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Media Transition

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Hi there

Wrapping up 2024

Welcome to our final newsletter for 2024. It's been a busy year for the Centre, with several major research reports and many submissions to government inquiries and consultations.

One area of particular attention for us has been the Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill, which was abandoned by the government the day before the senate committee was due to report on the bill. This came as little surprise. In our submissions and evidence to the committee, we raised concerns about the bill's structure and provisions, many of which are reflected in comments from the committee members.

The abandonment of the bill raises the question about what might come next. Taking an optimistic view, we see this as an opportunity to consider whether a broad-based approach to platform regulation, focused on transparency and holding platforms to account for their systems, processes and decision-making, would provide a more fruitful outcome.

Some of the dissenting comments in the committee's report point towards this possibility. Senator David Pocock, for example, states that 'Privacy Act changes should be implemented to create a stronger base for all other legislative changes we make to our digital ecosystem. From there, we can take a systems approach to regulating platforms rather than trying to address individual issues one by one.' The Greens argued that 'The Government must now turn its mind to comprehensive reforms that put responsibility on digital giants to make their platforms safe for all users, including when it comes to mis and

disinformation.' And the Nationals recommend that the government adopt the recommendations of the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, the first of which calls for all large social media platforms operating in Australia to meet a minimum set of transparency requirements.

Sacha Molitorisz and I argue for a broad-based regulatory approach to platform accountability in a paper that we presented last week at the Australia and New Zealand Communications Association annual conference. Of course, moving forward with a new approach requires a fair amount of political will, but it is likely to garner more support than the narrow focus of the failed bill. While Michelle Rowland has indicated that the government will seek to impose a statutory duty on digital platforms, the scope of that duty is yet to be articulated and it is unclear whether it would cover misinformation.

At the conference, I also presented some findings from our project on the implications of generative AI for Wikipedia and the open knowledge ecosystem. This is also, in part, the topic of our latest Double Take podcast – in which I had the pleasure of interviewing Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia. More on that from Alexia below.

Also, this week Monica presents CMT's latest report – the final of three reports in our Regional Journalism project in which we've been examining the flow of regional news and information into metropolitan news markets, and Kieran reports on CMT's participation in a major public event at UTS – the latest instalment of the Global Game Changers series on information integrity, AI and the law.
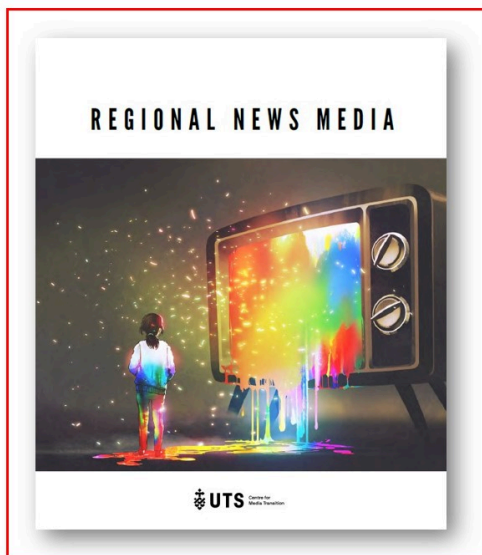
Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Regional endings

After three years of research into whether the decline of regional news has impacted audiences in metropolitan locations as well as those in regional Australia, this week we

are publishing our final report. You can read it here.

Funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation, we were able to help Guardian Australia experiment with a 'hub and spoke' model to establish a Rural Reporting Network. At the centre of this model is a rural editor, and over the past three years it has been supported by five UTS journalism graduates posted to different regional locations, and a team of freelance contributing journalists. The reporting network will continue, despite the end of funding and, for the moment at least, of our research.

In our 3rd report we have gone global in search of answers to how best to provide regional media with the resources it needs to produce quality public interest journalism, and, with that journalism, to establish links to metropolitan media, so that all Australians have a sense of what the significant issues facing regional dwellers are and how they can best be tackled by policy-makers.

We are also publishing the results of our final surveys measuring the flow of regional news to metropolitan markets. A spoiler – the news isn't good. Over the three years of our research, we have identified a steady decline in the production of regional local news by metropolitan news outlets – in the number of stories, the types of issues covered, and where coverage is occurring.

In this final year of research, we also conducted a number of focus groups in both regional NSW and in Sydney to see what people most valued in the news media available to them. Again, the findings are sobering: regional audiences were dismissive of metro news outlets' efforts to cover local issues unless they perceived the reportage to be derived from a connection to community, usually through the physical presence of a journalist. Metropolitan audiences reported being uninterested in regional stories unless they concerned national narratives directly relevant to them, such as energy production.

You can find all three reports on our site. Our thanks to the VFFF for their support, and to Guardian Australia. And finally, our congratulations to the students who won positions at Guardian Australia and contributed their reflections on regional media to our reports.

Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

Telling rights from wrongs

The government's announcement last week that it would not proceed with the misinformation bill overshadowed the report from the Senate committee published the following day. Despite the bill being dead in the water, the report makes for curious reading. No member of the committee offers a dissenting recommendation to adopt the bill, but it is clear that the main report was supported only by the three government members. The opposition and crossbench parties and independents all give dissenting reasons for their recommendations against it.

