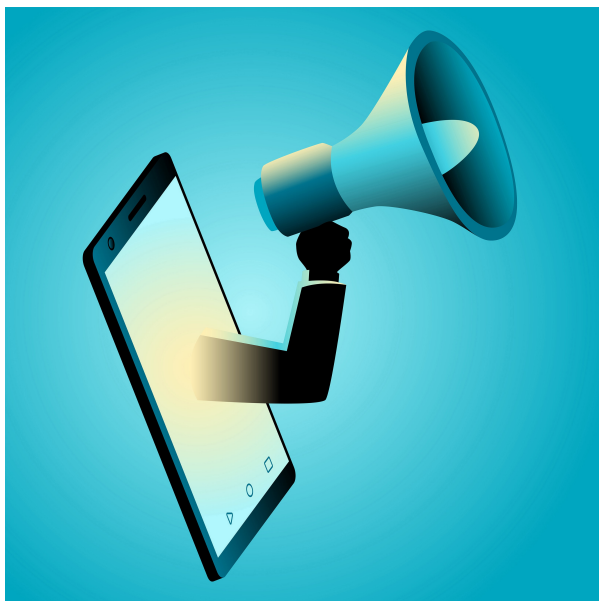Centre for
Media Transition

UTS

Hi there

Platforms, news and communities

Today we post our recent submission to a review of a code of practice on disinformation, and we release our new research report on another aspect of digital platform regulation – complaint handling.

Below, Michael Davis describes the approach we've adopted in our submission to DIGI's review of the Australian Code of Practice on Misinformation and Disinformation. Then I explain how our report, Digital Platform Complaint Handling: Options for an External Dispute Resolution Scheme – picks up on the ACCC's recommendation for a Digital Platform Ombudsman, finding some obstacles to the viability of such a scheme.

While we've been considering the options for a Digital Platform Ombudsman, the ABC has announced its new Ombudsman. The appointment results from a review conducted by Professor John McMillan (a former Commonwealth and NSW Ombudsman) and Jim Carroll (formerly Director News and Current Affairs at SBS). Current ACMA Authority member and former head of Screen Australia, Fiona Cameron, has been appointed.

In other news, Axios reported that in the US Meta has told its news partners that it doesn't intend to keep making deals with publishers for content to appear on its Facebook News

Tab. This will be a blow to publishers in the US, and there may be implications for Australian publishers. Here, some publishers secured significant deals with Meta as a result of the introduction of the News Media Bargaining Code legislation at the start of last year.

Countering some of the gloom, below Gary Dixon reports on the announcement by the Federal Government of new funding to help regional and suburban local, Indigenous and CALD news businesses. Gary notes this is the first time that the quality measure used in the News Media Bargaining Code - the courts, councils and communities classifier, 'core news' - has been tied directly to eligibility for government funding.

Ayesha closes out the newsletter with a report on the symposium we held at UTS last week on countering violent extremism, and we highlight our next event on August 19, 'Who Should Tell Stories About Conflict?' with a link to a compelling film featuring one of the panellists, Marwa Moeen.

Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

Expanding the scope of the Disinformation Code

As we previously noted, a review of the Australian Code of Practice on Misinformation and Disinformation is currently underway. CMT's submission to the review focuses on improving accountability by ensuring the scope of the code is broad enough to capture the full range of actions that signatories take to address mis- and disinformation.

Considered broadly, the Australian code takes the right approach, with a focus on outcomes and the encouragement of proportionate responses to the risk of harm. But key elements of the code undermine this approach and limit the code's potential effectiveness. In particular, the scope of the code is unnecessarily narrow, setting a high threshold of serious and imminent harm for platform intervention and excluding relevant services (messaging) and content (professional news

and political advertising).

As a result, the code fails to encompass the full range of actions that platforms are actually taking to address misinformation. Importantly, therefore, these actions are not subject to the transparency and accountability requirements of the code. Take Google's decision to remove Sky News videos from YouTube for violating its misinformation policies. Whether you agree with the decision or not, Google cannot be held accountable for it under the code because professional news is excluded.

The rationale for the narrow scope is to avoid impinging on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, as well as, perhaps, serving to limit what platforms take themselves to be responsible for and in what areas it is appropriate for them to act. In our view, however, these freedoms would be better protected from within the code. Outside the code they are essentially subject to the whim of individual platforms.

Importantly, nowhere does the code compel platforms to censor false or misleading information; indeed it explicitly rejects this. Expanding the scope of the code to cover the full range of platform measures would not alter this fundamental principle. Instead, it would provide an opportunity for platforms to engage openly, with each other, with related industries and with the public, on finding effective solutions to mis- and disinformation that appropriately balance interventions with the protection of democratic freedoms. For example, collaborative development of formal decision-making frameworks would increase accountability and responsiveness to public expectations.

