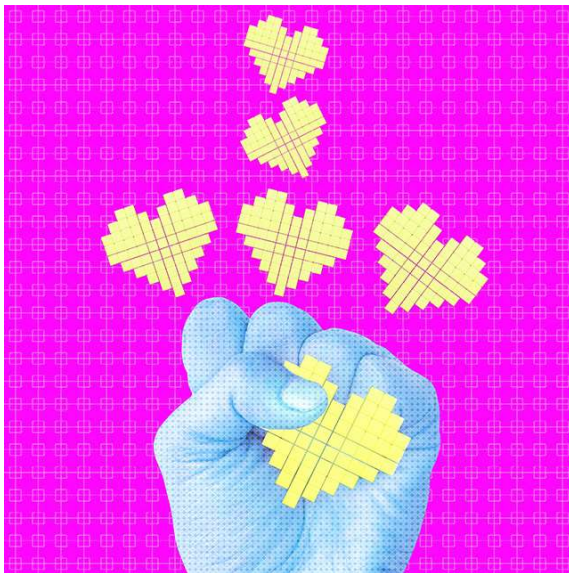


Hi there

A matter of ethics



As researchers around the world continue to find ethical ways of using social media and other digital platforms, in most cases with a sense of urgency, the legalities and principles behind technology's use and influence are getting more complicated. This week, we have focused on some of those complexities such as new regulation aimed to address the societal and economic effects of the tech industry, tech companies lobbying to influence law reform, transparency issues around information on websites, spread of

conspiracy theories among WhatsApp groups and understanding and defining disinformation.

In his piece, CMT's Co-Director Derek Wilding explains the new EU legislation that had been in development for some time now and was passed two weeks ago. As an upgrade of rules governing digital services in the EU, both the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act form [a single set of new rules](#) that aim to make online spaces safer for users by protecting their fundamental rights.

Hamish Boland-Rudder, CMT-based online editor for The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, writes about the Uber Files. His piece shows how some tech companies have influenced politicians to amend law for their benefit and of their CEOs.

From Uber, we then move to Wikipedia which recently became a centre of attention, at least in Australia, after a story published in *The Australian* claimed that the page for newly elected Teal independent Zoe Daniel had been flagged as potentially being created or edited 'in return for undisclosed payments.' This not only raises concerns about the rules of editing and conflict of interest editing, but further paves way for an already existing menace: misinformation. To discuss these issues and more, our Co-Director Monica Attard talked to Richard Cooke, a journalist, screenwriter, and author who is currently writing a cultural history on Wikipedia.

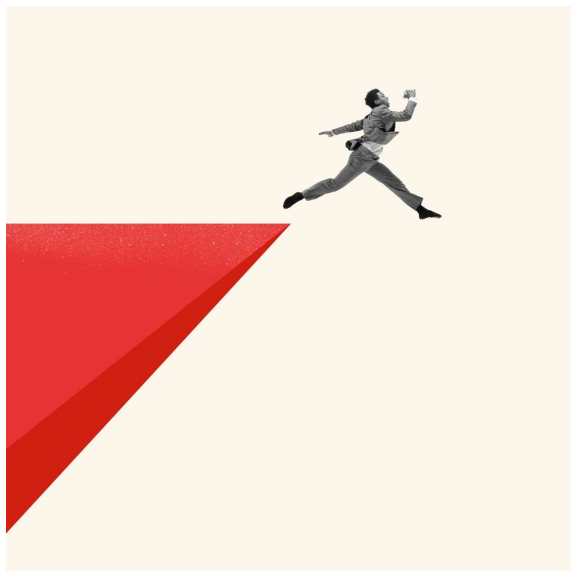
Separately, Anne Kruger writes about a new survey that finds significant differences in the Australian public views on the meaning of the term 'misinformation' and the lack of consideration of 'harm'. The survey findings also highlight the need for researchers to check their assumptions that people have a shared understanding of what they consider to be 'misinformation'.

