

Hi there

ABC simmers over summer



While the CMT newsletter has been resting over summer, debate has been raging at the ABC over the termination of Antoinette Lattouf and the national broadcaster's coverage of the Gaza/Israel war.

In our first newsletter for 2024, I look at the rules that apply to local radio presenters and social media and ask whether the national broadcaster has its editorial policy settings right. Monica then explores the controversy around objectivity and journalists from diverse backgrounds. And

Tim switches gear to AI and looks at how research questions become redundant even before they're answered.

As usual, we'll be back with our next issue in a fortnight, when Kieran will continue the AI theme with an update on the government's recently-announced policy. In the meantime, if you missed our December report on Gen AI and Journalism, you can find it [here](#).



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

Strife at ABC but don't blame the editorial policies



Much has been written about the ABC's treatment of Antoinette Lattouf. Opinions vary from those who think it was right for Lattouf to be fired (such as [Lawyers for Israel](#)) to those who – like the journalists who signed the [open letter](#) in support of 'ethical reporting' on Israel and Palestine – think her position on Gaza should be heard more widely on the ABC. As Lattouf's advocacy was well known, it seems odd that she was hired as the presenter of the ABC's Sydney radio morning program. But it seems just as odd that she was fired for

her social media re-post with two days left to run on her contract. Here, I want to look at the policy settings in place at the ABC to ask: is there something wrong with the editorial rules?

First, a little background. Like the SBS sports reporter [Stuart McIntyre](#), Lattouf claims that she was terminated because of her political opinions (among other things). The [offending conduct](#) appears to be her re-posting of a Human Rights Watch (HRW) post which presented a copy of the HRW report along with the comment, 'HRW reporting starvation as tool of war'. The ABC says she failed to comply with a direction not to post to social media anything controversial. (The ABC also argues that it did not in fact 'terminate' her because it paid her out for the remaining days of the contract.) Presumably, the ABC will need to establish that the instruction did relate to Lattouf's obligations under her contract, and the response to her conduct – termination – was proportionate. Writing in the Sydney Morning Herald on the weekend, [Giuseppe Carabetta](#) from the UTS Business School noted how in cases of an employee breaching a workplace policy, courts have tended to favour employers' arguments that the person was terminated for that reason and not for an expression of political opinion. But let's look beyond that to the expectations that are placed on ABC presenters.

The ABC has a suite of policies and rules that govern content generated by 'workers', which covers employees, contractors and others. At the apex is a [code of practice](#) required under the ABC Act. The code only applies to broadcast content, but it's supplemented by extensive policies and guidelines that also apply to the ABC's own digital content; for example, the detailed editorial policy on [Impartiality](#).

This is where the greyness sets in. Part of the debate around Lattouf's dismissal has been whether these policies applied to her. Some might say the policy on impartiality and others like it *should not* apply because the program was a morning show on local radio – the kind of program that is sometimes presented by a comedian. Others might say those policies *should* apply if a presenter – like Lattouf – is a journalist. But neither of these aspects determines the application of the impartiality policy; the rules apply to news and current affairs content. If, on any given day, the morning program on Radio Sydney shifts from lifestyle content to current affairs, the impartiality rule applies to that current affairs content.

This is the first aspect of editorial policy raised by the Lattouf matter and it seems to me the ABC has the right setting. The policy avoids the rigidity that would set in if the impartiality rule applied to all content all of the time, and it helps to protect the independence and integrity of the national broadcaster when they count most.

That brings us to the second aspect. Lattouf was fired for a social media post, not what she said on air. Does – and should – that make a difference? As a general proposition, the editorial policies don't apply to an ABC worker's personal social media account; however, this content must conform with the [Personal Use of Social Media Guidelines](#). These guidelines prescribe: 'do not damage the ABC's reputation for impartiality and independence'; 'do not undermine your effectiveness at work'; and 'do not mix the professional and the personal in ways likely to bring the ABC into disrepute.' And even though the full set of editorial policies doesn't apply to an employee's personal social media account, two of the policies – impartiality and independence and integrity – are 'nonetheless relevant'. The reason for this is that, 'For many Workers, remaining impartial in the public eye is crucial to maintaining effectiveness in their ABC roles.' Furthermore, the bar is raised again in the case of a 'high risk worker' such as a program presenter or journalist, especially those who are more senior or who have a high profile. For them, there is the obligation to 'treat personal content with the same care as if being published or distributed on an ABC platform' and 'avoid engaging in advocacy on matters of contention.'

