

Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

Spotlight on the campaign



It's been a busy fortnight in the media, with all attention focused on the federal election campaign. Not all the scrutiny has been directed at politicians – there's been plenty of discussion about the campaign coverage too. With concerns being raised about overt partisanship in coverage and aggressive questioning directed primarily at Anthony Albanese, CMT Co-Director Monica Attard hosted the Guardian's Katharine Murphy and the Australian's Troy Bramston on [this week's Fourth Estate podcast](#) to discuss how the election played out in the media.

Sacha Molitorisz takes a step back from the campaign to ask just what the rules are on impartiality. His answer is that, with 14 standards schemes in operation, it's a bit of a mess. Even within a particular scheme, different rules apply depending on whether we're looking at news or current affairs. But impartiality isn't just a matter of political bias – as Sacha notes, this week the ACMA found two television licensees in breach of impartiality requirements for campaigning on behalf of their own commercial interests.

The Australian Press Council's guideline on election reporting observes the critical importance of comprehensive and accurate accounts of key election issues, particularly in an era of 'fake news'. During the election campaign our First Draft colleagues have been

intensively monitoring the media for misinformation. Julia Bergin and Esther Chen report on the concerning influence of false election narratives from the US, and the blatantly false messaging from some of Australia's minor parties.

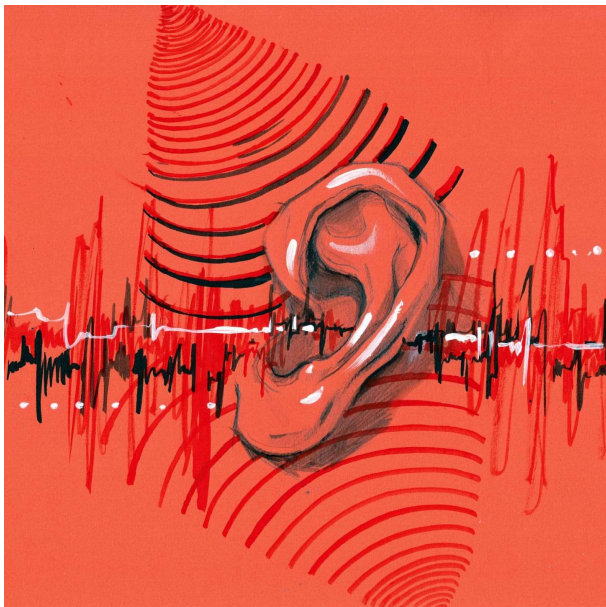
Looking towards the next three years, Gary Dickson digs out what we know about Labor's election commitments in the communications portfolio. From Labor costings there's some short-term cash injections for the press to counter rising newsprint costs, and a welcome increase in funding for the ABC and community broadcasting. Expected incoming communications minister Michelle Rowland looks [quite focused](#) on telecommunications infrastructure, but the details of Labor's broader media reform plans remain under wraps.

Finally this week, CMT research assistant Travis Radford has been in western NSW conducting interviews for our [rural and regional reporting project](#). His dispatch from Broken Hill and Wilcannia is a valuable reminder that news looks different outside the major metropolitan centres and plays a crucial role in the life of those communities.



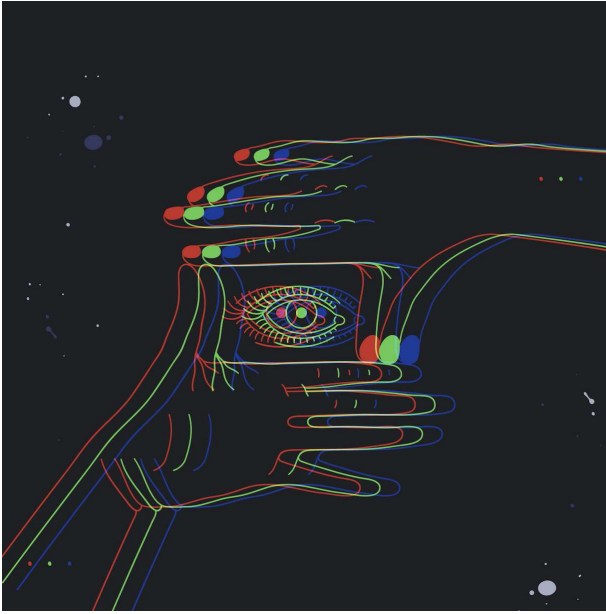
Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Beyond gaffes, press packs & stats