Lastly, I pen down some concerns around the spread of conspiracy theories on WhatsApp groups, especially among older people who are more vulnerable to forwarding false information without prior verification – as I witnessed happening around me during my recent visit to Pakistan, a country that [sentenced a woman to death](#), earlier this year, over alleged blasphemous messages sent over WhatsApp.



Ayesha Jehangir
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

EU edges ahead with new digital laws



Governments around the world are working on new regulation for the evolving digital platform environment.

Here in Australia, we've seen the News Media Bargaining Code, the Online Safety Act, proposals for new privacy laws, and the self-regulatory Australian Code of Practice on Misinformation and Disinformation. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is now working on a major new report to be released later this year that looks at a

range of competition and consumer protection issues associated with digital platforms.

Back in Europe two weeks ago, the European Parliament moved ahead of other jurisdictions when it finally passed legislation that has been in development for some time. Unlike Australia, the EU has split the issues into two distinct Acts: the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the Digital Services Act (DSA).

The [DMA](#) tackles competition aspects relating to large online platforms referred to as 'gatekeepers'. It tries to stop platforms treating their own products and services more favourably and seeks to enable better interoperability, for example in requiring dominant messaging platforms to allow users to exchange messages from users of smaller services.

Meanwhile, the [DSA](#) targets providers of 'intermediary services', imposing different levels of obligations on intermediaries such as ISPs and domain name registries, content hosting services (like web hosting and cloud hosting services), online platforms (like marketplaces, app stores and social media networks) and what are called 'very large online platforms' (online platforms and search engines with over 45 million users in the US). The Act doesn't itself identify certain content as illegal – that is dealt with under national laws or other EU laws – but it imposes obligations to take due diligence. It deals with issues like the removal of illegal content on social media and checking the information provided by online traders to improve online marketplaces. It is also designed to provide users with better control over their data. Platforms qualifying as 'very large online platforms' will have additional obligations to address online risks and provide greater algorithmic accountability, with annual independent auditing.

The new laws will commence in early 2023. In summarising the rationale underpinning this new legislation, the [European Commission said](#): 'The two bills aim to address the societal and economic effects of the tech industry by setting clear standards for how they operate and provide services in the EU, in line with the EU's fundamental rights and values.' I chaired a [panel discussion](#) on this for the International Institute of Communications last week, with Luke Van Hooft from Optus and Kara Hinesley from Twitter. The session also included a keynote address from Menno Cox, Head of Sector for global aspects of digital services and platforms with the European Commission's DG CNECT. You can watch Menno's presentation [here](#).



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

A tale of the uber powerful



'We're just fucking illegal,' one senior Uber executive wrote to a colleague. 'Uber launches, and then there is a regulatory and legal sh*itstorm,' wrote another.

The extraordinarily frank messages, along with thousands more, are part of [the Uber Files](#), a new leak which reveals the inside story of how the ride-hailing giant's executives muscled into new markets, then managed the fallout, spending gobs of cash on a global influence machine deployed to win favours from politicians, regulators and other leaders.

The 124,000 files were leaked to *The Guardian* and shared with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, which led a collaboration of more than 40 media outlets investigating Uber's chaotic global expansion and its relationships with influential politicians, like Emmanuel Macron, Joe Biden, Neelie Kroes and others.

The company's mantra was that it was easier to ask forgiveness than seek permission. In Australia, the files showed that [Uber knew it was illegal when it launched](#), yet it powered ahead and fiercely lobbied state governments to change laws and legitimise the service.

For its part, Uber acknowledged 'mistakes' and 'missteps' and said that, with the appointment of a new CEO in 2017, the company has completely changed how it operates.

More than just shedding light on Uber's early operations, the Uber Files shows the ease with which executives were able to gain access to and influence democratically elected leaders, even as Uber was brazenly flouting local laws, upending workers' rights and trying to hobble government investigations. In short, the investigation offers an X-ray into how multinational companies game the system — another example from an ICIJ investigation showing how money and power can buy access not available to the rest of us.

