

Hi there

In the interest of the public



This fortnight, all the pieces in our newsletter deal with key issues of public interest. Election misinformation, radicalisation through social media and public interest journalism.

In Australia, the threat of voter fraud is minimal, however, some minor political parties and their candidates have been raising baseless claims about election fraud and ballots being altered. The Australian Electoral Commission says it is 'dangerous' voter integrity misinformation and has raised concerns

about the growing misinformation claims spreading online. In this issue, Julia Bergin and Anne Kruger, our colleagues from First Draft, offer some interesting insights into election-related conspiracy theories by micro parties, who are pouring money into advertising that is focused on misinformation and vilifying major parties and their candidates.

Speaking of online targeting and manipulation of people, the New Zealand coroner in the 2019 Christchurch attack has ordered an inquiry into whether the lone terrorist was radicalised online, and whether his social media engagements significantly contributed to the planned massacre. My piece today focuses on how this new inquiry can push for more accountability by social media companies and other digital platforms, of course depending on the findings. To complement the piece is [my talk](#) with [Dr. Teagan Westendorf](#), who is an analyst at Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Teagan researches power politics; the law, ethics and national security implications

of digital technologies; and radicalisation and violent extremism.

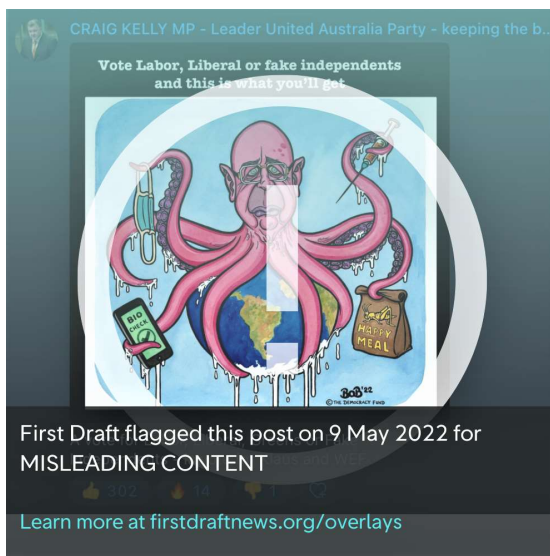
Meanwhile, Australia's News Media Bargaining Code is being reviewed by Treasury to assess the extent to which it has achieved some of its aims. Over the last year, many news businesses have reached multiple deals with Meta and Google. However, due to confidentiality agreements, details have been largely opaque to the public, to other news businesses and to government. In his piece, our new research fellow, Michael Davis, argues how difficult it is to gauge the extent to which the deals help sustain public interest journalism. The discussion continues in Derek's piece, in which he writes about the Treasurer's power to designate a digital platform, and questions the ambiguity around what amounts to 'a significant contribution' to the sustainability of the Australian news industry via these deals with publishers. The CMT made [a submission](#) last week which looks at these issues in more detail.

Have a great weekend.



Ayesha Jehangir
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Campaigning on conspiracy theories



Pro 'freedom' parties are packaging up and authorising conspiracy theories for the purposes of political advertising with our monitoring noting narratives being cited more often and in more explicit terms. One Nation, the United Australia Party, and various fringe parties have leaned into 'World Economic Forum' (WEF) and 'Great Reset' conspiracy theories, pouring money into online advertising that falsely claims major parties and their candidates are 'pawns' and 'puppets' in a grand global scheme.

Coded language and vague references are out. Bold name-drops are in. As one UAP candidate puts it, 'W.E.F is destroying Australia'. One Nation has been straight that it 'does not support the WEF's Great Reset' whilst UAP's Craig Kelly published a post on Telegram during the week that called a vote for major parties and 'fake' independents a 'vote for Klaus (Schwab, founder of WEF) and the WEF.'

This is not all. We also noted that it's moving from the online world to the offline. Conspiracy theories that were once confined to the corners of closed chat apps and semi-closed spaces are being printed on corflutes posing as legitimate political ads. Political ads must come with [an authorisation](#) but otherwise they can display almost anything they desire. The [Australian Electoral Commission](#) has been clear that it 'has no role in regulating the political content of electoral communications'. The uptick in misleading and unverified content posing as political posturing is a reminder to voters that they should not take online or offline ads as official information.

