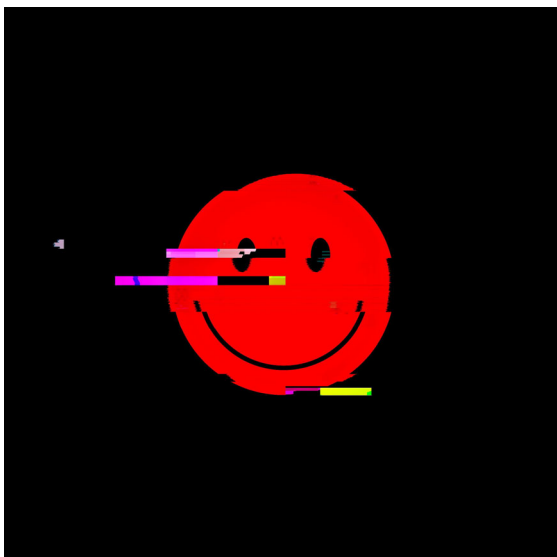


Hi there

From laughs to links



It's a mixed bag this week, the most surprising object being Sacha's interview with Shaun Micallef to mark the end of Mad as Hell. If you've never turned your mind to the difference between news parody and satire, read on ...

To mark a more sobering turn in online communication, Ayesha looks at the decision of the Iranian government to block internet and social media access, as protests grow over the death of a 22 year-old woman who was arrested for not

properly wearing her headscarf. Ayesha observes the importance of social media communication and protest in times of conflict.

Switching to the US, Monica then relays developments in the provision of local news, noting how large media organisations are recognising the value of local content, including through collaboration with local news providers.

And finally, we asked our colleague David Lindsay, a specialist in media and technology law here at UTS, to give us his views on the recent defamation case, *Google v Deferos* that considered liability for hyperlinks in search results. Does the decision really knock out the need for some aspects of planned legislative reform?

Derek Wilding



CMT Co-Director

Sad as hell



Last week, Shaun Micallef and his [Mad as Hell team said good night](#). And bam! After [10 years and 15 seasons](#), the world's best TV show was gone. So I contacted the man to complain. And to reflect on Mad as Hell and its SBS predecessor, Newstopia.

CMT: In 2008, you said, 'Actually, the idea of a news parody is as old as TV. To be perfectly honest, I wouldn't have thought there was much life in it.' Were you surprised by the longevity of Newstopia and Mad As Hell?

Micallef: Newstopia lasted three seasons and would have gone to a fourth (with a live audience) had not a celebrity panel show on Ten [Talkin' 'Bout Your Generation] intervened. Mad as Hell - which started after the Ten show finished four years later - picked up where Newstopia left off. The news parody had given way to news satire; jokes about what was being said on the news rather than how they were being said. All the news presentation jokes had been played out by then. We needed to at least scratch the surface rather than skim across it.

CMT: Research shows that many people are [avoiding news](#), that [trust in news is low](#), and that people are finding [alternate pathways](#) to news. It shows a lot of people use satire (Stephen Colbert, The Chaser, The Betoota Advocate) to get news, and that comedy can be [as good a source as news for knowledge gain](#). Did you get the feeling people were getting their news from you?

Micallef: God, I hope not. We only give enough background to set the joke up. We're not trying to inform anyone or have them learn anything. That's not our job.

CMT: Do you think satirical news shows play an important role?

Micallef: I used to think not. I think [when we spoke last time](#) that I thought satire created the illusion of action; that because we were laughing about something or someone they would soon be put to rights - but, of course, that only happens if we turn off the TV and take to the streets. I didn't think satire was important at all. I've changed my mind a little since Mad As Hell finished. Quite a few people have reached out to let me know the show helped their mental health over the last ten years. That's something.

CMT: More generally, do you think news and journalism remain important?

Micallef: Oh yes, that's very important. It's not at all what we do. We just riff off their work. But everyone's a comedian or a commentator these days. All you need is a social media

account. Not everyone can be a journalist.

CMT: What has the response been to you announcing Mad as Hell is over, after 10 years and 15 seasons?

Micallef: It seems a lot of people are sorry to see it go. That means we got out at the right time. There's nothing worse than outstaying your welcome.

CMT: You've written a memoir, [Tripping Over Myself, A memoir of a life in comedy](#). Does it cover your legal background?

Micallef: No. I left all that out thinking it would be too dull. I think I made the right choice.

CMT: Can you mark some Ethics, Law and Justice essays for me?

Micallef: Sacha, I wouldn't have the gall, having just scraped through on most of my subjects when I did them. I was too busy doing Footlights revues.



Sacha Molitorisz
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

Internet censorship in conflict zones



Last week, the [Iranian government shut off](#) the internet in most parts of Tehran and Kurdistan and blocked access to platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp to suppress videos of the ongoing anti-regime protests from going viral.

Dissidents across the country have been protesting the death of a 22-year-old woman from alleged police torture after she was arrested by the Islamic Republic's moral police for not properly wearing her headscarf. Within days, the protests and

rallies [spread to 146 cities in all 31 provinces](#), went viral on social media, and show no signs of ceasing. Across the border in Afghanistan, the de facto Taliban government, a group of militant Islamist jihadists who are themselves blocked from all Meta platforms, [blocked TikTok](#) insisting that such platforms were misleading the Afghan youth and inciting violence. In reality, this move attempts to stifle anti-Taliban voices and movements emerging on local social media and slowly getting noticed internationally, such as the #FreeHerFace and #BanTaliban hashtag campaigns that Afghans have been using to revolt online.

