

Hi there

## The foreign future of correspondents in China



It's hard not to draw the conclusion that China doesn't trust and has something to fear from foreign correspondents. This year alone, 17 American journalists have been ousted from the country; and this week, the abrupt departure of Australia's only two correspondents have cast an even gloomier cloud over Australia-China relations.

For both the ABC's Bill Birtles in Beijing and the *Australian Financial Review*'s Mike

Smith in Shanghai it was a sad and frightening way to leave a posting. Both reporters had been warned by Australian consular officials days before they fled that their freedom was at risk. As they started to pack their suitcases and bid farewell to colleagues and friends, they received synchronised, unexpected midnight visits from uniformed police informing them they'd be prevented from leaving the country and would need to submit themselves for questioning on a matter of 'national security'. Birtles left his apartment to shelter at the embassy in Beijing whilst Smith took refuge at the consulate in Shanghai. Both journalists submitted to interviews with the Chinese authorities in exchange for safe passage out of the country.

The national security issue their interlocutors were eager to explore was the detention of Australian television presenter Cheng Lei, confirmed by Beijing only a few days ago. Birtles and Smith had both met the journalist though neither of them knew her well. But of the questioning, Bill Birtles

said: 'It felt very, very political. It felt like a diplomatic tussle in a broader Australian-China relationship more than anything specific related to that case'.

'I believe the episode was more one of harassment of the remaining Australian journalists, rather than a genuine effort to try and get anything useful for that case.'



The departure of the two remaining Australian journalists in China marks an escalation in a rapidly deteriorating relationship between Australia and China over trade, a shifting blame game over the origins of Covid-19 and Canberra's tough stance against Beijing over the violent protests which have gripped Hong Kong over the past year.

Bill Birtles has written about the experience [here](#) and Mike Smith [here](#). And this week on [Fourth Estate on 2SER](#), I spoke with Hugh Riminton, former China correspondent for CNN and Chris Uhlmann, chief political correspondent for the Nine Network, on what the incident means for the future of foreign reporting from China.



**Monica Attard**  
CMT Co-Director

## Getting our wires crossed



We saw a different side to 'power imbalance' this week. The ACCC's draft [News Media Bargaining Code](#) is based on the power imbalance between Google and Facebook on the one hand, and Australian news organisations on the other. We acknowledge this power imbalance but, also [note](#) that putting publishers on a better footing to 'bargain' doesn't address systemic difficulties faced by smaller publishers who are essential in promoting media diversity.

The power imbalance at play this week involves the biggest of the Australian news providers – News Corp – and the newly non-profit wire service, AAP. AAP is concerned that News Corp's own news wire service might compete with it, thereby making it

unsustainable. (News Corp and Nine Entertainment [pulled out](#) of AAP earlier this year, prompting the move to a non-profit model.) AAP has started a crowdsourcing campaign in response and *The Guardian* [reports](#) ACCC chair Rod Sims saying that much would depend on the pricing of News Corp's wire service, as misuse of market power laws can be used to address low pricing for the purpose or effect of damaging a competitor.

It's reassuring that the ACCC is onto this, and effective competition law is crucial. But it only takes us part of the way in achieving public interest outcomes that have traditionally been the province of media regulation. Just as regulated bargaining doesn't address the underlying crisis in the business model of advertiser-supported journalism, predatory pricing doesn't address the foundational argument for media diversity.

News Corp is one of the engine rooms of journalism in this country. In many of its markets, it's the only daily print/online news source. Quite aside from the desirability of having an independent wire service provide content to a range of sources across the country, there's something wrong with News Corp stepping into the role.

So pricing isn't the only issue: we need media plurality laws that allow our media regulator to prevent a dominant news source from supplying content to others in concentrated markets. Or at least, we need the power to require the media regulator to advise the competition regulator to take action before pricing becomes an issue. But that needs Parliament to step up and 're-balance' the roles of our regulators.



**Derek Wilding**  
CMT Co-Director

## Costing the social value of news



The wave of disruption that is the ACCC News Media Bargaining Code has left many interesting eddies of conversation in its wake, including – radically – the question of putting a bargaining price on the social value of news.

As it stands the legislation doesn't take into account the social value of news despite the danger to democracy of the loss of public interest journalism, a key motivation for regulatory intervention. The cost of producing news is supposed to be factored

into bargaining but this is not the same thing as putting a dollar value on the social utility



created by both news companies and the platforms. If the principles of the bargaining discussion were reconfigured, this would radically shift the terms of engagement, which of course, is the whole point of [triple bottom line accounting](#).

In the [CMT submission](#) to the News Media Bargaining Code Exposure Draft we suggested that the ACCC should provide more guidance on bargaining taking into account the social utility of news. The Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) likewise [argues](#) that ‘the community value placed on public interest journalism’ should be considered; it argues that the dollar value to the community can be calculated by asking people how much extra they would be willing to pay in tax to support public interest journalism.

Another point to consider is that with true social accounting both negative and positive externalities have to be taken into account. So for example, is the value of political reporting undone when it is partial or poor quality? These are some of the issues we will be presenting to an international workshop on [news quality in the platform era](#).

