



Hi there

On complaints



Complaints dominate this issue of our newsletter.

Below, Monica discusses the findings of the independent review in response to complaints about the ABC's Exposed program, noting what she described as an 'odd' response from ABC management to the finding on the Wran aspect. She's been suitably restrained in her analysis – unlike some of the commentary, which I discuss below, on the Australian Press Council's finding that the Johannes Leak cartoon breached its standards. Chris Kenny

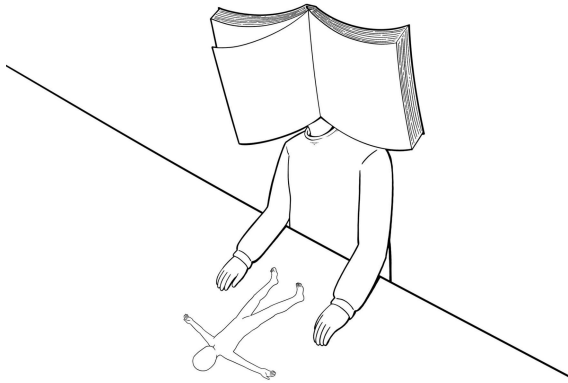
described the APC as an 'enemy of freedom of expression'.

On a different note, Anne points us to a new report she and her colleagues have written for First Draft on how mis- and disinformation circulate on social media within the Chinese diaspora. And Alexia draws our attention to the symposium on conflicting ethics in conflict reporting that CMT is holding next week in conjunction with the International Committee of the Red Cross. It's a really timely event with a great line-up, and registrations are still open.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

Exposed²



It cost two million dollars and took 15 months to produce, which makes the ABC's refusal to accept the findings of an [independent review](#) of *Exposed: The Ghost Train Fire*, on the one hand understandable. It's quite an investment from the national broadcaster and there was no doubt, costly editorial and legal heft applied.

On the other hand – the ABC's rejection of the review's sole criticism of the series is odd.

Former ABC Four Corners reporter Chris Masters and respected media academic Professor Rod Tiffen were commissioned by the ABC's Managing Director David Anderson to consider the impartiality and completeness of the series produced by Caro Meldrum Hanna. Did the series present relevant perspectives on the issues discussed and give those issues due weight? Did it show fairness in its treatment of the key characters?

Masters and Tiffen were largely complimentary of the series on the 1979 fire that killed 6 young boys and a man, notably finding that 'The series has performed an important public service, drawing attention to the lack of authoritative resolution surrounding the tragedy.'

But on the issue of the series' treatment of former NSW Premier, Neville Wran, which has drawn loud criticism from former associates of the long-time labor leader, Masters and Tiffen were critical. They found the series failed to establish a link between Wran and organised crime boss Abe Saffron despite giving the impression that such a link existed.

Television documentaries on historical events are difficult because footage is often hard to find, sources often long dead. Meldrum Hanna and her colleague Patrick Begley used a storyboard graphic as a film device, and it suggested the link between Wran and Saffron existed. The series ended with Meldrum Hanna telling the families of the victims that there 'was a cover-up and a web of criminal endeavour'; that Saffron 'was behind the fire and got away with it'; and 'There were a lot of powerful people in powerful places protecting Abe. So, it went right to the top, we're told.'

Of course, 'the top' is pretty ambiguous. But combined with the storyboard graphic and the absence of a rebuttal, Masters and Tiffen said the series left them with a strong impression

the program concluded Wran was complicit. The program makers and their ABC editorial bosses contend the Wran connection was referred to only as an unproven allegation. But as Media Watch's [Paul Barry](#) noted this week, the ABC didn't have enough evidence to make the allegation. The ABC is having none of that. It [says](#) 'The program in no way suggested that Mr Wran had any involvement in or knowledge of the 1979 Luna Park fire; was involved or implicated in a cover-up of the cause of the fire.' I suspect viewers might have missed that.



Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

Missing the joke



Before News Corp turned its attention to the first of the [Four Corners episodes](#) on Fox News, the Australian Press Council was the target of similar critique. The APC issued an [adjudication on the Johannes Leak cartoon](#) published in *The Australian* in August last year. It featured Jo Biden saying 'It's time to heal a nation divided by racism', then pointing to Kamala Harris and saying, 'So I'll hand you over to this little brown girl while I go for a lie down'.

