

Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

Funding and floods



Rishi Sunak's ascension to prime minister of the UK has seen some speculation on potential changes to UK communications policy. Sunak has [reportedly been non-committal](#) on the Online Safety Bill's proposal to regulate legal but harmful content, such as misinformation. On the other hand, he has flagged the privatisation of Channel 4 and indicated that he would pursue legislation to formalise the role of the Digital Markets Unit, which, in the [UK's answer to Australia's News Media Bargaining Code](#), has been assessing the

need for a code of conduct to govern commercial relationships between digital platforms and news media businesses.

The UK is not the only country following Australia's lead here, and this week Sacha Molitorisz examines the latest developments in Canada, where Facebook recently threatened to pull news content in response to the Online News Bill.

With this edition falling in budget week, CMT co-director Monica Attard gives a rundown of new funding for the media, including some long-awaited joy for the ABC. There's also some money for regional newspapers – a welcome boon given the reduced newsgathering capacity in regional areas identified in CMT's forthcoming regional news media report. CMT research assistant Travis Radford reflects on these findings in the context of his recent appearance representing UTS at a conference on regional, remote and rural education.

In a time of constrained spending, this new funding may not quite be a flood of money. But there's been plenty of real flooding in the regions, especially in Victoria. Stevie Zhang reports on the misinformation fuelling climate-change denialism on social media.



Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Facebook v Canadian Journalism



Last week Canada's Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez restated his commitment to Bill C-18, otherwise known as the Online News Bill. 'It's about the future of journalism in our country,' [Rodriguez said](#).

Bill C-18 is Canada's version of [Australia's news media bargaining code](#), which passed into law early last year and makes digital platforms pay news businesses for news content. Google and Facebook hate C-18. [According to Google](#), 'It will ... have, at best, unpredictable outcomes for the evolving Canadian news ecosystem.'

Actually, some outcomes are eminently predictable. Judging from the [Australian experience](#), Canadian news outlets are about to embark on a hiring spree following a significant cash injection.

What is unpredictable is the ongoing impact of the platforms' algorithms on news distribution. As scholars James Meese and Sara Bannerman [write in their impressive new book](#), '[Facebook and Google] use inscrutable algorithms to make significant decisions around the visibility of news on their service, which can affect people who want to access news and news outlets who want audiences to reach their websites. As a result, these technology companies ... have become critical gatekeepers. When they make decisions, there is often little that the media industry can do about it. Thankfully, platform regulation has started to become a policy issue.'

Fittingly, Meese is Australian, Bannerman is Canadian, and they know their algorithms.

On the weekend, soon after Rodriguez made his comments in support of C-18, Facebook said [it might withdraw news from its platform](#) in Canada. Déjà vu, anyone? In February last year, Facebook followed through on its threat to ban news in Australia, thereby also

banning emergency services and community pages. The [impacts were dramatic](#). Eight days later, after the government made concessions by amending its law, [Facebook restored the news](#).

Australia's news media bargaining code is far from perfect, but it was a positive step into tricky regulatory territory. The Canadian bill looks better. While the deals done under the Australian code are secret, the Canadian bill enacts transparency. Precisely the sort of transparency we don't have here when it comes to how Google and Facebook's algorithms distribute the news. Although it is worth remembering that if Google and Facebook are ever 'designated' under Australia's code, they would be required [to notify news businesses of significant algorithmic changes](#).



Sacha Molitorisz
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

Back to square one



Whilst the prospect of sharply rising energy prices sucked the oxygen out of the post-budget commentary, there was some good news in the Treasury papers for the ABC. It will receive \$83.7m over four years to restore the funding stripped from it by the former Coalition government's freeze on annual funding increases. This freeze on indexation led to some brutal cuts to ABC output, just as the former government was insisting on new layers of reporting which critics said would lead to a loss of independence.

The ABC is delighted. In a statement released after the budget was delivered it [noted the increase](#) in operational funding would allow significant investment in services across all platforms and help the ABC to deal with rising costs and support the sustainability of ABC services.

And in a decision which will please the bean counters at both the ABC and SBS, Labor has kept its promise to move from triennial to five-year funding arrangements for both organisations from July 2023. Sadly, that's where the good news for SBS ends: there's no extra funding for the broadcaster.

The ABC also gets an extra \$500,000 in 2022–2023 to test whether its digital-band retro music channel, Double J, can move to an FM frequency – which seems a marginally positive development considering the other demands on the national broadcaster. However, critically the budget also gives the ABC \$32m over four years (\$8m each year), out of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s bottom line, to expand regional transmissions in the Pacific. This, of course, will help the new government as it attempts to re-engage with the region. As Jemima Garrett, co-convenor of the Australia Asia-Pacific Media Initiative [told CMT in April](#), Pacific journalists and media organisations have long been calling for funding for more public-interest journalism and co-productions with Australian media. She said all bespoke ABC Australia programming had been lost under the Coalition.