Earlier in May, Pauline Hanson's One Nation used an animated video to push well known tropes about voter fraud that mirrored those used in the US to falsely discredit electoral processes. But as First Draft noted to the [ABC](#), just as worryingly the video weaponised the use of satire to push racism and conspiracy theories. In the video, the character of Penny Wong hands the character of Anthony Albanese (who was recovering from Covid 19 at the time) a bowl of soup, from which a screeching bat later flies out. 'Bat soup' videos were weaponised against Chinese people from as early as January 2020, despite debunks that found the videos were from Palau and three years old at the time. The problem of racism and [xenophobia](#) arose quickly at the start of the pandemic, and shows the potential for how damaging this type of content can be. It seems those lessons are still being learned.



Julia Bergin, First Draft Senior Research reporter

Anne Kruger, First Draft APAC Director

Looking for radical connections



Last week, the presiding coroner in the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack ordered an inquiry to examine if the Australian terrorist, who killed 51 people and live-streamed the attack, was radicalised online. The coroner, Brigitte Windley, will focus on the gunman's online activities between 2014 and 2017 – a window that had not been covered by earlier investigations, including the [Christchurch Royal Commission report](#), which was released after 20 months of consultation.

The report's lack of attention to his online activities had come as a surprise to digital

media researchers, including myself. After all, the preliminary investigations found that the gunman had spent time on YouTube and the message boards 4chan and 8chan. His strategic use of a social media platform to live stream the attack to a global audience was clearly indicative of his disconcerting relationship with digital media platforms. That said, the 800-page RC report has paved the way for future investigations, such as that ordered by Windley last Thursday. Now if, through this new inquiry, it is established that social media had a significant role in the gunman's radicalisation over the years, it will be a win for those who have been arguing for more accountability of and responsibility by social media companies and other digital media platforms. For now, the coroner and the investigation team have been facing some 'monumental hurdles', mainly because the terrorist had made attempts to wipe parts of his digital footprint before committing the attack on the two mosques.

No inquiry can bring back what the bereaved families have lost. However, this new investigation may be able to offer insights into whether and/or how these deaths could have been prevented if the digital platforms he was using were able to catch and flag suspicious online behaviour and activities, such as in this case, the purchase of arms by a foreign citizen, uploading the manifesto before the attack, and sharing and promoting far-right extremist ideologies.

Sadly, religious radicalisation is not the only worry of Australian security agencies. Earlier this year, we heard ASIO boss, Mike Burgess, warning of more '[angry and alienated Australians](#)' – some as young as 13 years old – who were prone to violence after being exposed to online echo chambers of extremist ideology, mis- and dis-information, and most importantly, conspiracy theories communicated across closed groups and spread online. The pandemic lockdowns may have made it worse, [increasing the serious risk of lone attackers](#) idealising executions, taking up arms, and martyrdom.

Vulnerable individuals, including younger people, are of course more likely to get inspired by extreme rhetoric that is both overtly and implicitly [promoted by social media](#) and influencers on various digital platforms. This can amplify radicalisation that can become a pathway to both ideologically and religiously motivated violence in real life. While we, as researchers, are trying to identify these links, for now, the coroner's inquiry is a promising step towards exploring how users are radicalised online and why digital platforms need to be more accountable.



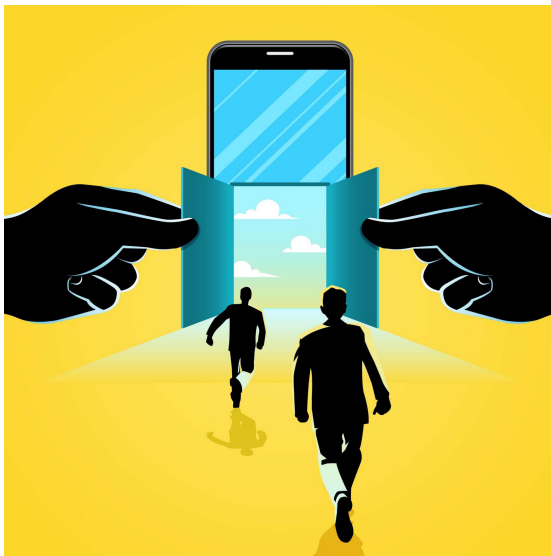
Ayesha Jehangir

CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

In conversation with Teagan Westendorf



Bargaining for public interest



When it was introduced on 3 March 2021, Australia's News Media Bargaining Code made [international headlines](#). One year on, the code is now being [reviewed by Treasury](#) to assess the extent to which it has achieved its aim of ensuring digital platforms fairly remunerate news businesses for their content, thereby helping to sustain public interest journalism in Australia.

The code has resulted in news businesses reaching deals with Meta and Google [reportedly valued](#) at over \$250 million annually. Not that it is possible to put an accurate figure on these deals – they have all been reached without any platforms being designated, meaning they are not subject to the already-limited transparency provisions in the code. Confidentiality agreements have ensured that the details are largely opaque to the public, to other news businesses and to government.