The Press Council found the cartoon breached its principle that requires a publication to 'avoid causing or contributing materially to substantial offence, distress or prejudice, or a substantial risk to health or safety, unless doing so is sufficiently in the public interest.' Whilst the cartoonist might have had no intention to cause offence or prejudice, the APC says it did cause the latter to women and particularly women of colour and offended a wide range of people, in particular women.

In response, an [editorial](#) in *The Australian* said, 'The intention was to ridicule identity politics and demean racism, not perpetuate it.' Both *The Australian* and [Michael Bradley in Crikey](#) said that interpreting the cartoon in the terms put by the APC was wrong because it 'missed the joke'.

One of the problems with 'missing the joke' is that it puts intention above all else. As long as the speaker – or in this case, the cartoonist – didn't intend the message that was taken by others, there should be no censure. That argument doesn't stack up for words or expression

that amount to incitement to terrorism or child abuse, for example, and few would argue it does. But how far back down the line do we come in order to say the effect on others is more serious than the burden on freedom of speech?

I can't answer for the women of colour who saw this cartoon, and what they felt at the time. But I do know that speech can go beyond 'offence' and really give people a kick in the guts. And I do mean a visceral response. We no longer have the likes of Steve Vizard giving the limp wristed impressions of gay men that were prominent when I was young. I certainly don't miss that joke and I'm not interested in what Vizard intended at the time; I just remember the effect on me. And I clearly remember the shame and then the anger I felt when I read an article by *The Courier Mail* columnist, Laurie Kavanaugh, that spoke of homosexuality as a 'sewer practice'. [This adjudication](#) from the 1993 incarnation of the Press Council didn't help.

Is it too much to ask that 30 years later, we might accept that it's valid – not defining, not to the complete exclusion of the intended meaning – to take account of the likely impact on others?

On the role of the APC in the Leak decision, *The Australian* said the Council was allowing itself to be used to decide issues 'that are not its place to decide'. Chris Kenny continued this theme in a column on August 21, when he said of the way complainants use the APC complaint process: 'It is more civilised and incremental, but it is the same thought control imposed by the Taliban.' But alongside these opinions was a [reflective piece from Helen Trinca](#) showing how it can be difficult navigating your way through contemporary sensibilities, but it's worth the time and effort.

All of these views sit alongside the Press Council decision, an independent opinion on whether publishing the cartoon was consistent with the standards set out by the APC. No fines, no criminal offence, no 'shutting down debate'. Just an assessment against principles.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

Misinformation meets the diaspora

Our [latest publication](#) draws on nearly a year's worth of monitoring and research from the First Draft APAC team. We took a deep dive into the Chinese diaspora and their unique social media landscape ahead of Australia's next federal election;



specifically how mis- and disinformation flows through closed and semi-closed spaces.

Chinese social media platforms remain a lesser known area, so in this report you can find details about how content is censored and moderated, how the Chinese diaspora traverses these and 'mainstream' social media.

This report discusses the preferred social platforms, the flow of misinformation across platforms, as well as racist stigma. It offers guidance for policymakers, tech companies, journalists and researchers to better serve these communities.



Anne Kruger
First Draft APAC Director

Ethics in conflict



Online symposium Friday 17 September 9.00am -12.30 AEST

Please join the Centre for Media Transition online for [Conflicting Ethics in Conflict Reporting](#) on Friday 17 September.

This half-day symposium, sees the CMT partner with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to investigate the ethical quandaries faced by reporters in conflict zones. Research by CMT Co-Director Professor Monica Attard, Dr Chrisanthi Giotis and Dr Sacha Molitorisz explores ethical decision-making processes that look beyond codes of conduct.

The CMT will be joined by former and current correspondents with experience reporting on conflict. Keynote Sophie McNeill as well as Matt Brown, Kate Geraghty and Hamish McDonald join the first panel 'In the Field' ; and ICRC's Head of Mission David Tuck, Stan Grant and Dr Kathryn Greenman join the second panel 'Virtues and Rights'.

Registrants also have the opportunity to watch conflict simulations created by ICRC's VR Unit used to educate, communicate, and advocate respect for International Humanitarian Law.

Date: Friday 17 September 2021

Time: 9.00 - 12.30 AEST

Where: Online. Registration essential.

RSVP: [REGISTER ONLINE HERE](#)

We welcome you to drop in for part of the symposium if you are unable to stay for the entire event. We look forward to seeing you online!



Alexia Giacomazzi

Events and Communications Coordinator

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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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