

Hi there

Reckoning with responsibilities



Where does responsibility to others begin and end? If there is a through line to this CMT newsletter I think that deep philosophical question might be it.

The decision of YouTube to remove Sky News from its platform for a week for misinformation breaches has raised a plethora of commentary but below, Derek Wilding goes further, bringing in broader questions of platform accountability,

including those that arise from legal decisions when maligned minorities fight for their rights in court. Our First Draft team in Australia have taken on the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with a new report arguing that these organisations must take more responsibility for the way their information is being misused – including here in Australia – and take steps to remedy. Monica Attard delves into the role and obligations of investigative journalists and points out part of the duty of accountability lies with audiences. Finally, Sacha Molitorisz looks at the new remits Google and Facebook have voluntarily taken on with training programs and grants for news businesses arriving in the wake of the Mandatory News Media Bargaining Code.

Responsible citizens read on.



Chrisanthi Giotis
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Winding roads to online accountability



This week we saw two contrasting forms of accountability for online material.

First – as widely reported, including with some comments from me in [the SMH/Age](#) – there was the decision by YouTube to suspend Sky News Australia for a week.

But then there's the [story from the ABC](#) about a decision of the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal finding former Senator Fraser Anning contravened that state's anti-vilification laws. Anning's

attacks on Islam – including at the time of the Christchurch mosque killings in 2019 – were widely condemned. At the time, our colleague, Anne Kruger, wrote [a piece for First Draft](#) about Anning's conduct.

The ABC reports that QCAT has ordered Anning to remove many posts on Facebook and Twitter, following an action by the Australian Muslim Advocacy Network (AMAN) and the Islamic Council of Queensland. The orders of the Tribunal were made against Anning himself, but the ABC reports that AMAN 'wants the Australian government to put more pressure on the platforms to enforce their own standards'.

Here's the link with Sky News. In that matter, YouTube took action against Sky News content which it said breached its community standards. The action may have been justified, but unlike when [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) took action against Donald Trump, YouTube has not explained its decision by pointing to specific instances of offending content, the standards it breached, and the reasons why (in this case) a one-week suspension was considered an appropriate remedy. Zoe Samios and Lisa Visentin [have reported](#) sources saying that YouTube did not even give Sky News such reasons.

In its action based on vilification rather than disinformation, AMAN took a different path – as Pat Eatock and others did in an [action against Andrew Bolt and the Herald Sun](#) in

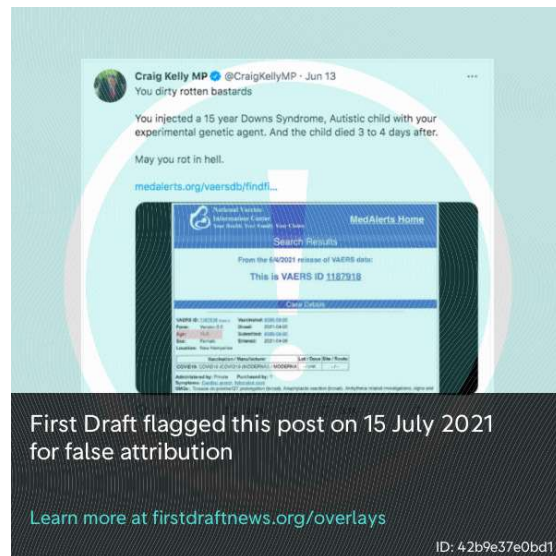
2011. But AMAN achieved a remedy against the author of the content, not the platform, and the ABC says neither Facebook nor Twitter has committed to taking the material down, despite QCAT's (as yet unpublished!) decision. In the meantime, if Anning fails to comply with the QCAT orders, AMAN might seek orders against Facebook and Twitter, and has also raised the idea of government intervention in relation to platform standards. It's a long path to accountability.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

The VAERS effect

An Australian MP writes a tweet suggesting a 15-year-old teen with Down syndrome has died as a result of receiving a Covid-19 vaccine. On TikTok and Telegram, a video of a person scrolling through a website and describing Covid-19 'vaccine deaths' is viewed hundreds of thousands of times. Screenshots of reports that contain a person's age, date of death and a brand of Covid-19 vaccine are shared on just about every social platform, in multiple languages, across various countries around the world, including Australia.



What do these false claims and narratives have in common? They drive down trust in vaccines, and they have their roots in a sprawling database co-managed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA), called the [Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System](#), or VAERS.

The database stores reports of adverse medical events that take place after people are immunised with US-licensed vaccines – regardless of whether a vaccine was thought to be the cause. It's an important part of the United States' vaccine safety monitoring mechanism but it's not without complications. As explained by the [CDC and FDA](#), the reports can be made by anyone, and may include incomplete, inaccurate, unverified or coincidental information. On their own, they can't be used to determine whether a vaccine caused or contributed to an illness or death. And yet, the reports are published in their unvetted form. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they are then misinterpreted and shared out of context by vaccine sceptics, driven by genuine confusion or malicious intent.