The strengthened EU code on disinformation provides a good example for how this can be achieved. Within a much-broadened scope, it requires signatories to form formal working groups, advisory bodies and other collaborative partnerships to share information and develop best-practice measures. While the strengthened EU code was published after DIGI released the discussion paper for this review, it would be a missed opportunity if the many improvements in the European model were not considered.

Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

A Digital Platform Ombudsman?

The idea that users might be able to take complaints about digital platforms to an ombudsman is compelling. While platforms vary considerably in the products and services

they offer, there's also great variation in the ways complaints are handled. Sometimes, a user just wants to flag a piece of content, but there are also times when they want to make a formal complaint and expect platforms to respond.

Is it possible to establish a scheme or body to hear escalated complaints about digital platforms? This week CMT published a new research report – Digital Platform Complaint Handling: Options for an External Dispute Resolution Scheme – that addresses this topic. We set out to consider one of the recommendations from the ACCC in the Digital Platforms Inquiry – that an external dispute resolution scheme should be established, perhaps building on the existing role of the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO).

Focusing on social media, and examining the ways users make complaints to Facebook, we designed a matrix of complaints that classifies the issues in two ways: firstly, according to whether they involve some kind of transaction or, instead, have a social dimension; and secondly, whether users are complaining about other users or about the actions of digital platforms themselves. We also looked at the role of some government and industry bodies that already have some role in the resolution of digital platform complaints.

Our research shows that while it would be possible for an expanded TIO to handle some types of digital platform complaints, other complaints would still likely fall between the gaps. But this option could also compound an existing problem relating to the fragmentation of responsibility for digital platform complaints: users already face a confusing array of government and other bodies. Adding the TIO to that mix – without giving it comprehensive coverage and maintaining the role of those other bodies – could add to the current confusion.

One possible solution we identified for addressing this confusion is to establish a clearing house for escalated digital platform complaints. This would effectively be a referral and tracking service that could help users identify the right home for their complaint, while also monitoring the volume of complaints and some aspects of industry performance.

Having completed our report, partly funded by a research grant from the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, we're now considering how we might promote discussion of some of its ideas in a seminar or roundtable.

Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

From Kabul to Sydney

Marwa Moeen, a young Afghan woman, came to Australia under exceptional duress in a bid to safeguard her future from Taliban rule. Marwa played a pivotal role in the escape from Afghanistan with her family and 15 other young female university friends. Her story is shared in the recently released film 'Die. Or Die Trying. Escaping the Taliban' made by the Addison Road Community Group. Click here to watch it.

Marwa will speak at our forthcoming in-person panel 'Who Should Tell Stories About Conflict?' hosted by the Centre and International Committee of the Red Cross on Friday, 19 August at 12pm at UTS. In this panel, we will look at language, perspective and the role of race, gender and privilege in conflict reporting.The panel will be chaired by Dr Sacha Molitorisz and other panellists include:

– Anthony Galloway, a political correspondent for *The Sun-Herald* & *The Sunday Age*.
– Dr Kathryn Greenman, UTS Law lecturer.

For more information and to register, click here.

New funding for news

This week, the Federal Government announced the Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program 2022, its first package of support for local media. The program contains $29m worth of funding to implement some of Labor's commitments ahead of the election.

The bulk of the money is earmarked to address newsprint price increases which began with the new financial year. Australian Community Media submitted to a House of Representatives inquiry that the price increase would be 30 per cent, while reporting in the Sydney Morning Herald put the increase as high as 80 per cent for some publishers.

ACM has warned in recent months that the increase in costs is 'the single biggest threat to the viability of our publishing business' after Covid 19.

$15m has been made available: $10m for regional local publishers, and $5m split between suburban local publishers, Indigenous and CALD media. Funding is short term, with grant agreements only expected to run for six months.

In order to receive the grant, applicants are required to produce 'core news content' for their local communities. That requirement was developed for the News Media Bargaining Code and is defined in legislation as content which engages Australians in civic life: courts, councils and communities.

As the Code lies dormant, this is the first use of core news in direct connection to funding eligibility. The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, which is administering the grants, will have to assess applicants for compliance with this requirement. The results will be interesting.

There is little detail about the money remaining in the package. $12m will 'support community broadcasting', likely through reversing cuts made to the Community Broadcasting Program. $2m is not accounted for, but may fulfil a pledge to replace paper producer Norske Skog's ageing equipment at the Boyer Mill in Tasmania.

