

# Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

## In the news



Welcome to our newsletter. This week, Tamara is looking at the controversy around the decision by Media Watch to investigate an external work contract undertaken by one of its star presenters, Tony Armstrong, who as a result found himself again targeted by racist comments on social media. This came in the same week the ABC handed down its damning report on racism in the public broadcaster.

Miguel is looking at what appears to be consistent breaches of an internet protocol by Large Language Model (LLM) manufacturers which is allowing them to crawl websites for content that otherwise would have been off limits.

And I'm looking at the vastly different tone of news media coverage of the first anniversary of the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel. It's all in the headlines!



**Monica Attard**  
CMT Co-Director

# Media Watch and Tony Armstrong



For most people, quitting a job is usually a private affair concerning only employee and employer. For Tony Armstrong, however, most of Australia appears to have had a front-row seat to his latest career move, and there's been plenty to see – but not all of it pleasant.

A week after the popular presenter announced he would be leaving ABC News Breakfast, a [Media Watch](#) investigation revealed that Armstrong provided voice-overs for nationwide NRMA Insurance ads.

Contrary to ABC's [strict guidelines](#) for staff engaging in external work, *Media Watch* confirmed that Armstrong hadn't sought prior approval from the bosses before doing the ads.

A day later, the [findings](#) of an ABC-commissioned review into racism revealed that 119 out of 120 current and former staff said they personally experienced racism while working at the broadcaster. Around the same time, Armstrong took to [Instagram stories](#) to share screenshots of racist and derogatory messages he'd received from online trolls.

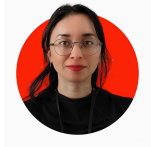
Not surprisingly, this generated a flurry of comments and media interest, with everyone from *The Guardian* to the *Daily Mail* covering it. ABC's Director of News, Justin Stevens, [was quick to condemn](#) the racist attacks and reaffirm the broadcaster's unequivocal support of Armstrong.

Numerous outlets framed *Media Watch*'s investigation as a targeted ABC attack on one of their own, or otherwise implied that the racist abuse levelled at Armstrong was a direct consequence of the episode. For example, one called it a '[hit piece](#)', and another blamed it for '[unleash\[ing\] a torrent of online abuse](#)' at Armstrong. Stevens wasn't as forthcoming in his statement but appears to be suggesting the same thing: '[t]he ABC belongs to the public and is rightly subject to appropriate scrutiny and feedback. However, at times the nature of the scrutiny on particular ABC employees is unsettling, and the incessant coverage targeting them has real impacts.'

Stevens is correct that the ABC must be scrutinised, and this isn't the first time *Media Watch* has taken aim at one of their own. The programme criticised the ABC and Mark Willacy for their [reports on war crimes](#); and on multiple occasions has questioned the ABC's impartiality, including for their [relationship with ACON](#) and more recently journalist

Jamelle Wells in a story about [brumby culls](#).

So, the issue here doesn't seem to be about whether *Media Watch* has the right to scrutinise the ABC, but whether *they should* in certain situations. Even in high-profile cases like this, it is important to remember the distinction between upholding ABC's principles of impartiality and avoiding commercial influence, which *Media Watch* routinely covers, and the targeting of individuals. While the racist attacks on Armstrong or any other ABC staff should be denounced, surely they are irrelevant in determining whether these principles have been breached.



**Tamara Markus**  
CMT Researcher

## We are the robots



One measure of how consequential the breakneck rollout of genAI is to the very fundamentals of the internet is the raging battle around the humble robots.txt file, a vital but little-known feature of websites and search engine optimization, which tells web crawlers which parts of your website they can crawl.

Since ChatGPT's breakout moment, AI companies have taken to training their LLMs on

pretty much everything they can find on the internet. They use bots to crawl the web, downloading web content as they do so. This is not new – Google [has been crawling the internet in a process](#) known as [indexing](#), categorising the world wide web for users to search.

But AI is different. As AI companies like Perplexity.ai build multimillion dollar business models on the content other people have paid to produce – raising still-unresolved copyright issues – they have trampled on an internet protocol that dates to 1994, the robots.txt file which says 'do not crawl this' as a guideline to bots.

The robots.txt protocol is an agreement, like a code handshake under the hood of how websites are searched, crawled and indexed. Robots.txt files used to have not much more than a rudimentary sitemap and maybe, if the site admin was pedantic, a few specific 'do not crawl' instructions. Not anymore.

The robots.txt files of Australian media outlets today are like a roll call of bot agents who are told to go elsewhere for training data. Our survey of 34 robots.txt pages of major publishers here found everything from no bots blocked at all to one site which blocked 19.

Perplexity.ai was [caught out ignoring the protocol](#), only to respond with a proposed revenue share model, which incrementally rewards publishers with a proportion of the revenue earned when one of their articles features in an answer to a query. There are concerns this could lead to publishers prioritising content that will ['align with algorithmic demands'](#), much in the way that search and social has driven the [growth of clickbait journalism](#).

Reading the [fine print on this](#), Perplexity's Publisher Program offers participants a share of revenue when someone lands on their content through a Perplexity search. But as yet, there is no detail on how to [join the program](#).

The six starting publishers are an odd bunch of huge to community level outlets; TIME, Der Spiegel, Fortune, Entrepreneur and The Texas Tribune, and WordPress.com, all with wildly divergent business models and levels of capitalisation. It's very hard to see how the non-profit Texas Tribune will leverage the necessary resources to 'create their own custom answer engine on their website,' one of the ['key components'](#) of Perplexity's program.