What lessons can journalists take from the media coverage of the Australian federal election? This week on 2SERFM's [Fourth Estate](#), CMT's Co-Director Monica Attard spoke with Troy Bramston, a senior writer and columnist at The Australian, and Katharine Murphy, the political editor at Guardian Australia, on the political landscape shift and how the election played out in the Media. [Listen in here.](#)

A bias for impartiality



This week the Australian Communications and Media Authority, or ACMA, found WIN and Prime7 had breached impartiality rules. Specifically, the ACMA pinged WIN News Townsville and Prime7 News Wagga for their ‘call to action’ to support the ‘Save Our Voices’ campaign seeking law reform around regional media.

‘Australian audiences should be able to rely on news programs for fair and impartial information so they can understand complex issues,’ [said ACMA chair Nerida O’Loughlin](#).

‘The issue is not the topic reported on but the fact that a news broadcast encouraged viewers to take action and visit an online petition in which the licensee had a direct interest ... The commercial interests of a broadcaster should not shape the way in which news stories are presented.’

Australians are deeply worried about bias in the news. [Research published in 2020](#) showed that 85 per cent of Australians are concerned that ‘news is reported from a particular point of view rather than being balanced or impartial.’ That same year, we published an extensive review of the [academic literature on impartiality](#), including international findings that ‘bias, spin and agendas’ are breaking down people’s trust in news media. Lately, of course, the issue came to a boil during the election campaign. ‘Some of the content in News Corporation tabloids has read like political advertising for the Coalition,’ [wrote Margaret Simons](#) days ahead of the poll.

So what are the rules? Well, they’re inconsistent. As [we’ve noted previously](#), Australia has a tangled mess of 14 standards schemes for news media.

WIN and Prime7 breached the [Commercial TV Industry Code of Practice](#), which prescribes, ‘In broadcasting a news Program, a Licensee must: a) present news fairly and impartially; b) clearly distinguish the reporting of factual material from commentary and analysis.’ Crucially, WIN and Prime7 were found in breach for content broadcast on news programs, not current affairs programs. The latter are not required to be impartial under the code.

Unlike the Commercial TV Industry Code of Practice, however, most Australian news media standards schemes do not mention ‘bias’ or ‘impartiality’, even though the research shows

just how much these concepts matter to the community. Instead, standards schemes tend to impose commitments to ‘accuracy’, ‘fairness’ and ‘balance’. For instance, the [MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics](#) prescribes, ‘Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts.’ And the Australian Press Council’s Statement of General Principles includes binding commitments to ‘accuracy and clarity’ as well as ‘fairness and balance’.

(Interestingly, the APC also has an [Advisory Guideline on Reporting Elections](#), which begins: ‘The Press Council recognises the right of media to have and promote their own political positions; endorse certain beliefs and policies and to reject others; and favour or oppose the election of one party or candidate over another ...,’ before drawing attention back to the General Principles and adding that ‘comprehensive and accurate accounts of key elections issues, particularly in an era of ‘fake news’, are critically important.’)

Just as the ACMA was handing down this week’s finding, former [ACCC chief Rod Sims](#) published a report extolling the benefits of public interest journalism. As Sims wrote, ‘the benefits to society extend beyond those who are willing to pay for it, or even access it. This is because such journalism holds the powerful to account, it provides a vital journal of record, it provides a forum for ideas, and it can campaign for wider society goals.’

Australia needs more public interest journalism. It also needs less journalism that counters the public interest, including by being inaccurate, unfair and biased. Sure, the issue of bias is fraught. It’s hard to collect evidence, it’s hard to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable, and it’s hard to know how best to police that line, all with a view to optimising press freedom. But evidently Australians want their news media to do better, and a clearer distinction between ‘news’, ‘commentary’ and ‘analysis’ would be a good start.



