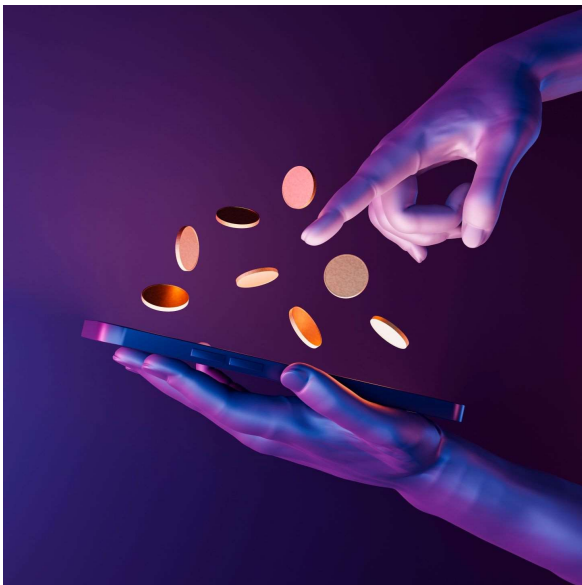Centre for Media Transition

Hi there

# The ABCs of budgeting

As the Prime Minister readies to announce the date of the election, the Treasurer has brought down his fourth budget – and for the ABC and the SBS the news isn't altogether bad.

The government has kept a promise made a few weeks ago to increase funding for both public broadcasters, committing a combined total of $4.3billion to both over the next three years. Of that, the ABC will receive $1.077b in 2022-2023, leaving it in a better net position overall when you take into account the government's decision to scrap the indexation freeze.

Still, the recent history of public broadcaster funding isn't great: since 2014, the ABC's budget has been cumulatively cut by more than half a billion dollars. This does not include the $200m lost due to the cancellation of a 10-year Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade contract that funded the Australia Network television service in the Asia-Pacific. That was painful for the broadcaster and may prove painful for the government as it grapples with the implications of China's latest move in the South Pacific – the signing of a security agreement between the Solomon Islands and China. It's been well known for years that China wants to establish a military base in the South Pacific. The soft power of the Australia Network might have been no match for the hard dollars China is investing in the region but it certainly would have helped to achieve at least one of the Australian

government's objectives – influence.

And as Jonathan Holmes, former *Media Watch* host and now chair of ABC Alumni (an organisation of former ABC employees of which I am also a member), says in an interview with CMT for this newsletter, the government's estimate of future inflation is one the ABC will need to keep a careful eye on.



Also this week, Sacha takes a look at proposed new powers for the ACMA to force digital platforms to reveal what they're doing to combat disinformation and misinformation. That can only be good news.

Ayesha takes a dive into the murky world of billionaires starting their own social media platforms.

And Gary has been reading the House of Representatives report on regional media, discerning what's different in this 5th inquiry into how to make the sector sustainable.

**Monica Attard**
CMT Co-Director

# Holding big tech accountable

It's hard to overstate the damage done by misinformation and disinformation. This damage can be direct and deadly, such as when it convinces people to avoid vaccines. Or it can be indirect and subtle, picking away at the trust that is the foundation of our society. As philosopher Hannah Arendt said in 1974, 'If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer.'

Last week, the government released a report by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (the ACMA) into 'the adequacy of digital platforms' disinformation and news quality measures'. The report found that four in five Australian adults have seen misinformation about COVID-19 and that such misinformation is mostly experienced on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. It also found that three quarters of Australians believe that platforms should be doing more to reduce the amount of false or misleading information that appears online. The report followed the launch of a voluntary, industry-developed code of practice on disinformation and misinformation in February 2021.

On releasing the ACMA's report, the government acknowledged the positive steps taken by industry, but said Australians needed more protection. To this end, the government announced it will (assuming it wins the election) introduce legislation later this year to give the ACMA new regulatory powers. New information-gathering powers will force digital platforms to give the ACMA access to Australia-specific data on the measures platforms are taking to address disinformation and misinformation. The ACMA will also be given reserve powers to register and enforce industry codes or make industry standards. ' Digital platforms must take responsibility for what is on their sites and take action when harmful or misleading content appears,' said Communications Minister Paul Fletcher.