The fact that the whistleblower who leaked the files was a former top lobbyist for the company is telling. He told *The Guardian* that the ease with which Uber could penetrate the upper echelons of political power was 'deeply unfair' and 'anti-democratic'.

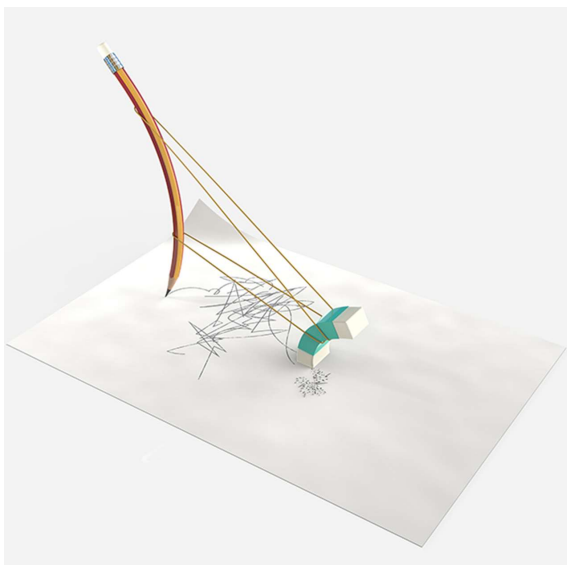
The Uber Files is a story that could only be told by a global coalition of journalists, working together, to show that the issue is bigger than a single company in a single country. It's a playbook that thrives on opacity and is used time and again.

Parliamentarians across Europe and elsewhere are now pushing for inquiries and calling for increased transparency in corporate lobbying. In the meantime, journalists working with ICIJ will continue shining a light into the dark corners where business and politics collide.



Hamish Boland-Rudder
ICIJ Online Editor

Open for editing?

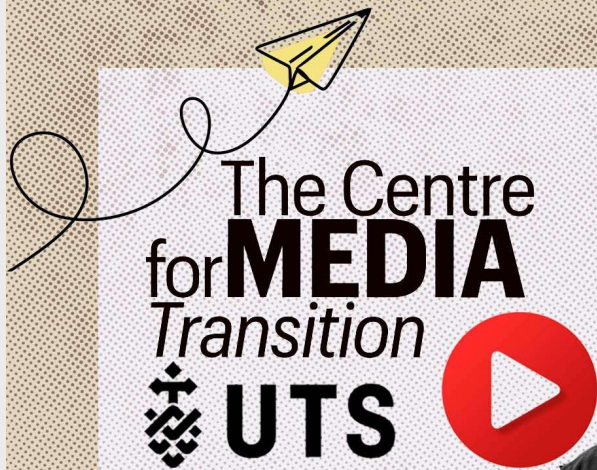


Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia edited by volunteers and hosted by the Wikipedia Foundation has, it's fair to say, had its ups and downs. There's been concern about the accuracy of the information published, instances of defamation and a dazzling number of occasions when pages have been vandalised. On the upside, when properly fact checked it can be a useful resource and whilst most journalists would deny using it, it's also fair to say, many do.

Last week, *The Australian* published a [story](#) noting the Wikipedia page for newly elected Teal independent Zoe Daniel had been flagged as potentially being created or edited 'in return for undisclosed payments'. Though the notation appears to have now been removed, the news story noted that the individual whose editing it was reporting on, had denied any wrongdoing, including editing for payment.

