Centre for Media Transition

Hi there

Assange, Russia and truth

It was justifiably a very big story. Julian Assange a free man, after a plea deal with the US Justice Department that saw him admitting to a felony charge of conspiracy to obtain and then disclose national defence information. In the meantime, Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, an American citizen, is behind bars in Moscow, being tried by the Russian state for spying, which even Russia's President Vladimir Putin seems to admit is a political manoeuvre.

Assange's plea deal ends a 14-year legal battle during which the Australian spent seven years holed up in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and some five years in a British prison as he fought a US extradition request to face espionage charges. Had the US been successful, and Assange been convicted, he'd have faced 170 years behind bars. Gershkovich would face some 20 years behind bars if convicted.

The US claimed Assange's Wikileaks publication of secret files which exposed alleged US war crimes, mass casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq and torture of prisoners held by the US in Guantanamo Bay, put lives in danger. The US Justice Department noted: "By publicly releasing these documents without redacting the names of human sources or other identifying information, Assange subjected these individuals to serious harm and arbitrary detention." Yet, the judge signing off on the deal said that no one had, in fact

been harmed.

As ABC TV's Media Watch reported on Monday night, journalists in the UK and the US noted early on in the Wikileaks saga – even when the organisation was working on The Afghan Diaries with The New York Times, The Guardian, Le Monde, Der Spiegel and El Pais - that the Taliban was using the highly redacted logs to find informants. Then, a year after the publication of The Afghan Diaries, Assange decided to dump on the internet several hundred thousand US diplomatic cables, unredacted.

Is that journalism? Receiving and publishing information that reveals an otherwise unknown truth is journalism, if knowing that truth is in the public interest. However, ethical journalism also requires editing information to do one's best to prevent harm from coming to the leaker or to anyone identified in the documents who is incidental to the wrongdoing. Assange forgot or ignored the ethical consideration that ensures journalism must aim to do no harm to those who serve its cause.

Few would disagree that Assange has paid the price for his ethical lapse. Twelve years is a long time to be deprived of your freedom to live and work as you please. But in the zeal shown by news media here at his arrival home to a cold, wet Canberra, it would have better served audiences to understand the politics of the plea deal which freed Assange; the claim that no-one was harmed by his actions was a convenience that got the "Assange problem" off the table at a time the US Government is berating the Kremlin over its arrest of a Wall Street Journal reporter on trumped up charges of spying. Here's hoping the Kremlin avails itself of the same political convenience towards Gershkovich.

In our newsletter this week, Kieran has been testing out generative AI's infamous ability to extract information from large volumes of documents, which has been useful in academic research. Will it be the same for journalism?

It's been fairly quiet on the misinformation front since last year's release of the draft Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill. But it's clear the government has been beavering away in the trenches. Michael considers what we can expect, and should hope for, in a redrafted bill.

And finally, Tim Koskie, who this week left us to take up a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Sydney, writes about how scholars around the world are thinking about what government can do to help subsidise private media, a subject of discussion at this year's International Communications Association Post Conference on the Gold Coast – from which many of us at the CMT have just returned.

Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

GenAI: streamlining document analysis

At the Centre for Media Transition, we have done a lot of research on the impacts of generative AI (genAI) on journalism and the information ecosystem (examples here and here). However, newsrooms are not the only ones testing the capabilities of this new tech. The Centre has just recently finished a trial, using genAI for our own purposes.

Newsrooms have told us that extracting information from large text corpora is one potential use of AI, which they are exploring. Its use could range from searching through historical, legal or business documents to finding newsworthy material from press releases. The appeal is obvious: have AI carry out the tedious documentary work, freeing up time for journalists to review and focus on other high-value tasks such as analysis.

As academics, we also regularly face situations where we must analyse large volumes of documents. One such recent task was an analysis of the different viewpoints presented by submissions to last year's government consultation, which proposed giving the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) new powers to combat misinformation and disinformation. In total, there were 2,418 public submissions. Traditionally, this would be a manual, time-consuming project, where each submission would be reviewed, thoroughly testing human concentration spans and patience. AI, thankfully, has unlimited of both (or whatever is considered the silicon-based equivalent)!