We need to see what the draft law looks like when it's released later this year, but these sound like sensible proposals. And one key point here is that such an approach does not threaten our freedom of speech. Rather, sensible measures to tackle misinformation *increase* our freedom of speech. All our freedoms, including freedom of speech, are so precious and valuable precisely because they are limited, not absolute. Freedom of speech does not include the freedom to incite violence against an ethnic group. It does not include the freedom to share intimate images of someone without their consent. And just as a person's ethical and legal right to freedom of speech should not include the right to incite violence or commit image-based abuse, nor should it include the right to spread dangerous falsehoods. The law in Australia has an important role to play in curbing misinformation and disinformation. That said, the law could also do much better at protecting freedom of speech

in Australia, given the glaring absence of an explicit constitutional safeguard or Human Rights Act.

**Sacha Molitorisz**
Senior Law Lecturer, CMT

# Billionaire platforms
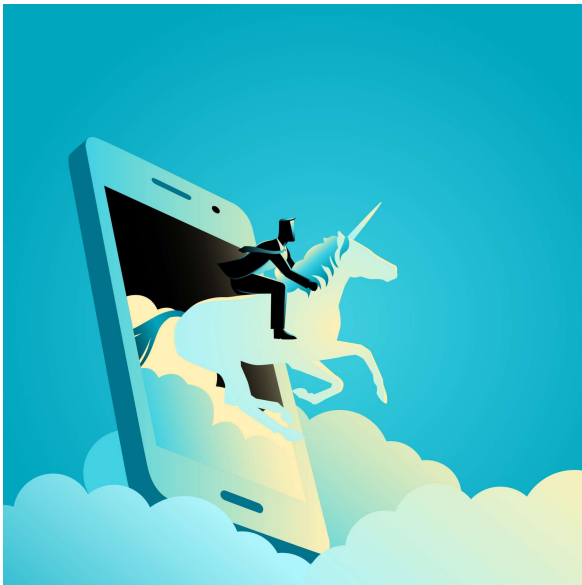


Last week, Tesla and SpaceX CEO, Elon Musk tweeted that he was giving 'serious thought' to creating a new social media platform. Polling his followers, the billionaire asked whether existing social media platforms adhered to free speech principles, all the whilst referring to Twitter as a 'de facto public town square' that 'undermined democracy.'

Musk has had murky relations with multiple regulators and digital platforms, especially over how he defines 'free speech.' Earlier this year, he tweeted a meme comparing Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to Adolf Hitler, which he deleted after a public backlash. In September 2018, Musk found himself in hot water with the US Securities and Exchange Commission for making 'false and misleading' statements to investors via Twitter.

Unfortunately, Musk's 'free speech' melodrama has company. Former US President Donald Trump also recently launched his own social media platform Truth Social, after he was banned from Twitter for inciting his followers to violence. While his platform claims to be 'America's "Big Tent" social media platform that encourages an open, free, and honest global conversation without discriminating against political ideology,' interestingly, yet unsurprisingly, the platform has a long waitlist. The state of freedom on the platform is such that interested users can be barred from using it if the platform does not like their account name, which would indicate the platform may be more restrictive on free speech than other social media platforms.

Whilst there seems to be a trend for billionaires to have a polarising presence on social media, they have something else in common - the power to not only launch their own social media platforms, but the ability to govern and regulate them for their own benefit and in their

own way.

It is a populist approach that emerges from an elite model, institutionally segregated from a democratic process. Media theorists Des Freedman calls it the control paradigm and argues that the political influence of particular 'media moguls' equips them with a tool to assert their own dominance. Launching their own platforms gives these billionaire populists the power to defy regulation, contribute to the concentration and monopoly of power among an already limited pool of people, and crush small competition with little or no substantive legislative action behind a 'free speech' façade.