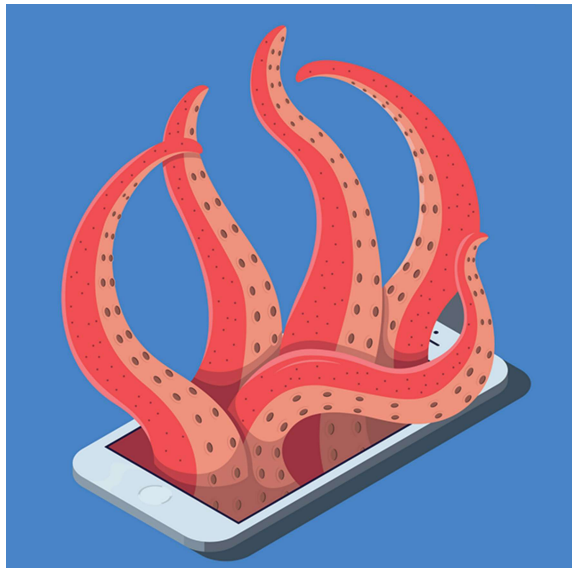
The published story raised many questions about who gets to edit a Wikipedia page and whether editing undertaken by interested parties, or conflict of interest editing, might contribute to the pernicious and ongoing problem of misinformation. And if it does, what can be done about it. To find an answer to some of these questions, our co-Director Monica Attard [talked to Richard Cooke](#), a journalist, screenwriter and author who is currently writing a cultural history on Wikipedia.





Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

Conspiracy in my inbox



I made a short visit to Pakistan last month. Apart from the [intense heatwave](#) affecting the region and causing fatalities in parts of Pakistan and India (which surprisingly only a very few people back here seem to know about), another situation that appeared to be getting out of hands was the spread of conspiracy theories on WhatsApp groups. Conspiracies related to religion, health, pandemic, electoral politics, foreign affairs, business, governance; you name it and you have it, delivered every day right there in your inbox – unsolicited and unchallenged.

My dad sent me many. When asked, he said he was part of many WhatsApp groups with 'likeminded people' (friends, friends of friends, and their friends), who shared 'important information' all the time. Some of these WhatsApp groups had over 100 members. He showed me forwarded messages about Covid-19 vaccination 'developed to make Muslims

infertile', India's 'secret operation against Pakistan in the Indian Ocean', Afghan refugees 'spying for India', same-sex relationships as a 'plot to ruin Muslim youth', international food chains feeding Pakistanis 'haram food', etc. A quick look at his messages felt like a trip on a vehicle of misinformation and propaganda. But more so, I got very worried for my dad because a simple WhatsApp message can get you death in Pakistan. The most recent case was that of [a woman who was sentenced to death](#) over an alleged blasphemous message sent over WhatsApp. All it needed to get her killed was for someone to report her to the police with or without a screenshot of the message as evidence.

In Pakistan, mis- and disinformation has picked up over the recent years. Low levels of digital literacy among a huge portion of the population also makes them vulnerable to various types of online and digital propaganda. As of 2020, there were [46.2 million WhatsApp users in Pakistan](#). Even if every user sends a single message a day, that means at least 46.2 million messages are exchanged every day. While this is great for communication and connectedness, in a country that is ravaged by extremism, violence, conspiracy theories, and misinformation, this digital tool can conveniently turn into a weapon used to share big amounts of information without prior verification.

A [2021 study](#) that mapped the public's understanding of misinformation in Pakistan revealed that 70% of the respondents could not always detect if the information they had received was true or not, although 9 out of 10 Pakistanis said they saw misinformation as a major problem among social media users.

Unfortunately, not much is being done to address the spread of conspiracy theories, and especially when it happens in groups on messaging apps such as WhatsApp, where users are stuck in an echo chamber. The first time the government began some efforts to educate the public about misinformation was in 2018, prior to the general elections. The full-page public service advertisements in newspapers across the country read, 'Together we can fight false information,' and listed 10 tips on differentiating rumours from fact. Then it went silent, and the situation only got worse over the last four years.