Is this second aspect of the ABC's editorial policies – the extension to a personal social media account – reasonable? Again, I think it is, at least for a public service broadcaster. As the policy itself explains, a presenter's post to their own social media account, 'has the potential to affect the perception of the ABC's independence, impartiality and integrity'.

This assessment of the policy settings themselves says nothing about the ways they have been applied in this case. Whatever the merits of the ABC's actions, and of Lattouf's case for unfair termination, there is a gulf between the principles of editorial integrity embedded in the ABC's policies and popular understandings of how and when they apply. Opinions will differ on the correctness of those policies and on questions such as: does it make a

difference if the presenter is a journalist, a comedian or an activist? On this point, we'd suggest it might be time for the ABC to conduct more formal consultation in an attempt to gauge contemporary community expectations.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

Diversity and open-minded enquiry must work together



The ABC has a new Chair, Kim Williams, who takes up the role at an especially tumultuous time for the main national broadcaster.

Amongst the many issues that have been surfaced – or resurfaced – by the decision to terminate Antoinette Lattouf a mere two days before her contract was due to end is whether ABC staff who come from diverse backgrounds are capable of meeting the level of impartiality required by the ABC, when they report on their own

communities.

Kim Williams isn't yet in the hot seat but has already been asked whether objectivity and diversity are at odds with each other – and his response appeared to back the affirmative view of former Media Watch presenter Jonathan Holmes who [first raised the issue](#). Williams said it was '[complex](#)'. Not so for ABC Managing Director David Anderson who [told](#) Radio National Breakfast that a journalist's cultural background has no impact on his or her ability to be impartial. 'We all hold our own backgrounds, our own lived experience - no matter what that might be – geographical, socio economic, political, culturally diverse – I believe people act impartially at the ABC and I believe they do so regardless of that,' he said. Cue many interesting discussions ahead around the ABC Board room table.

Of course, the question – can journalists of diverse background impartially report on their own communities – carries problematic assumptions. The first is that diverse journalists have diminished or no capacity for impartiality and the second, that white journalists from the dominant culture reporting on their own and other communities are somehow,

miraculously more able to be impartial. Anderson's response was probably the only answer he could give to stem the outrage within the ABC that diverse journalists are feeling unsupported and rounded upon, especially in relation to coverage of the Gaza/Israel war.

That's not to say that asking the question is inappropriate or that it is asserting the journalism produced by diverse background reporters at the ABC on issues such as The Voice, marriage equality or Gaza/Israel has been anything other than impartial. The ABC's number one KPI ought to be trust and there is an often-expressed concern that objectivity at the ABC is a problem which has created a trust deficit. Worse, it is often diverse background reporters who have the blame finger pointed at them.

The ABC often defends accusations of bias by pointing to its editorial policies which demand open minded enquiry in which the truth, or the closest approximation to the truth, comes from the evidence that in most cases derives from responses to questions asked of many, without agenda. Supporters of advocacy journalism, including many of whom signed the petition Derek mentioned above, calling for 'both sidism' in the reporting of Gaza/Israel to be abandoned, would say this 'outsiders' journalism is impossible to achieve. It's undoubtedly hard. But the alternative is the airing of prejudices without enquiry.

