

Hi there

## The flight of consciousness



Here in Australia, I spent the three days of the Anzac Day long weekend mostly chatting with old friends. Over in the US, Elon Musk only had two days, but still he found time to buy an entire platform of chatter.

Musk's purchase of Twitter is a big deal, not just because of the US\$44 billion price tag. As academic Ethan Zuckerman [wrote on Twitter](#), 'two billionaires will now control four of the major digital public sphere platforms.'

And as [Australian academic Belinda Barnet](#) wrote, 'In order to implement his own personal definition of a "public square", the world's wealthiest individual has just bought the square itself.'

One of the most compelling responses came from Jean Burgess, a QUT academic who co-authored the book [Twitter: A biography](#). In an article in *The Conversation*, [Burgess wrote](#) that her own vision of an ideal town square includes 'market stalls, quiet corners ..., a playground for the kids, some roving entertainers – and, sure, maybe a central agora with a soapbox that people can gather around when there's some issue we all need to hear or talk about. That, in fact, is very much what early Twitter was like for me and my friends and colleagues.'

However, Burgess continued: 'I think Musk and his legion of fans have something different in mind: a free speech free-for-all, a nightmarish town square where everyone is shouting all the time and anyone who doesn't like it just stays home.' Like Zuckerman, Burgess then considers alternatives, including a publicly funded and governed option: 'In an ideal world, [public service media organisations](#) might collaborate to build international social media services using shared infrastructure and protocols that enable their services to talk to and share content with each other.'

By contrast, Twitter's founder [Jack Dorsey](#) was effusive, writing that he trusts Musk's mission to 'extend the light of consciousness.' And [academic André Brock](#), while acknowledging that Twitter's openness 'affords toxicity, racism, misogyny, and abuse', praised the benefits of Black Twitter, writing, 'Twitter offers the capacity to speak to/be spoken to by Black collectives AND Black individuals at the same time WHILE also participating in other public spheres.'

Today's newsletter is all about the importance of public discourse. Monica Attard conducts a video interview with Jemima Garrett of the Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative and then writes about Australia's media presence in the Pacific in light of China's deal with the Solomon Islands. Julia Bergin writes about political parties co-opting the language of fact-checkers. And Tim Koskie asks: how exactly will Musk's Twitter foster democracy, if at all? You'll also meet the CMT's new research fellow: Michael Davis.

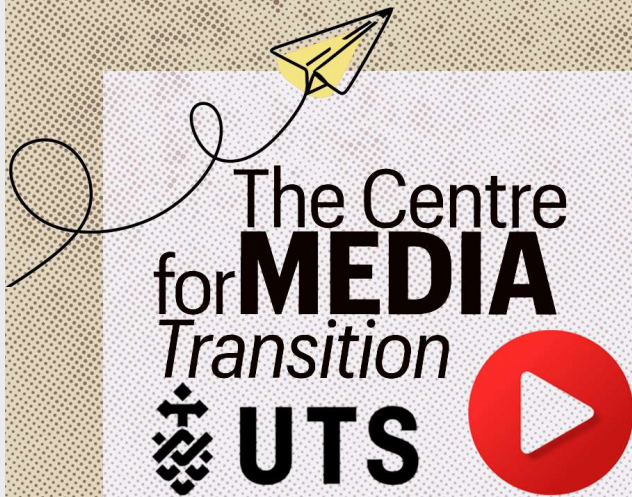
For our collective future, these are important issues. As academic Nancy Baym tweeted mid-week: 'How we all doing this morning? Light of consciousness reached you yet?'



**Sacha Molitorisz**

Senior Lecturer, CMT and UTS Law

## In conversation with Jemima Garrett



## The wisdom of the Solomons?



It was being labelled a 'khaki election' long before it actually became one. But we are now definitely into camouflage territory, with China having signed an alliance agreement with the Solomon Islands in week two of the Australian federal election campaign.

Both major parties seem to agree that there is a pattern emerging of Beijing creating a sphere of influence in the region. With that, a narrative has emerged that this will be at the expense

of both Canberra and Washington: there are plans for significant Chinese state investment in a fishing port in Papua New Guinea and evidence that the superpower is also interested in Timor-Leste. PNG has also signed an [agreement](#) with China that commits both to non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, not dissimilar to the agreement Beijing and Moscow signed ahead of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The US is also expanding its influence in the region. However, China's agreement with the Solomon Islands seemed a bridge too far for Australia's politicians and may well have been even had it not been signed during the febrile atmosphere of an

election campaign.