This is the locus, as also argued by Elisabetta Ferrari, where technocracy and populism intersect to reinforce the misconception created by the tech world that only they can save the public from bureaucracy and truly represent the public, their will, and their voices. And questioning such elitist narratives is exercising one's right to free speech, democratically.

**Ayesha Jehangir**
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

# Saving regional news (again)



The House of Representatives Committee on Communications and the Arts has released its report on regional newspapers. The fifth such inquiry in five years, this one ran only three months from beginning to end. Unsurprisingly it treads familiar ground and reaches most of the same conclusions as others, but it has also found a way to advance the conversation.

Among the familiar recommendations: targeted federal grant programs for regional media, a minimum of 20% government print advertising spend in regional newspapers, and investigation of tax options like rebates for regional businesses supporting their local papers or for investment in journalism labour, and changes to philanthropic tax settings.

Country Press Australia has welcomed the report's findings and endorsed these recommendations. President Andrew Manuel, publisher of the *Plains Producer* in Balaklava,

South Australia, told me that direct and indirect financial measures are crucial.

'The game changers to us would be ongoing government financial assistance, which is what the ACCC also recommended [in the *Digital Platforms Inquiry*] . Tax rebates may also be beneficial, but the most helpful thing is a strong advertising commitment from the Federal Government. That is absolutely vital to ensuring our sustainability.'

The inquiry also recommended the introduction of a partnerships program between the ABC, SBS and local news producers, modelled on the BBC *Local News Partnerships Program*. Since 2017 that scheme has increased the BBC's presence in regional UK areas and established formal partnerships with newspapers that makes BBC articles, visuals and data available for reuse.

In giving evidence to the committee, Hugh Martin, Head of Regional, Rural and Emergency at the ABC, said that 'there is definitely a will and an interest in helping to be a part of the solution for regional media'.

Andrew Manuel, however, said a similar scheme in Australia would be of very limited assistance to his members.

'Generally speaking, the ABC produces very little hyperlocal news in comparison to our newsrooms.'

He also said that republishing content from the ABC dilutes the point of difference between the public broadcaster and local newspapers.

'If we were looking for syndicated content, we can currently use AAP.'

But where this inquiry moves the conversation is its recommendations to improve the available evidence of regional sustainability, media diversity and the recurring proposals to improve both. It returned to a piece of research by the CMT for the ACMA titled *News in Australia: diversity and localism.* The framework for measuring media diversity developed in that project goes beyond the traditional focus on ownership, expanding it to include media type, viewpoint, impact and consumption. The report says ACMA should be able to include these factors in its assessments of media diversity.

The committee also made calls for more investment in building evidence to support policy making, including a two-year review of the market viability of regional newspapers and tax measures to support them, greater data sharing between industry and government and the development of a central register of regional news providers. It recommends more funding for research to identify sustainable business models, improve governance and digitisation, and a minimum ten-year project to gather and analyse core sector data.

History suggests there may well be another inquiry. With better evidence of impact, we might then finally implement meaningful policy to support the sector.

**Gary Dickson**
CMT Research Fellow

Please visit our website for more information about the Centre.
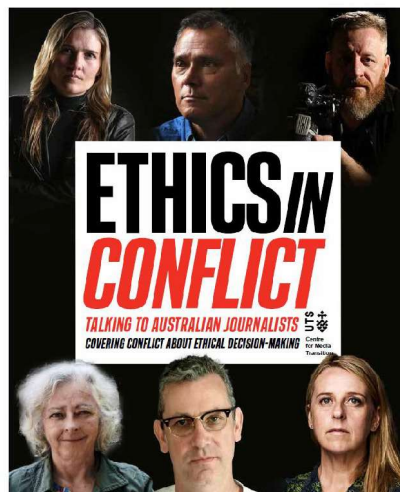


The Centre for Media Transition and UTS acknowledges the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our university now stands. We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these places.