Ultimately, if journalists are using open minded enquiry, there can be no substance to claims that diverse background reporters are allowing advocacy to intrude on journalism. And it may well be that open enquiry leads to the same conclusions as that espoused by advocates which is ok because it will be evidence based, factually accurate, fair and independent reporting. It's reasonable to ask the ABC to verify whether this is what its journalists are producing. If the answer is still 'all good here', tell the lobbyists (both Israeli and Palestinian) who come at it with complaints that they should go talk to the ABC ombudsman. And put protocols in place to ensure that diverse background journalists who find it hard to report on their own using the methods required are not asked to do so when it's impossible for them.



Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

Chasing the AI ball over the wall

Wikipedia has tasked us with finding the ways that generative AI (genAI) tools like ChatGPT could impact on their crucial processes of providing and curating the world's largest



encyclopedia. The workers that cultivate this knowledge source are largely an army of self-selected volunteers that engage with a vast range of tools and techniques alongside Wikipedia's now long-established norms, so the massive and minute ways that genAI can interact with these processes are potentially diverse. Many are citing impacts on their processes of knowledge integrity, as genAI produces often small factual errors with such confidence that they can be difficult to detect, and volunteers can be demotivated to curate this content that lacks

the good faith behind human contributions.

As we continue to investigate the Wikipedia community's interactions with AI, a predictable challenge is coming to light. The AI tools have already since evolved out of previous problems to [a new iteration](#), with a new set of challenges. Consider, for instance, Wikipedians' discussions explaining the hallmarks of genAI content, with its [noodly extra fingers](#) and [sophomoric document structures](#). While making for entertaining conversation, fingers and hands are [increasingly accurate](#) and the newest LLM offerings provide carrier outputs – a key goal of these projects is to be [as indistinguishable from the real thing as possible](#). This leaves Wikipedia's community on the back foot in responding to genAI developments. For researchers investigating genAI's implications, this translates to further problems even before we wrap up our current research.

That massive disruptions can outpace research is not a new phenomenon; similar concerns were raised in the rapid expansion of [the internet](#) and [social media](#) into every business and household. However, there does not appear to have been much success in matching the pace. Indeed, there is an extent to which the gap may be incontrovertible: our increasingly networked and online society means these innovations have wider implications than in the past. Much of research on handling [disruption](#) necessarily comes after [the impact](#), and good research needs to take into account confounding factors that complicate the data, which multiply as the scope increases. Compounded with Australia's [declining investment](#) in research, we are increasingly finding ourselves in a position of being less able to effectively respond to disruptions that are growing in scale and frequency.

As we continue our projects investigating genAI on Wikipedia and [beyond](#), we are in an academically novel position. While we ostensibly want to make a distinctive impact on the body of knowledge, we would also take solace in some redundancy – a bevy of research on generative AI that maps out its impacts in a fulsome fashion and mitigates [the worst of its potential to do harm](#). Whatever its benefits, and there are potentially many, Wikipedians

have painstakingly explored the potential for genAI to do harm to knowledge integrity and our ability to interpret the world. It may take a change of paradigm for us to keep up.



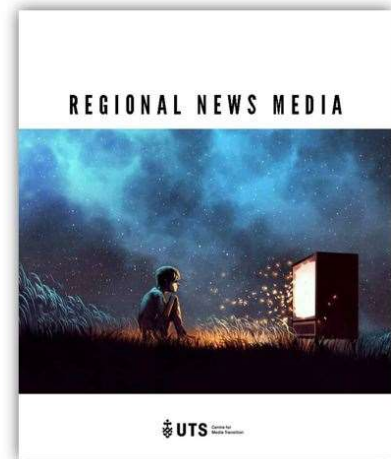
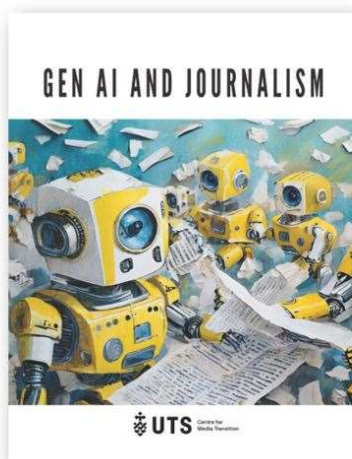
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