Concerns over misinformation is not a Pakistani phenomenon only. In the last two-and-a-half years, we witnessed how universal scientific assumptions were and continue to be discredited and delegitimised globally by the public, and how conspiracy theories and false claims quietly proliferated among groups predisposed to spreading the message, such as people opposed to vaccines. What we need to remember is that ideas that are frequently circulated among closed groups have a huge potential to become mainstream, and if not nipped in the bud, they have and will always come back biting at us.



Ayesha Jehangir
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Australians and misinformation



The Digital Industry Group Inc (DIGI) that launched The Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation in February 2021, recently presented findings of a nationally representative survey they undertook into Australians' perceptions of misinformation. Published as part of the [code's annual report](#), the survey not only found weaknesses and inconsistencies with how Australians understand what the term 'misinformation' means, but also a worrying lack of thinking about the harm misinformation can cause.

According to Sunita Bose, CEO of DIGI, the answers reveal '...significant skews in the perceptions based on respondents' personal characteristics, political or media preferences.'

The survey also found that Australians are concerned about misinformation and a clear majority of participants believed they had been exposed to online misinformation within the last week. This compares similarly with findings by surveys including those conducted by the [University of Canberra](#) for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

DIGI's Director of Regulatory Affairs, Policy & Research, Jenny Duxbury, noted 'a limitation of studies of Australians' experience of misinformation to date is that they assume that people have a shared understanding of what kinds of information and news sources should be categorised as misinformation, regardless of differences in their attitudes and beliefs.'

The DIGI survey delved further into what participants mean when they refer to 'misinformation'. Respondents were asked to explain the term using an open-ended question which was then coded for various themes. Results found:

- a strong belief that misinformation is anything false or untrue;
- it is intentional, i.e. more akin to disinformation, or at least presents a one-sided, biased and opinion-laden view;
- and that only 1% of the respondents define it as being harmful.

To the final point - and for me perhaps the sting in the tail of the findings - is that only one percent of Australians are thinking about the harmful ramifications of misinformation. Given the continuing harmful effects of Covid misinformation, this shows large gaps - and opportunities - in media and news literacy education.

Additionally, our work on the [Chinese Diaspora](#) in Australia shows the harmful effects of misinformation and mischaracterisation of the group as a result of Australia's tensions with China, and how these have reinforced stigma and fuelled racism. This was perpetuated in the recent federal election with '[reds under the bed](#)' rhetoric, and populist right-wing Senator Pauline Hanson's video (that was swiftly removed by the platforms for tripping over election standards) that fuelled dangerous racist tropes under the excuse of satire (see my comments on the latter [here](#)).

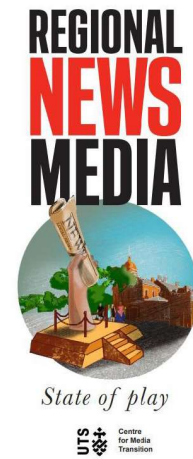
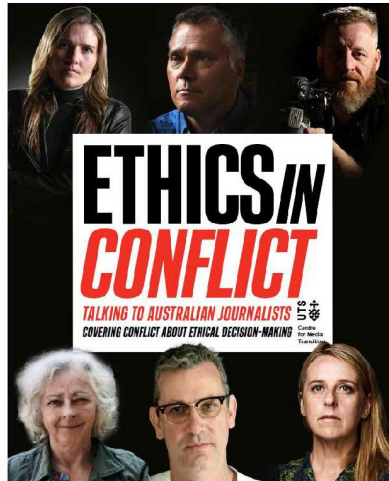


Anne Kruger
Associate Professor, CMT

You're invited

Come join the Centre and International Committee of the Red Cross on Friday, 19 August at 12pm for the panel 'Who should tell stories about conflict?' We will look at language, perspective and the role of race, gender and privilege in conflict reporting. For more information and to register, click [here](#).

Please visit our [website](#) for more information about the Centre.



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.



[Privacy Statement](#) | [Disclaimer](#) | [Unsubscribe](#)

UTS CRICOS Provider Code: 00099F

This email was sent by University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123 Broadway NSW 2007, Australia