In a [new report](#), First Draft APAC Bureau Editor Esther Chan and I recommend the CDC and FDA take steps to mitigate this harm by publishing VAERS reports with [overlays](#) or watermarks that provide the vital disclaimers and context and through publishing ['prebunks'](#) to lessen the effect of common misinformation narratives drawn from the database.

[Research shows](#) misinformation is correlated with a decreased likelihood of undergoing vaccination. If unverified and easily manipulated information is being published by two of the world's most prominent health agencies for the sake of transparency, there must be significant efforts made to ensure Covid-19 vaccination programs around the world are not placed at risk as a result.



Lucinda Beaman
First Draft senior researcher

ABC editorial policies vs the Critics

The ABC and indeed, the rest of us, are now very accustomed to criticism of the public broadcasters' documentaries and special broadcasts, arriving like clockwork as each program ends. The ABC usually doesn't react beyond correcting via media release what it sees as false claims or unfair criticism.

But in response to the criticism of Caro Meldrum-Hanna and Patrick Begley's three-part series *Exposed: The Ghost Train Fire*, the ABC reaction has gone way further. The ABC has asked Professor Rod Tiffen from the University of Sydney and the multiple award-winning investigative reporter Chris Masters to investigate.

The series focuses on the 1979 Sydney Luna Park fire in which six young children and one man lost their lives. *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Kate McClymont had previously reported the involvement of corrupt senior NSW police and underworld figures including Abe Saffron and his ilk. Caro Meldrum-Hanna and Begley went a step further – alleging the now deceased former NSW Premier, Neville Wran was open to backing a Saffron bid for the site. One of the appointed investigators, Chris Masters, produced a 1983 *Four Corners* program 'The Big League' which made allegations against Wran. That led to the



Street Royal Commission in which Wran was exonerated of any wrongdoing.

Since the Meldrum-Hanna/Begley claim against Neville Wran was broadcast in the third episode of the series, the complaints have mounted. Former Premiers Bob Carr and Barrie Unsworth are unhappy. So too former SMH editor Milton Cockburn, who was also an aide for Mr Wran when he was in office, former ABC Managing Director David Hill and former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

External reviews of ABC programming are rare and are more usually confined to the ABC's election coverage. So, a board ordered review of a current affairs broadcast is notable. Notable too is the ABC's Managing Director David Anderson's insistence that the series made allegations rather than presented facts concerning the former Premier and that it was up to the series' audience to make up its own mind. That, it seems, complies with ABC editorial standards. And that might surprise ABC audiences given that public interest investigative reporting often results in 'allegations' that cast a shadow, on the deceased as well as the living.

The Tiffen/Masters report will be considered by the ABC Board on August 25.



Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

Coded and uncoded support for news media



Back in February, the government was locked in the shed, feverishly hammering away at its News Media Bargaining Code. Six months after the Code's big reveal, news media announcements are coming thick and fast. On Wednesday, [Facebook announced](#) that its Facebook News product had arrived in Australia, initially for a small number of Australian users. Facebook also announced a \$15 million news fund. Grants of up to \$250,000 will be focused on business sustainability for regional newsrooms and digital-first publications.

And, separately, grants of up to \$120,000 will go to small, regional publishers and independent journalists to foster public interest journalism and media diversity.

Also this week, [Google announced](#) a partnership with News Corp to create a 'Digital News

Academy'. The three-year program, launching in 2022, will provide training to 750 local and regional news professionals, focusing on digital skills, AV production, data journalism, audience measurement, reader revenue, digital business models and marketing. It will also create 60 12-month journalism traineeships in regional Australia.

And the impact of the Code itself? Strictly speaking, the Code has had zero effect. Since the Code became law in February, only 16 news media businesses have 'registered' with the ACMA, and not a single digital platform or service has been 'designated' as covered by the Code, including its mandatory bargaining rules. Indirectly, however, it's had a big impact, prompting deals with news media businesses - including [Nine](#), the [ABC](#) and many more - reportedly [worth \\$500 million](#).

Of course, some media are missing out. This week, Broadsheet Media, The Urban List and Concrete Playground [claimed they might need to consolidate](#) given Facebook was denying their requests to support their journalism. However, even if the Code were in effect, these lifestyle publications would not be eligible to be covered, given their primary purpose is not to publish 'core news content', as defined by the Code. That's not necessarily to say they don't deserve money from Facebook, just that the Code was never designed for them. And in any case, the Code could never hope to be a cure-all.

News media in Australia are still in trouble, but hopefully these deals and developments mark the beginning of some sort of renaissance.



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