UTS

Hi there

Media plurality and the public interest

There has been a lot said about Kevin Rudd's petition for a royal commission. Maybe we can accept there are some legitimate questions here about concentration of ownership and media responsibility, separate from Mr Rudd's comments on News Corp's reporting on the ALP. And whatever the fate of the petition, it might help us to question a current campaign for further deregulation.

The 'Save our Voices' campaign, launched by the three regional broadcasting networks with Australian Community Media and fronted by Ray Martin, wants the removal of the one-to-a-market cap on commercial television licences. With the repeal of the cross-media rules and the national audience reach rule, the licence cap is the cornerstone of structural diversity in Australian commercial media. It means that in most licence areas, there will be at least three commercial media operations. Broadcasting law no longer stops mergers between local newspapers, television and radio, and neither does it regulate ownership of online news sites or other digital media, pay TV or national newspapers.

It was good, then, to see Michelle Rowland, the shadow communications spokesperson, speak of the need to rethink regulation in a way that 'takes account of algorithms as much as ownership' and that considers both media plurality and industry sustainability.

In the concentrated Australian media market, there must be an alternative to further concentration in regional Australia.

And on this theme of regional media, below Sacha relates his experience on a recent regional tour, while Rosa ends on a different kind of diversity. First, though, Anne fills us in on First Draft's experience monitoring the NZ election and referendum.

Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

Monitoring NZ election misinformation

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern led her centre-left Labour party to a landslide victory at Saturday's general election. First Draft takes a look back at the past two months of monitoring with a focus on ads appearing in Facebook.

But first, a proud mention of NewsHub Journalist Tova O'Brien, trained by fellow Google News Initiative trainers, for her zero-tolerance approach to misinformation. Indeed, First Draft has monitored the Facebook rise - and last week's sudden demise - of the fringe Advance NZ/NZPP page. The party had downplayed the pandemic as a 'winter flu' and made claims about 'forced vaccinations'. Such ads were taken down, but in some cases not before making 100,000-125,000 impressions in just two days. Friday saw a flurry of online activity as the party attempted to regroup in other online spaces.

New Zealanders were also asked to vote in two referenda on the same day as the general election. First Draft found there was also plenty of ad take downs and misleading tactics at play from referenda lobbying. On euthanasia, misleading ads came from the opposing side. Risky Law NZ ran numerous highly emotional ads featuring dramatised portrayals of vulnerable people they argued would be at risk if the proposed End of Life Choice Act passed. It also used misleading language, such as the term 'teenager', to obscure eligibility criteria for euthanasia in the proposed legislation. Some Risky Law NZ ads have had a total reach of 200,000 - 250,000 people across all duplicates. It had 18 ads removed due to a violation of Facebook's advertising policies, but 11 reappeared despite the take down.

For cannabis legalisation, on the 'against' side, the use of statistics by Say Nope To Dope NZ was vague. In these ads, they state '30% of drivers who had crashed and died had cannabis in their system'; however, there is no indication as to how much cannabis was present or whether there were other substances. One version of this ad was taken down by Facebook. In pages 'for' legalisation, Make It Legal NZ were the highest referenda-focused spenders according to the Facebook Ad library report. They ran a busy campaign from many angles of the 'for' debate, although at times used partial-context quotes for example, from public figures: these ads depict Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern saying 'Personally I've never wanted to see people criminalised for cannabis use'. This leaves out the second half of the sentence, in which she says, 'but equally I've always been concerned about young people accessing it.' Ardern has repeatedly refused to state her position on the referendum.

And Meanwhile, NORML New Zealand Inc posted this ad misquoting National Party leader Judith Collins, substituting what Collins said about eating meat during a televised debate to read as though she was hypocritical about cannabis. While the real quote is included in the image, it is extremely small.