Previously, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Syria and US have

made attempts at censoring the Internet or blocking certain social media platforms for various reasons. However, when such decisions come from authoritarian regimes, China and Russia included, there is a certain level of irony and malevolence attached to it, which only points towards the suppression of dissenting voices that are otherwise disseminated and amplified through social media.

The significance of social media for activism first became evident during the 2009 anti-regime protests in Iran that marked the beginning of what was later known as the Twitter Revolution. Later, during the Arab Spring – a wave of pro-democracy protests against the authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain in 2010 and 2011 – social media and other digital platforms emerged to play a central role in protest communication and mobilisation. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, Twitter and Weibo (China’s version of Twitter) emerged as a virtual gathering place for the mainland Chinese dissident community.

Social media gives a platform to voices that need to be heard to be recognised, and links them to the broader public for pluralised storytelling. Under targeted state crackdowns on the internet and social media platforms, digital activism becomes vulnerable to political manoeuvring and dictatorial control of information, especially in cases where there aren’t a range of alternative options available to the public. Yes, social media cannot prevent authoritarian governments from cracking down on the protesters, but when violent repression occurs, at least the world is watching.



Ayesha Jehangir
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Local News - direct from NYC



When you look at a [map](#) of news deserts in the United States, you see a nation dotted red, with counties within larger regions where local newspapers have died.

However, surrounding that county, there are others where there may be 6 or more local newspapers – in various states of financial and editorial health.

A map of news deserts in Australia looks far gloomier. Still, Dean Baquet, the former editor of the New York Times, now leading a new local investigative fellowship program at

his paper, says there is a crisis in local news and people not only don't like to hear they live in a news desert, but they are also paying a price. The relationship between a local newspaper, as a source of information and knowledge and the community is profound, he says and when a local paper dies, what people are left with is a swamp of news from national media, all of it focussed on New York City or Washington DC.

A few weeks ago, I attended the International Press Institute World Congress at Columbia University in New York City and what struck me was the extent of innovation that is pouring into the production of local news. This innovation concerns not just the financing of local news outlets; it includes the creation of associations between them and larger city-based outlets to ensure there is a flow of information from the local to national audiences. And that's very much of interest to us at CMT, because it's this flow from local to national that we're looking at in our [Rural and Regional Reporting Project](#) (first yearly report out soon!).

The differences in news deserts between the US and Australia are clearly enormous: population in regional centres there and here are vastly different, the size of local or even regional newspapers is vastly different and as a result, the stories or investigations which are or can be written have vastly different reach and impact. However, the focus of mainstream, big city news outlets in the US is very much on what they're missing when they don't focus on local news and how important it is for social cohesion in a divided nation for non-city communities to be accounted for in news coverage read by city readers.

The fellowship program that Baquet now leads will induct 10-12 young reporters from the local news ecosystem around the United States to work with Times editorial staff on investigations within their communities. The collaboration starts early. "Local editors don't have time to craft projects and they need help doing this. It's not that they aren't sure they have good projects. They do," said Baquet. With other New York Times editorial staff, he will travel to local newsrooms to brainstorm investigations and then work for prolonged periods of time with local journalists on the reporting which will be co-published in the New York Times and the local publication



Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

Defamation and search results

In a previous issue, Sacha briefly noted the decision of the High Court in the defamation case that George Deferos brought against Google, initially in the Victorian Supreme Court. It's an important decision in its own right, but it also has relevance for the national defamation reform process. We've noted before how the working party formed by the departments of the federal, state and territory Attorneys-General is up to stage 2 of the



reform process. They're now looking at the circumstances in which internet intermediaries – including search and social media services – should be liable for defamation. (See our recent [submission](#).)

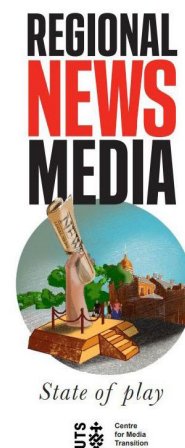
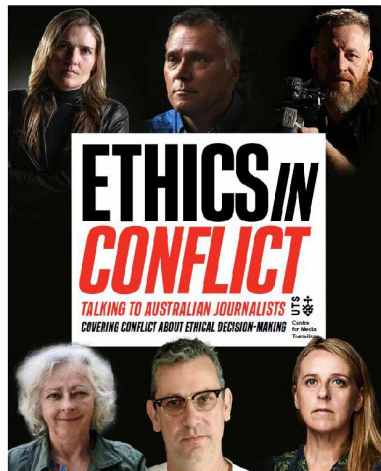
The Deferos decision appears to land squarely on the topic of liability for hyperlinks in search results, and some participants in the reform process have said it means there's no need for any new legislation to deal with those issues. Is that the end of the story? Media and technology

law specialist, Professor David Lindsay, thinks not. Read his explanation of the decision and its implications [here](#).



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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