This may benefit parties to a deal, but it likely works against the interests of smaller

businesses who are deprived of information that may help them bargain with digital platforms. It also makes it very difficult to gauge the extent to which the deals help sustain public interest journalism. In [our submission](#) to the review we argue that the code should mandate a degree of transparency for deals made both under the code and in the shadow of the code.

A lack of transparency is not the only problem. Even with designation, there is a risk the code will reinforce existing market failures by failing to direct support to quality news sources that invest in and produce original public interest journalism. The businesses [registered so far by the ACMA](#) include some that largely repackage news produced by other businesses and therefore undermine rather than contribute to the production of public interest journalism. One of these, 'News Cop', was [registered as a company](#) only days before the code passed into law. In effect, the code provides an incentive for the launch of low-cost businesses to take advantage of the remuneration they could receive through bargaining with digital platforms.

We believe the code should support and foster quality journalism that reflects the standards of accuracy and fairness that are generally included in professional codes of practice. But by allowing news sources with internal standards systems, the code supports news that does not meet the standards we expect of traditional news businesses, the quality of which can be tested through the independent adjudication of complaints.

In our view, the code also presents a missed opportunity to re-evaluate Australia's confusing and flawed news media oversight system and to address the increasingly important role of digital platforms in the distribution of news. As we have [consistently argued](#), the 14 disparate codes of practice that apply across various media platforms should be brought under the one independent cross-media standards scheme that includes an effective complaints-handling function. Digital platforms should be brought in as associate members to help to fund the scheme and take other action such as promoting the content produced by publisher members.

News businesses are already gaining major benefits from the code. These benefits ought to come with an increased responsibility to produce quality journalism that contributes to the public interest. A requirement to participate in an overhauled and enhanced media standards scheme would help ensure the code contributes to sustaining public interest journalism in Australia.



Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Be wary of Ministerial discretion



One of the key features of the News Media Bargaining Code is the role of the Treasurer in ‘designating’ a digital platform. The legislative scheme lies dormant until brought to life by this act of ministerial discretion – hence the deals that Google and Facebook have struck with publishers around the country in a bid to avoid designation.

We’ve said in our submission to the Treasury review that we think this part of the scheme could be improved. For a

start, the test the Treasurer applies is ambiguous with no guidelines around what amounts to ‘a significant contribution’ to the sustainability of the Australian news industry via these deals with publishers.

In addition – as Michael notes above – there is a lack of transparency and reporting under the scheme. This leaves doubt over the quality of information available to the Treasurer when making the decision to designate. Sure, the Treasurer will likely know about the news businesses that have not got a deal, but those that have will be sworn to secrecy.

Beyond this, there’s a more fundamental problem with the Treasurer making the decision. In our submission we point out that the authority given to ministers has been regarded as ‘broad and unfettered’ in comparison to the authority given to regulators and independent government agencies. The law considers it reasonable for a minister to take into account policy considerations in a way that it would not be appropriate for a government regulator to do.

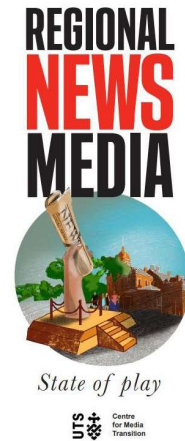
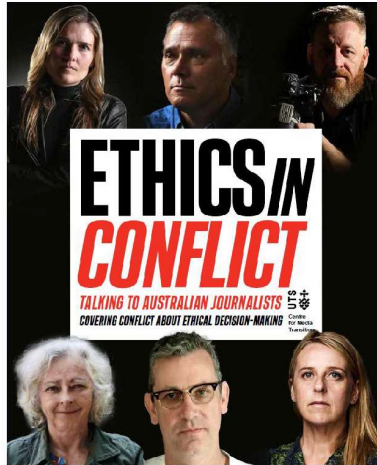
This is different from the approach we’ve taken in Australia to decisions on media mergers: we leave mergers to independent agencies. The ACCC applies a test under the Competition and Consumer Act and the ACMA applies ‘bright line’ rules in the Broadcasting Services Act about shareholdings and other interests. In this way, we avoid the risk of powerful businesses trying to influence the decisions of elected officials who may, in some cases, benefit from these decisions.

None of this is to say that the holder of the office of Treasurer will be biased or unduly influenced in the act of designation, just that there’s a good case for requiring a more carefully constrained framework for making that decision in the public interest. In the environment of the NMBC, that means taking the decision away from the Treasurer and giving it to the ACCC.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

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.



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