Sacha Molitorisz
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

What to expect from Labor

We have two sources of information on the new government’s media policy: campaign announcements by the expected Minister for Communications Michelle Rowland, and a costings document released in the days before the election. These promises are mostly short-term cash injections, with no large-scale reforms yet announced, but there is a suggestion that more creative change could be coming.



First, the cash. \$15m was announced to support print news in the face of significant increases in the price of newsprint, [following a campaign](#) by Australian Community Media and Country Press Australia. The Coalition promised \$10m for regional print newspapers; Labor matched that amount, and added an additional \$5m for print businesses in the cities.

A further \$2m will be provided to newsprint producer Norske Skog to investigate replacing a coal-fired boiler at the

company's Boyer Mill in Tasmania.

The ABC will also receive more money, with \$83.6m to be provided over four years, and both public broadcasters are set to have their funding terms [extended from three to five years](#). Labor will also investigate relocating the SBS from Artarmon to Western Sydney, keeping [a commitment made at the 2019 election](#).

The community broadcasting sector will also see some cuts reversed. The Commonwealth provides funding through the Community Broadcasting Program, which was budgeted to drop from \$20.37m in FY23 down to \$16m the following year. Peak body for radio the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia called \$20.37m per annum the 'critical baseline' [for viability in a pre-budget submission](#), warning that pre-existing shortfalls were already restricting the ability of stations to sustain essential services, particularly in regional Australia. Labor [has announced](#) a return to the \$20m funding baseline from FY24 and suggests it will 'work with the sector to identify a sustainable funding basis for the future'.

Community television also gets another lifeline, with Labor suggesting it will keep Channel 31 Melbourne and Channel 44 Adelaide on the air until it has another use for the spectrum they occupy.

In their [policy costings](#), Labor identifies a \$1b advertising spend by the former Coalition government as a 'key example of rorts and waste'. The document says that the Commonwealth's advertising, travel and legal expenses combined will be reduced by \$142.5m each year through FY26, totalling \$570m. The document does not make it clear how much of that total will be advertising, but a reduction in advertising spend is likely to hit news businesses.

Lastly, Labor [announced a](#) News Media Assistance Program. There is little detail on this

item and no funding attached to it, but it seems to pick up the recommendation from the House's recent inquiry into regional newspapers for government investment in further research and data. The program will 'secure the evidence base needed to inform news media policy interventions and formulate measures to support public interest journalism and media diversity'. Though currently undefined, the Program could be one avenue for deeper thinking about news media policy in the future.



Gary Dickson
CMT Research Fellow

Keeping it local



Image: Wilcannia News Committee, Facebook.

On Thursday afternoon, I travelled nearly 200 kilometres from my Broken Hill outpost (where I've been interviewing locals for the Centre's [rural and regional reporting project](#)), to the outback town of Wilcannia in north-western NSW, so I could speak with Christine Elliot.

Christine is one of four volunteers who run Wilcannia News, an independent local newspaper servicing the majority Aboriginal community of less than one thousand. Like many regional newspapers across the country, Wilcannia News faces an [uncertain future](#).

But, Christine explains, Wilcannia News isn't exactly like other regional newspapers. While it does serve a traditional role of a community noticeboard and local archive, it's also a local political voice for a town with a council that's been in administration for almost a decade, and a counterweight to 'biased' or 'incorrect' reporting by outsiders.

The local newspaper in Broken Hill, the Barrier Truth, is also unique. A legacy of the trade union movement in the inland mining city, to which the world's largest mining company – Broken Hill Proprietary Company (BHP) – owes its name, the paper remains owned by the local trades and labour council to this day. And the city itself stands out as a Labor

stronghold in the federal electorate of Parkes, that is otherwise a safe Nationals seat.

But in a city that boasts a median house price of \$160,000 and limited-to-no commute times (despite buzzing with the arrival of Chris Hemsworth for the new Mad Max movie being filmed nearby), the hot-button topics this election of housing affordability and cost of living haven't been top of mind for the locals I've interviewed. Instead, management of the Darling Baaka (the river system where the mass fish kills of 2018–19 occurred) remains a top issue, alongside rental availability, growing the town and local economy, quality healthcare (especially in relation to the death of local teenager, Alex Braes), and local mining projects.