The ALP is accusing Foreign Minister Marise Payne of ‘hiding under her desk’ while Beijing and Honiara were signing on the dotted line. All the while, Labor is also [insisting](#) the government is trying to ‘bodge up some kind of fake khaki election to camouflage for all of their incompetence’.

The government is yet to release its Pacific Strategy, but the [ALP has](#) promised to increase foreign aid, and to increase Australian public and commercial media content to audiences in the Pacific. The ALP strategy includes an \$8m boost for the ABC to increase broadcasting in the region. In 2014, [the Coalition cancelled](#) a 10-year, \$200m contract with the ABC for the Australia Network, leaving it to fulfill its charter duty to broadcast internationally - to 40 countries across Asia and the Pacific – on a shoestring budget. In 2017, China took over some of the ABC’s short-wave frequencies in the region, expanding its reach.

Jemima Garrett, the co-founder and co-convenor of the [Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative](#), says what the Pacific needs is co-productions and partnerships, so that Australia is talking with the Pacific, rather than at it. Garrett says that the money the ABC would receive under an Albanese-led government might not have stopped Honiara signing with Beijing, but it would certainly have influenced the conversation.



**Monica Attard**  
CMT Co-Director

## Vote for a fact-check

Political parties are hoping to capitalise on voters’ appetite for the truth by creating websites that resemble fact-checking resources.

The Liberal Party has established two websites that speak in the parlance of fact-checking to help voters ‘get the facts’ and avoid being ‘misled’ on Labor and independent candidates. The first warns of the perils of the ‘partisan’ and therefore ‘fake’ independent. The website details a laundry list of how candidates have allegedly danced around the truth of their Labor-leaning political allegiance and distorted the facts of funding pools. The second is dedicated to calling out ‘Labor Lies’ through a series of third-party resources where a simple click will ‘reveal the





truth’. Both websites come with a Liberal Party disclaimer in small text at the base of the page, which is easy to miss. The unique domain names and lack of political branding can mislead voters into thinking that these are third-party fact-checking resources.

So far Labor doesn’t appear to have set up their own websites, but both parties have engaged a potentially misleading tactic for postal vote registration. Voters are being mailed, emailed, and served

up Facebook advertising for postal vote registration that, instead of going direct to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), filters through party-backed websites and lands in party HQ. These websites come with generic domain names and lack the look and feel of Liberal and Labor products. The AEC [confirmed](#) that although legal, these websites have the potential to mislead voters.

Meanwhile, One Nation has slipped into fact-checking mode, calling these ‘fake postal vote applications’ from major parties a ‘SCAM’ designed to ‘trick you’. To promote their message, One Nation used official AEC branding, which the AEC confirmed in an email to First Draft it did not approve. However, the AEC said, ‘We do appreciate that the message intending to be sent here by One Nation was for people to apply for a postal vote (if they need one) directly through the AEC instead.’

Going into the May election, voters need to be aware of how political parties and candidates are donning fact-checker uniforms and presenting themselves as the arbiters of truth.



**Julia Bergin**

First Draft Senior Research Reporter

## Tweet for the stars



With Elon Musk making his bid for Twitter, we see yet another volley in the battle over [free speech](#), at least as it regards our social media spaces. Twitter's managers, according to Musk, exceed the boundaries established by the laws in a space that should be a forum for all kinds of speech. Musk calls Twitter a kind of 'digital town square' that raises connections to Habermas' Public Sphere, those neighbourhood coffee shops where locals can argue politics and policy with their community. Musk

uses this town square analogy to emphasise the importance of free speech to its function as a part of democracy.

In practice, however, there is an enormous and critical distinction between town squares and the micro-blogs of Twitter. Political discourse in our town squares is surrounded by context, negotiation, and social exchange – politicians may put up their signs, but the community will play an active, sometimes extremely active, role in [shaping their message](#). Even the simple act of going out to [shake hands](#) with the public can draw quick attention to opposing views. If these informal discussions are particularly [vigorous](#), it is precisely this diverse and even agonistic quality that marks them as sites of democratic deliberation.