Some [reports](#) claim that the ACCC is considering changing the code to meet the concern, raised by platforms, that value flows both ways. Currently the bargaining code only considers the value of news content to platforms. Google and Facebook argue this ignores the value created by referral traffic – that the value platforms create for news organisations should also be considered in bargaining.

If changes are to be made anyway, and the categories of value widened, these changes could, and perhaps should, include social value. But that would be pretty radical.



**Chrisanthi Giotis**  
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

## Sharing is caring. Or is it?

By now it's clear that the ACCC's News Media Bargaining Code is hotly contested. In response, Facebook [threatened to remove](#) news entirely from its Newsfeed. And one contentious issue that has received relatively little coverage is the code's requirements for the digital platforms to share data with news media businesses.

This is covered in the draft bill under section 52M of the non-negotiable





'minimum standards' the code seeks to impose on digital platforms. Digital platforms covered by the code must give explanations of the types of data collected about news media users. In other words, if a person reads a News Corp story on Facebook, then Facebook would be obliged to tell News Corp about the types of data it's collecting about that user's engagement with News Corp content.

The wording of section 52M – covering 'a list and explanation of the data that the digital platform service collects' – is vague. This, understandably, is a concern, especially for Google and Facebook.

One interesting point is that not all news businesses want such data. As the submissions in response to the ACCC's Concepts Paper reveal, news businesses have very different approaches to data sharing. Some news media businesses want it all. Others want none.

In its submission, News Corp wrote that it wants an acknowledgment that data collected about user engagement with a news media business' content is owned by that business. Further, it wants full and unconditional access to that data, and to have that data used only on behalf of and as instructed by the news media business. Nine Entertainment, by contrast, submitted that it doesn't want access to data under the code, believing that's an issue that ought to be resolved by the Ad Tech Inquiry. Similarly, rather than data sharing, Country Press Australia wants privacy law reform. This chimes with the Privacy Commissioner, who argues for a cautious approach to data sharing requirements so as not to pre-empt privacy reform.

For their part, Google and Facebook say they already share a lot of data with digital platforms. In its submission to the Concepts Paper, Google said that what's needed is better training on how to use it. If data sharing is to be part of the code, Google argued, it should be part of the bargaining framework to be decided in negotiation, not a minimum standard. Facebook says it already shares up-to-date lists of anonymised, aggregated data and insights about audiences and the performance of news content.

Time will tell what the final legislation prescribes, and whether Facebook's Newsfeed contains news in name only.



**Sacha Molitorisz**  
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## The false narratives bound up in 'Freedom day' protests

'Freedom day' protests against lockdown measures in Australia last weekend featured a range of

misinformation narratives, including false claims about vaccines, 5G and references to 'new world order' conspiracy theories. Media from the event also sought to accentuate confrontations between protesters and activists, which we have increasingly seen feeding into narratives that seek to portray measures to control the virus as authoritarian and part of attempts to use the pandemic as an excuse to implement totalitarian rule.



Over the weekend there were numerous posts and livestreams by protesters at the events; most received hundreds of shares and low thousands of video views at the most. An exception is a video on Twitter from a right-wing commentator and political activist which features footage purported to be of his arrest viewed more than 226,000 times. Though the protests are ostensibly based around civil liberties concerns and many attendees may be focused on such issues, we are increasingly seeing protests become a focal point for conspiracy theories around allegedly authoritarian behavior by authorities, and separate issues such as vaccines and claims that the pandemic is a hoax.

This report featured in [The Daily Briefing](#) - a compilation of interesting reads from around the web on disinformation and information disorder by [First Draft News](#). This week, First Draft APAC Director Anne Kruger also spoke on [ABC The Drum](#) for a segment about how the fringe conspiracy group QAnon has hit the mainstream and how we can talk about it without amplifying false narratives and misinformation.

## HDR Spotlight - Cheyne Anderson



Hi! I'm a PhD student researching the discursive construction of algorithmic accountability in state and tech company responses to the Christchurch mosque attack. My background is in long form audio with bylines at the ABC, the Guardian and community radio. I have a Master of Arts (Journalism) from UTS and Bachelor of Arts (Anthropology - Honours) from the University of Sydney.

I was producing the show Think: Digital Futures for 2SER in 2017 when I started to

think about the cultural and political dimensions of emerging technologies. This led me to the Centre for Media Transition in 2019 where I set out to research algorithms, journalism and platform power. In March that year, a terrorist who was radicalised on social media used Facebook Live to broadcast the massacre of 51 Muslim worshippers in a video that subsequently went viral. In the unfolding debate around the role of social media in the attack, I started to unpack how algorithms and accountability were constructed through public discourse in the wake of the attack. What can this case study teach us about the unique regulatory challenges techno-social objects pose for governments and tech companies?

Alongside this, I co-host a weekly radio show on 2SER called [Start Making Sense](#) about internet culture, power and politics. I hope to continue to explore questions of technology and power in both academic and creative mediums. I am active on Twitter [@cheynederson](#)

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**Have a great weekend!**

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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.*