The next years – and the government's response to the regional newspapers inquiry – will determine whether these newspapers will continue to represent these issues or die trying.



Travis Radford
CMT Research Assistant

False election narratives spread online



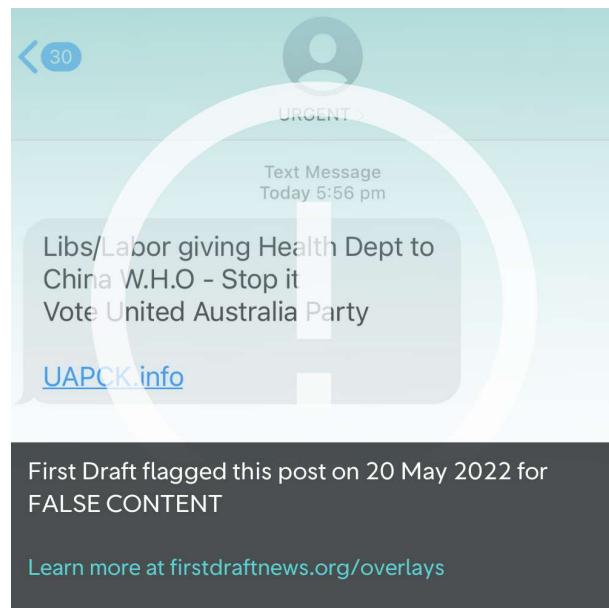
The treasure trove of US-inspired narratives seeded by 'freedom-friendly' minor parties in the lead up to the Australian election did not materialise into the same conspiratorial [post-mortem](#). Notwithstanding the peaceful transfer of power, the ability to spruik and spread misinformation relating to 'voter fraud' and a 'rigged election' through various forms of digital communication is cause for concern.

In the final week of the election campaign, One Nation and the United Australia Party (UAP) turned to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s proposed pandemic treaty as a last-ditch pitch to voters, retrofitting conspiracy theories about global power grabs to the Australian election. Both falsely declared that both major Australian political parties would vote in favour of expanding the WHO's pandemic powers, forfeiting Australian freedoms and liberties mere days after taking office.

Whilst the WHO's powers to respond to global outbreaks [may well be expanded](#) at the annual World Health Assembly (WHA) currently underway in Geneva, a draft of the treaty touted as a done deal for dystopia is [not due until 2024](#).

But One Nation and UAP stuck to their trumped-up talking points. The UAP published a series of Facebook video ads falsely claiming China would soon lock Australia down because 'Liberal and Labor are transferring Australian health' to a China-controlled WHO 'a day after the election'. Combined, the ads registered over 2 million impressions. Their YouTube equivalents currently total upwards of 5 million views. Neither Facebook nor Google found them to be in violation of their policies.

The UAP also personalised their misinformation marketing, messaging the masses in the dying days of the election. A friendly ping to let them know that the nation's sovereignty and health system would soon be ceded to the WHO and China. It will not – but that did not derail discussion, with the topic trending across social media for much of last week. Tracking Twitter data in the days leading up to the election found the unique URL of One Nation's petition to 'Stop the WHO Pandemic Pact' was the most shared web page in tweets globally.



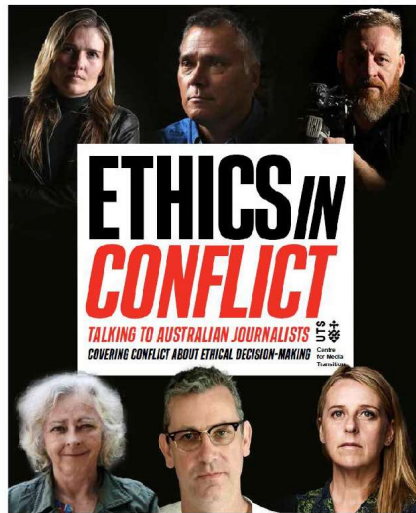
While the election result was a clear referendum on such rousing rhetoric, the ability for conspiracy content to retain an online presence and reach voters in texts – an opaque space to monitor – facilitates the spread of misinformation.



Julia Bergin, First Draft Senior Research Reporter

Esther Chan, First Draft Bureau Editor

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.



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