Anne Kruger
First Draft APAC Director

Disinformation code out for comment

DIGI has released a draft of its Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation. This is the voluntary code developed as part of the response to the government's Implementation Roadmap for the ACCC's Digital Platforms Inquiry. The ACMA later released a position paper on misinformation and news quality.

CMT has been working with DIGI on the project. Our discussion paper is released along with DIGI's code. The paper draws on the experience of First Draft in responding to disinformation and outlines international approaches to regulation as well as efforts by platforms to address the problem.

The draft code represents platforms' thinking on the right approach to tackling disinformation at a national level. The Australian code needs to sit alongside regulatory initiatives in other jurisdictions like the EU. We approached this project with the view that this issue is best addressed in an industry or co-regulatory form, as changes in technologies, business systems and user practice all make it difficult to cover in government regulation. We think there's still some way to go in shaping a good local code, and we encourage you to let DIGI know how the current draft code can be improved. Deadline is 24 November.

Derek Wilding and Anne Kruger

Positively *all* about community

Earlier this month, while travelling in regional NSW, I had the chance to read various regional newspapers, including The Gilgandra Weekly, the Mudgee Guardian and Gulgong Advertiser and the recently-launched Coffs Coast News of the Area. When you thumb through them, it quickly becomes obvious that what counts as news is decidedly different outside metro areas. It also quickly becomes obvious that news in the regions is often defined by its ability to build community.

Image Credit: ABC Western Plains

The front page story of the October 13 edition of The Gilgandra Weekly was all about local sport. 'Swans win,' said the headline, followed by the lengthy subhead: 'Dunedoo claims victory over the Panthers in the Christie and Hood Castlereagh League and Monarch Blues League Tag grand finals'. The front page story spilled over onto the back page; and page five was devoted to crowd photos. For a 16-page publication, that's serious coverage.

Clearly, this extensive coverage connects readers to their neighbours, and their community. That function would have been particularly vital during the isolation and hardship wrought by COVID-19.

Research here and overseas shows that people consumed more news after the outbreak of COVID-19. It also shows that a lot of people have turned back to legacy media, and particularly television. Ironically, however, the pandemic also hit news outlets hard by drying up advertising revenues, particularly in regional areas. In May, for instance, News Corp announced the end of more than 100 print titles.

On this note, one positive piece of news this week is that the ABC will not be cutting any jobs in regional and rural areas.

And speaking of positive news, that's another thing I noticed. Regional media is often more positive in tone, rather than aggressive and adversarial. This is particularly pronounced in the Coffs Coast News of the Area, launched recently after the demise of the print edition of News Corp's Coffs Coast Advocate.

The front page story of the October 9 edition of the News of the Area details efforts by volunteers to survey the koala population in the Bongil Bongil National Park. On page 7, a local told of how she found a wedding ring with an engraving of a man's name, woman's name, and a date. As the story asked, 'Do you know who owns this ring?'

I'm hoping the positivity catches on.

Sacha Molitorisz
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Social commentary, racism and COVID-19

Why is calling the Coronavirus the #ChineseVirus racist?

One of the defining features of 2020 has been the poignant resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement following from the death of George Floyd in the US, which has sparked a global call for social justice and reckoning in the face of systemic and institutional racism.

The issue of media diversity and inclusion, or more particularly the lack thereof in news media institutions in Australia, has been called to account in recent months. This week, All Together Now in partnership

with Asian Australian Alliance have released the report, Social Commentary, Racism and COVID-19, an inquiry into the racialisation of COVID-19 in mainstream Australian social commentary.

The report identifies five key techniques that mobilise and perpetuate anti-Asian racism in contemporary social commentary in mainstream news media. It aims to support readers to identify and critically analyse overt and covert racism and to support journalists to address ongoing issues of racism in media and to provide evidence for the need for media reform.

This is the kind of practical and important research we strive to showcase on our social channels.

Rosa Alice
Communications Officer

#ICYMI You can read more of our publications and the reports below on our website.

Have a great weekend!

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