In recent weeks, content-delivery network provider Cloudflare has rolled out a product – for free – to allow site admins to monitor for bots, in real time, including those trying to camouflage their behaviour, like [Perplexity was found to be doing](#). Cloudflare has gone a step further and debuted a tool that allows customers to pick and choose which bots they want to block or permit. Next, Cloudflare plans to build a marketplace where site owners can negotiate [Terms of Use with LLM platforms](#), by allowing site owners to set a price for restricted sections of their sites which they will allow LLMs to crawl.



It remains to be seen whether this performance enhancement to the venerable old protocol will bring some balance back to the publisher-platform relationship.



**Miguel D'Souza**  
CMT Researcher

## A tale of many headlines



One year on from the Hamas attack on Israel, the debate continues about how news media is covering the conflict. Has it been fair, accurate, impartial? Who can be believed? Are the Palestinians or the Israelis the greater victims?

With 90% of Gazans and some 1 million Lebanese now displaced as a result of Israel's military action, and more than 100 Israelis still captive in Gaza, the war is now a zero-sum game in which news media is inexorably caught up.

Just a few days before the first anniversary of the Hamas attack, a time destined to be emotionally charged for all, Al Jazeera published a story [titled](#) 'Failing Gaza: Pro-Israel bias uncovered behind the lens of Western media', based on a documentary released by the Qatar-based organisation. In it, ten journalists who have been covering the war on Gaza for CNN and BBC detail the journalistic practices they say have led to 'pro-Israel bias in coverage, systematic double standards and frequent violations of journalistic principles'. These include preferencing Israeli perspectives and guests over Palestinian voices, and airing Israeli-government propaganda despite concerns about veracity. There was no follow-up reporting of the documentary's findings.

In Australia, October 7 was marked by a very sharp news-media divide. News Corp's *The Australian* decided on a full-throated expression of sympathy and support for Israel. Its largely pro-Israel coverage over the past year culminated in a series of front pages in the lead up to October 7 which left readers in no doubt where it stood. On October 3, 'War and Appeasement' [lambasted](#) Prime Minister Albanese for urging diplomacy over military action to punish Hezbollah for its 200-ballistic-missile attack on northern Israel the day

before. On October 4, 'Repugnant Diplomacy' [criticised](#) the government for failing to expel the Iranian ambassador to Australia for heralding the Israeli-assassinated Hezbollah leader as a remarkable leader. On October 5, 'Abandonment of Israel' [accused](#) the Australian government of an 'historic betrayal of Jews' in Israel's darkest hour and creating an explosion of anti-semitism. And on October 7, the Australian's front page [blared](#) 'Israel protecting the free world'. All of which was not quite the same tone taken by other news media.

*The Sydney Morning Herald* on the same days: October 3 – '[Israel](#) Vows to Fight on'. October 4 – '[Protest](#), Vigil to Proceed'. October 5 – '[Premier](#) Gives Stern Warning to Protesters'. October 6 [carried](#) a report on an Israeli family who fell victim to the Hamas attack, a report on Israeli strikes in north Lebanon and another on Gazan families finding new lives in Australia. October 7 [carried](#) two reports - 'Voters Oppose Protests' and another headlined "'Evil Walked the Earth" on October 7'. The tone was altogether more subdued, though many critics of Australian media coverage of the war also claim the same pro Israel bias can be seen in the *SMH* and *The Age* coverage. CMT is currently examining these claims and will (hopefully) bring you more soon.

Newspapers have always exercised their right to take a stand, even to fiercely advocate. Whether it helps or hinders civil discourse is another question.



**Monica Attard**  
CMT Co-Director

## In case you missed it ...



The last four episodes of Double Take cover media matters in regional and rural Australia, our global region of South Asia, and the frontiers of cyberspace. There are common pain points shared in all jurisdictions: the threat of disinformation and rise of AI, the challenge of developing regulatory solutions to platform autonomy, and the question of sustaining journalism as traditional business models fail.

In June, [Derek spoke](#) to Rita Jabri Markell from Birchgrove Legal about the vilification

action brought by the Australian Muslim Advocacy Network against X Corp. Rita shared her experience of bringing digital platforms to a level of accountability in an environment where some have pushed back against national laws.

[Kieran chatted](#) to Crikey's associate editor Cam Wilson in July about its decision to ban AI-generated news on its platform. While Crikey described such content as 'unhuman slop', other news outlets have signed deals allowing generative AI manufacturers and distributors to mine their content for training large language models.

[Monica hosted](#) a panel in August on the dramatic contraction of regional news in Australia and whether big city markets were sufficiently addressing regional issues. The panelists questioned the extent to which regional communities can have a voice in big policy debates and weighed up the differences between local and metro reporting on regional news.

And finally last month, our South Asia expert [Kean Wong interviewed](#) four Indian editors of independent news platforms and found that while they too battle against disinformation, in India, it is largely peddled by the very powers responsible for its regulation.

Tap into Double Take for insights on media trends at home, abroad and in the cloud.

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**Alexia Giacomazzi**

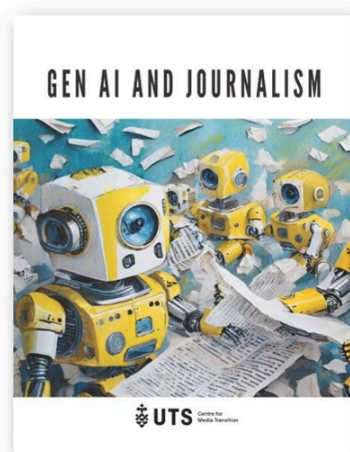
CMT Events and Communications Coordinator

We hope you have enjoyed reading this edition of the *Centre for Media Transition newsletter* | *Racism, headlines and robots* | *Issue 19/2024* **ISSN 2981-989X**

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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.



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