By contrast, Twitter is a manicured space whose functions enable users and readers to avoid discussion rather than to foster it. Tweets are standalone micro-blog posts, with users needing to interact with the site to see more than a few recent replies. Readers choose the voices they want to hear and which accounts they want to block. Authors of these posts get primacy: the way they feel, the frames they present and the angles they choose get (literally, physically) top billing and no context sullies that initial view. Town square and coffee shop denizens can shout over one another and vandalise signs, but Twitter broadcasters don't need to compete for first impressions. That order of presentation has a significant impact in participatory media: top posts [carry much more weight](#) and influence our view of the entire discussion. Further, Twitter does a poor job of [representing the diverse public](#), and attention is highly focused on a subset of users that are already [popular](#). This resembles less a town square than a re-hash of [call-in talk radio](#).

While this approach to discussion – my view above all others – may suit Musk, his

proposals portend less a vigorous democratic discussion than further empowering speech for the already powerful.



**Tim Koskie**

CMT PhD Candidate

## A pragmatic fellow



Having started just this week at CMT, I don't have a lot to say yet about what I'll be working on. I can say that I'm very excited to be collaborating with such a great team of researchers and professional staff. I've come to CMT after almost four years as a regulatory analyst at the Australian Communications and Media Authority, or ACMA, where I had the opportunity to work on a number of pressing issues in the media and communications industries. These included online

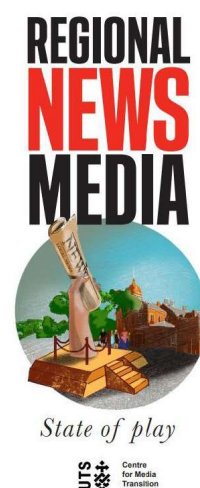
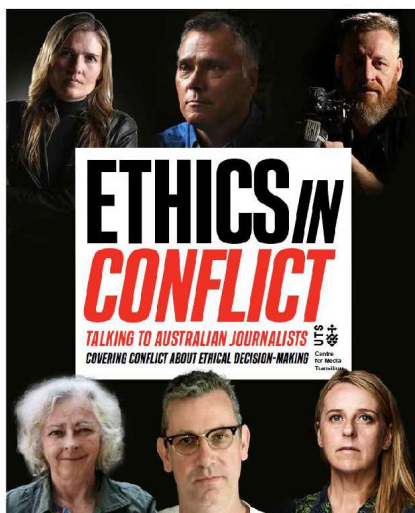
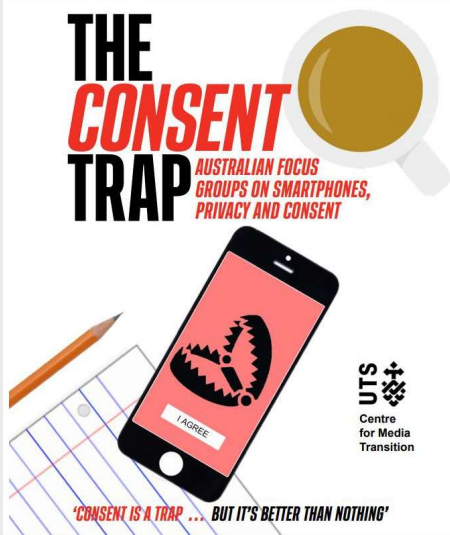
misinformation and disinformation, the news media bargaining code, prominence of broadcasting services on connected devices, and impartiality and commercial influence in news. There's a lot of overlap there with the work of CMT, and I'm looking forward to diving back into those issues from a somewhat different perspective.

Some time ago now I completed a PhD in philosophy at the ANU, have taught philosophy and the history of ideas at the ANU and at Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, Colombia, and am currently teaching a course in media ethics and regulation at the University of Sydney. In my own research I am interested in using ideas from philosophical pragmatism to develop a better framework for understanding news media, and the public sphere more broadly, in the age of misinformation. As I'm a pragmatist, this naturally involves considering the practical outcomes of policy responses, regulation and other industry interventions – hence my interest in the interdisciplinary focus at CMT. I'm looking forward to making some useful contributions to the centre's work while I'm here.



**Michael Davis**  
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.



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