Gary Dickson
CMT Research Fellow

New extremes require new measures
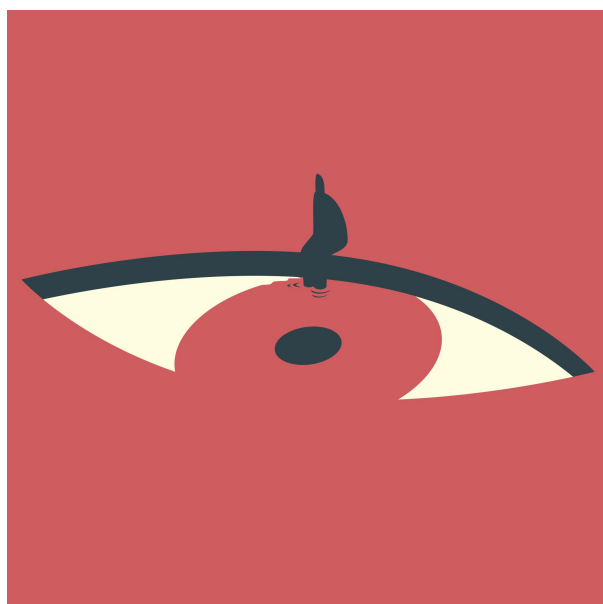
Australians are living with two realities when it comes to extremism and terrorism in the country. One reality is propagated by government officials to the public, which implies that Australia is a generally safe country with an insignificant threat of extreme violence or a terrorist attack, which is true, but only to some extent. The other reality is reflected in official documents, mostly out of the general public's eye or reach, such as the recent Australian Federal Police briefing papers on security environment prepared for the Albanese government that warn of an 'increasingly complex criminal environment'; the ongoing Victorian parliamentary Inquiry into far-right extremism that has so far warned that children as young as 10 years old are being radicalised online; or the March 2022 interim report of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS) Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, which found that 'threats of extremist movements and radicalisation in Australia are evolving.'

One industry that has always found itself in a predicament is the media. The challenge of how, if at all, to report on extremism and terrorism was the topic of a roundtable on countering violent extremism and the media's role. It was hosted by CMT last week and sponsored by NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet. Panelists at the roundtable discussed how terrorists and violent extremists use and exploit the media to amplify their messages; shared insight on some of the ways extremists and terrorists use technology to their benefit, including the recruitment of young Australians from overseas, spreading disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information; highlighted impacts of media coverage of extremism on social cohesion; and explored whether journalists and other media professionals agreed on a set of principles on reporting extremism and terrorism.

It was agreed that while Australia may not be at an immediate threat of a terrorist attack for

now, there is ample evidence suggesting that far-right extremism, or ideologically motivated extremism as it is now officially referred to, is on the rise across the country. And it's spreading, mostly unperturbed by law enforcement attention, as reflected by a surreptitious spread of neo-Nazi groups in some parts of the country; 'Islamists not welcome' posters recently found pasted on Wollongong's Omar Mosque, days after police found 'white supremacy, neo-Nazi' flyers at several points around the University of Wollongong campus; and white supremacist posters, containing explicitly racist speech and far-right symbolism, found on campus at the University of Sydney in late May 2022.

Increasing far-right extremism and radicalisation of young Australians is a real threat to Australia's national security. Amidst growing concerns, it is disappointing that the PJCIS could not complete its inquiry report during the 46th Parliament.

Ayesha Jehangir
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

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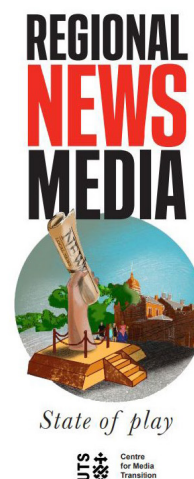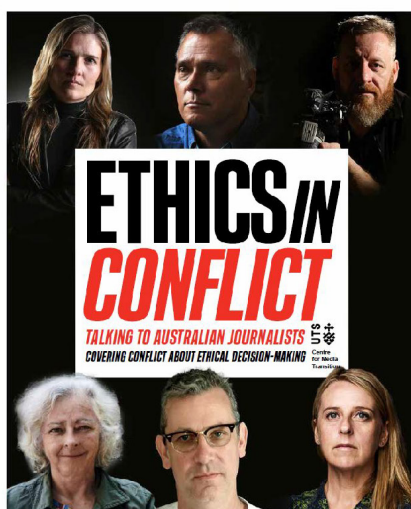
The Centre for Media Transition and UTS acknowledges the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our university now stands.
We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these places.