In a nutshell, the method we used made use of OpenAI's GPT4o model and an open-source PDF conversion tool called Marker. Once the PDF submissions had been converted to markdown (a type of text formatting), the GPT4o model was prompted to evaluate each submission on a set of very specific and direct questions we had formulated. These questions asked the model to extract information on issues such as whether the submission provided commentary on the definition of 'misinformation' or whether the submission supported excluding professional news content. Crucially, for each response, the model was asked to provide a direct quote from the submission alongside reasoning as to why it came to a decision, allowing for quicker validation when reviewing the results.

This project has, of course, not been without its challenges. Ethics and [issues](#) such as bias and the reproducibility of genAI content had to be carefully considered. Testing for reliability and accuracy became the bulk of the time spent on the task. That being said, even with the additional verification steps and significant period of trial and error testing, we were able to analyse these submissions in a fraction of the time and resources a regular manual human review would have taken.

The results are shaping up to be quite insightful, and we look forward to sharing them in a future newsletter. In the meantime, the success here has buoyed my optimism that genAI, whether in academia or a newsroom, can speed up the tedious, sparing time for more enjoyable or harder-hitting tasks.

Kieran Lindsay
CMT Research Officer

The disinformation dilemma
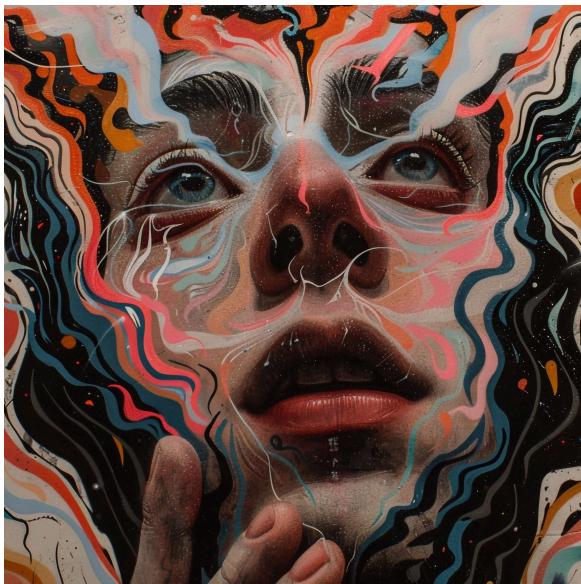
Since public consultation ended last August on the exposure draft of the combatting misinformation and disinformation bill, there have been few clues on what changes the government is thinking about to address the feedback. One clue came in April in the issues paper for the [review of the Online Safety Act,](#) which indicated there would be 'new measures to improve protections for public debate, freedom of speech and religious expression, improve the transparency and accountability of platforms' decision making, and improve public visibility into the efficacy of platform misinformation and disinformation strategies.'

Another clue came last week in [a submission](#) from the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts to the ongoing inquiry on Social Media and Australian Society. There, the department states that the bill 'would not enable ACMA to request [that] specific content or posts be removed from digital platform services and includes strong protections for privacy and freedom of speech. For example, professional news content, online content related to satire, reasonable public

debate (i.e. academic, scientific, religious or artistic), and private messages would be exempted entirely.'

This suggests the government has taken account of the free-speech concerns raised by the exposure draft – which in our view were not without foundation, if somewhat overblown – and that the limitations on ACMA's powers will be clarified. And while the final form of the bill remains to be seen, it also suggests that 'excluded content for misinformation purposes' will be expanded to include 'reasonable public debate', as well as professional news, satire and private messaging.

These changes will no doubt be welcomed by many critics of the bill. But as we have previously argued, narrowing the scope of ACMA powers by excluding certain types of content also narrows the range of content for which platforms can be held accountable. The bill thus fails to acknowledge the imposition that platforms make on freedom of expression when they moderate user content. Excluding a certain class of content *does not prevent platforms from moderating that content* – it only limits ACMA's powers to hold platforms accountable for how they engage in that moderation. Thus, ACMA will not have the power to request data about how many professional news items a platform has removed, or why. Nor will it be able to ensure that platforms provide news companies with that data, or with access to an appeal mechanism in the case that a news item is removed.

This is not idle speculation. YouTube's removal of Sky News Australia videos under their Covid misinformation policy is an example of an action that would be excluded from the bill. Excluding it will not prevent YouTube from removing professional news videos in the future, but it will certainly mean they cannot be held accountable under the bill for doing so.