A focus of many of the comments on the right to free speech is whether opinion is captured by the bill's definition of misinformation. Although it is not in the bill itself, the explanatory memorandum notes that the definition is 'intended to include opinions, claims, commentary and invective'. The inclusion of these types of statements in the definition of misinformation generated quite some attention in the submissions. The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) warns that 'considerable caution should be exercised before including opinions and commentary within the scope of 'information' as this significantly broadens the potential reach of this legislation and increases the risk of it being used to censor legitimate debate about matters of public importance.' And Professor Anne Twomey argued in her appearance that 'you can't prove that someone's opinion is false; it's an opinion'.

We can grant the immense difficulty of determining what is and isn't misinformation, and with the AHRC, that legislation should err on the side of protecting freedom of expression. We have argued as much in our own submissions and commentary on the bill and Australian code of practice. But the objection to including opinions is a strange one. Indeed, if misinformation is not to include opinion, it is difficult to imagine what it should include. Being misinformed is, in its simplest sense, having a false opinion about a factual matter. Indeed, one might say that an opinion is true just when it expresses a fact. That does not make it any less an opinion.

For example, my opinion might be that Joe Biden won the 2020 election. That opinion would be true. My uncle might argue that it was Trump. That opinion would be false (at least on the available evidence). When a judge asks in court, for example, 'What are the facts of the matter?', they mean essentially, 'What is true here?'. Witnesses are called to give their opinions about what those facts are. The judge weighs their evidence, and makes a determination. This may involve deciding which opinions are reasonable, which may in turn involve a judgement about which rest on firmer evidence. This process is, of course, fallible. Indeed, as The Victorian Bar Association observes, science also advances through a fallible process of weighing evidence.

Perhaps what Twomey means is that some opinions are 'mere opinions', not founded in fact, but pure expressions of subjective commitment, taste, or value, and that these are to be contrasted with 'facts'. There are of course such 'mere opinions' or statements of commitment or value ('Ice-cream is the best dessert', 'liberal democracy is good'), and these are certainly not verifiable in the same way that opinions about factual matters are. But as the example above shows, only a subset of opinions are expressions of subjective commitment. In any case, the requirement for misinformation to be 'reasonably verifiable as false, misleading or deceptive' excludes such statements of commitment or value.

As the Victorian Bar Association and other submitters argue, the burden of making these kinds of judgement is immense, and is not feasible as a basis for enforceable regulation. That is certainly why the objective of the bill was to make platforms accountable for the systems they put in place to deal with misinformation – systems which, it is worth remembering, they already have, despite not having a regulatory obligation to do so. Unfortunately, the bill failed to fully embrace a systems approach, opening up questions about who is to hold platforms accountable for their decisions about what counts as misinformation, and how. This is what, ultimately, led to its downfall.

Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Global game changers: from the audience

Last week, the UTS Law Faculty hosted the latest instalment of Global Game Changers – a series of conversations hosted by different UTS faculties covering contemporary issues.

The topic was Information Integrity, AI and the Law.

Fittingly, the event began with a deepfake introduction from UTS Vice-Chancellor Andrew Parfitt. The CMT's Michael Davis gave the keynote address, outlining the risks to information integrity posed by generative AI.

It was extremely thought-provoking. How do we, as a society, and specifically how does law as an institution, address cheap and readily available access to generative AI? Generative AI that can be used to flood the internet with manipulative or low-quality information, the risk exacerbated by online echo chambers that help spread false news at

a rate of six times compared to the truth. Lastly, what are the consequences of AI companies purchasing the rights to information, potentially creating walled knowledge gardens?

Michael was then joined for a panel discussion by CMT's Monica Attard alongside Cullen Jennings, Sophie Farthing, and Creina Chapman. Journalist Hamish Macdonald moderated the conversation, which delved into the role of regulation, human rights, the role of journalism, and media ethics and accountability.

A short Q and A wrapped up what was a fascinating night. You can watch a recording of the session here.

Kieran Lindsay
CMT Research Officer

The republic of Wikipedia

In this episode of Double Take, CMT Research Fellow Michael Davis speaks with internet entrepreneur Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia.

Wikipedia is first and foremost an encyclopedia. It differs from social platforms in that its business model does not depend on advertisers, which means it doesn't need provocative commentary to attract eyeballs. Jimmy likens Wikipedia to a republic that honours the internet's early libertarian credentials, where other platforms hide behind them.

So, is it possible to extrapolate some of the principles that govern Wikipedia to social platforms? To answer that question, we need to ask whether in the first instance it's even possible to have a social platform that prioritises content based on quality and author expertise, while balancing engagement.

But challenges faced by Wikipedia today might be considered existential – its ability to survive on donations, for example, might be compromised in the age of genAI as users increasingly use zero-click search to access information. The use of free and open knowledge on the internet to train AI systems has got commercial media entering into deals and licensing agreements – but what can Wikipedia do to protect its data? And what are the consequences of Wikipedia being designated as a very large platform under the

EU's Digital Services Act?

This episode comes out on 18th December – sign up to our platforms to hear it!

Sign up on Spotify | Sign up on Apple Podcasts

Alexia Giacomazzi
CMT Events and Communications Officer

We hope you have enjoyed reading this edition of the *Centre for Media Transition newsletter | 2025 on the horizon | Issue 23/2024* **ISSN 2981-989X**

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FEBRUARY 2024

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REGIONAL NEWS MEDIA

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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.