There’s also some relief for print publishers in the form of a \$15m newsprint rebate. This will please Australian Community Media, which has been campaigning for tax incentives and rebates to help compensate for [what it claimed](#) was an 80 percent increase in the cost of printing newspapers.



Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

You cannot be what you cannot see



Recently I attended the first National Conference for Regional, Rural and Remote Education (NCRRE) with the UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion. I sat on the student panel and co-presented a case study about a student-led UTS initiative to engage with the university’s low number of regional and remote students – the lowest in fact of all universities in NSW, representing just over 3 percent of the total student body but still numbering over one thousand.

The NCRRE was opened by Australia’s Regional Education Commissioner, Fiona Nash, who observed, ‘You cannot be what you cannot see’. It was an adage that would be repeated over the following days by academics and practitioners from all corners of the country, who showcased their initiatives and studies that drew attention to the need for higher-education institutions to meet regional people where they are and provide support alongside access.

I grew up in regional NSW and chose to move to Sydney to study journalism at UTS, not because I had a burning desire to move to the state capital, or any major city for that matter, but rather because I was told that these were the only places with opportunities for people like me. The CMT's upcoming report on regional news media can be read to reflect this sentiment, insofar as it reveals a reduced newsgathering capacity in regional NSW and limited representation of stories from regional NSW in national and state-wide news products. However, it should also be read to show that while supply may have decreased, the need and demand for high-quality regional news at both a local and national level have not.



Travis Radford
CMT Research Assistant

Rainmaking



We've [seen in recent years](#) that extreme weather events tend to bring about an influx of mis- and disinformation, and that these events often fuel conspiracy theories and climate-change denialism. The same has borne out after the most recent Victorian floods, which continue to ravage communities across the state at the time of publication.

Our monitoring of social media posts about the Victorian floods in October has found the recirculation of old conspiracy theories, as

well as some new ones. The unproven theory that the floods were caused by human weather manipulation has circulated again, pushed primarily by the same Australian fringe groups on Telegram that made the same claims during the New South Wales floods earlier this year. The posts have [baselessly claimed](#) that 'Victoria and the rest of Australia is heavily sprayed, almost on a daily basis', citing Victoria's [Rain-making Control Act of 1967](#), and [that the flooding was orchestrated](#) for a government land grab or to serve local governments' move towards 'smart' cities.

A new conspiracy theory that has emerged relates to Victoria's Covid-19 quarantine facilities, built earlier in the pandemic but which were [closed](#) this month. The state government has announced the hub will be [repurposed](#) to house those who have had their homes affected by the floods – leading to commentary that this was 'convenient' and

'Another conspiracy now a reality'. The unfounded theory claims that the floods were engineered to force people to move into the hub

As with all extreme weather events, climate-change deniers were quick to rebut any claims that the floods were caused by anthropogenic climate change. Former MP Craig Kelly contrasted a [tweet](#) by Victoria's Greens leader Samantha Ratnam, which states in part, 'The climate crisis is here', against [old photos of flooding in Melbourne from February 1972](#). Kelly claimed that the presence of flooding decades ago means that recent disaster events were nothing new and simply part of the climate's regular cycle; the same sentiment was [echoed](#) in the highest-liked Facebook comments of Sky News Australia. [Old photos from the Great Flood of 1891](#) have also been shared across Telegram to make the same point.

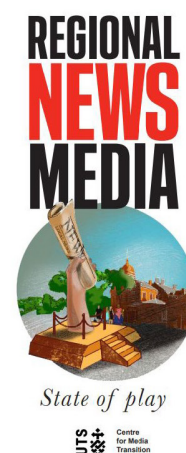
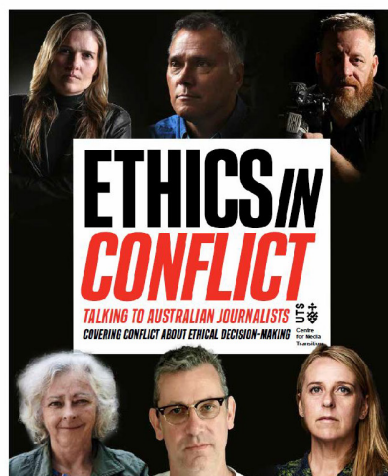
Experts disagree. Climate scientist Chiara Holgate of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Climate Extremes [points out](#) that while 'Australia has long been a continent of droughts and flooding rains... projections indicate that climate change will supercharge this variability.'

"Observations show there's been an increase in the intensity of heavy rainfall events in Australia, including the short-duration events, which can be associated with flash flooding."



Stevie Zhang
CMT researcher

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.



[Privacy Statement](#) | [Disclaimer](#) | [Unsubscribe](#)

UTS CRICOS Provider Code: 00099F

This email was sent by University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123 Broadway NSW 2007, Australia