In this way, the bill undermines its own objectives by failing to hold platforms accountable for a wide range of content-moderation measures. This might seem like an unfortunate but inexorable dilemma. Surely it is more critical to limit government power over online speech than platform power. But, as we argued in our submission on the exposure draft, we can in fact do both; by explicitly limiting ACMA power to functional matters relating to 'platform systems and processes', there is no need to be unduly restrictive over the scope of content or services to which the bill, or an industry code, applies. This would provide increased accountability for platforms, while allaying concerns about government overreach.

Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Choppy surf for subsidies

On an overcast late morning at the Kurrawa Surf Club on the Gold Coast, a group of global media scholars converged at the News Industries: Funding Innovations and Futures ICA post-conference to tackle a thorny subject: how governments can provide funds and relief for private media's mounting concerns. Panellists discussed subsidies both for their provisions and their drawbacks, as well as the criticisms they have invited. While numerous scholars have surveyed these kinds of approaches, there is clear value to having the scholars most familiar with the schemes reflect on their context and their results, and their detailed insights provided a number of interesting takeaways.

One thing that stood out is the diversity of what the subsidies cover, and no two countries reported the same targets or interventions. Where Australia's focused on regional issues, South Korea's included components like discount loans for journalists and extensive ad buys to help journalists and their employers keep the lights on. Canada's labour tax credit was a focus of their schemes but Norway has long provided a large amount of direct support for operation and production costs. They all reported challenges facing their media systems, but Eli Skogerbø, Alfred Hermida, Jaemin Jung and your writer, on behalf of the CMT described a variety of potential solutions.

Conversely, the scholars described a range of criticisms of how the subsidies are rolled out and their impacts. Some, like Canada's tax deduction for news subscription, garnered little interest or take up due to its size and the mismatch between consumers' choices and the subsidy's scope. Others, like Australia's regional support and Korea's support for newspapers, fell short of ameliorating the growing crises facing parts of the media that are still important to their subscribers and communities. In many cases – including in responses from the scholars in the audience – political challenges were raised as a difficult intervening factor, with governments arguing to end the support or to shape it toward their own ends. Whatever the benefits of subsidies, the headwinds they face and the ways they are shaped proved an impediment for their impact.

Overall, the picture that emerged of these subsidies was both diverse and complex.

According to panellists, narrow scopes and limited funding precluded strong effects, but unstructured and larger subsidies mostly benefited the status quo, and politics often played a role. Ultimately, the challenge remains – how to fund journalism.

Tim Koskie
CMT Researcher

The mess of media standards

Check out our latest episode of Double Take, The Mess of Media Standards. Derek speaks with Rita Jabri Markwell from Birchgrove Legal who's been leading the vilification action brought by the Australian Muslim Advocacy Network against X Corp. The network had a win in the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal when it claimed that X Corp, a foreign corporation, could be brought before the tribunal in relation to tweets posted in Queensland. The network says the tweets constitute hate speech and contravene the state's vilification laws. However last month, X Corp lodged an appeal against the tribunal's decision on jurisdiction.

Rita tells us what it's like running a matter in the tribunal and bringing digital platforms to a level of accountability in an environment where some have pushed back against national laws.

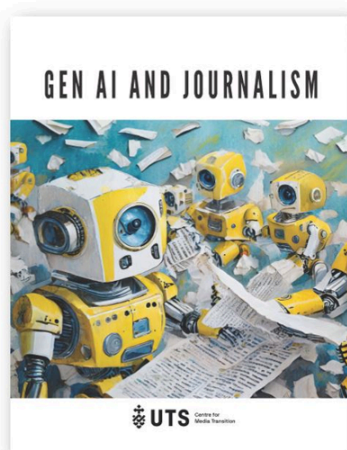You can listen on Spotify or Apple Podcasts.

Alexia Giacomazzi
CMT Events and Communications Manager

We hope you have enjoyed reading this edition of the *Centre for Media Transition newsletter | Assange, freedom of speech, AI and government subsidies - Issue 12/2024* **ISSN 2981-989X**

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GEN AI AND JOURNALISM

THE ENFORCEMENT OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS CONSUMER PROTECTIONS
FEBRUARY 2024

REGIONAL NEWS MEDIA

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.