Centre for Media Transition

Hi there

Ethical questions about ethics

Today, CMT co-director Monica Attard and Research Fellow Michael Davis are presented their work on how journalists use AI, at the 2023 Humanising AI Futures Symposium at UTS. Their presentation outlined a new research project exploring how the ethics and practice of traditional public interest journalism can be maintained given the inevitable adoption of generative AI models in newsrooms, as well as their impact on an already critical information disorder problem.

As today's symposium raises important concerns about understanding the human-machine relationship in the context of creativity, journalism and ethics, I cannot help thinking – especially after my recent work-related trip to the 'troubled' France – about the ethical dilemmas in media coverage of civic unrest and political conflict, and most importantly the human suffering it causes. However, more importantly, what can academics do about it? This also happened to be one of the key issues raised at the recent International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) conference that was held in Lyon, France from 9-13 July 2023. In my piece, I return to some of the key issues discussed during the four plenaries at the IAMCR conference.

Speaking of symposiums and conferences, yesterday, the CMT was pleased to co-host an event with DIGI, Australia's digital platform industry body and administrator of the Australian Code of Practice on Misinformation and Disinformation. The event included two panel discussions. The first was moderated by CMT co-director Derek Wilding and featured Professor Andrea Carson from Latrobe University and Dr Jenny Duxbury, DIGI's director of policy and regulatory affairs. The panel examined some of the key issues arising in the consultation on the government's draft bill to give ACMA powers to regulate online misinformation.

The second panel, focusing on best-practice approaches to content moderation and misinformation, was a lively discussion that explored the important role played by organisations other than digital platforms in helping to address problems in the online information environment.

Next in this newsletter is Sacha Molitorisz's piece in which he raises an ethical question of whether a sour breakup between two politicians is of public interest or rather a private event between two individuals who deserve, and in this case required, privacy in the media coverage.

Lastly, Tim Koskie discusses Wikipedia's role in the digital transition and the concerns of its contributors about AI tools. He highlights the growing apprehension towards AI and Large Language Models, which are perceived as replacing creative human work in various fields. What's interesting about his piece is that he argues that the root of the problem lies not solely in the algorithms but in how we identify and utilise reliable information.

Ayesha Jehangir
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Notes from IAMCR 2023

As hundreds of scholars and researchers gathered in Lyon for the International Association for Media and Communication Research conference in the second week of July, they were posed with a key question: *How can we understand and explain the challenges humanity is facing today in the light of digitalisation?*

This is a complicated question, but not an abstract challenge, especially when digitalisation is not an option but a necessity. And so is humanity in this so-called borderless world, as governments around the world continue to become a threat for the very people who they are supposed to protect.

The IAMCR conference witnessed a gathering of international scholars, young and experienced, who all agreed that the concepts of radical (digital) humanism, social production, injustice as alienation, domination, exploitation, social struggles, media/communication/digital (in)justice, and democratic socialism/socialist democracy have substantial significance.

Christian Fuchs, professor of media at the Paderborn University in Germany, for instance, went to great lengths to outline some aspects of the notion of digital capitalism, comparing

it to other concepts such as the network society (Castells), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff), and platform capitalism (Srnicek). From talking about the number of usable nuclear bombs (which has increased from 9,440 in 2022 to 9,576 in 2023) to digital capitalism and digital violence, Fuchs' plenary engaged the audience for almost two hours, discussing a variety of forms of digital injustices and digital alienation.

Another very interesting plenary session highlighted the significance of borders in the digital borderless world, asking how social media, but also traditional media, play a key role in the building of symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'them', or are used as instruments to fuel hatred between communities.

However, the most important, and my personal favourite, was the plenary on the contribution of academia and journalists to peace-building, through critique and creativity. The star panellist was Finnish media scholar Kaarle Nordenstreng of the University of Tampere in Finland, who with his almost zero tolerance for beating around the bush got straight to the point and posed peace at once as 'an important social question' and 'a professional value' in the face of unprecedented political, social and environmental problems.

This leaves us with a lot to deliberate over as social sciences and communications academics in terms of what we stand for and who we want to benefit through our epistemic and deontological journeys, if we are to engage in a dialogue about what sustainable futures and sustainable societies mean for us as media and communication scholars, today and tomorrow.

Ayesha Jehangir
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Confidence in news media

Let's say you work in the public service. Let's say you're in a relationship with a colleague, but the relationship sours. And then let's say the unpleasantness gets nasty, involving abusive messages laced with threats of violence. After years of this, you finally decide this isn't just a personal issue, but a workplace culture issue. So, you lodge a complaint to your employer, explicitly requesting confidentiality.

One of the stories of this past week involved a personal relationship that soured. Both people involved were politicians. And what interests me is not the details of a failed relationship; rather the way journalists covered the story. The question, in simple terms, is: should journalists respect the complainant's request for confidentiality and

privacy? Or does the public interest require publication of his name, her name, and/or the abusive correspondence?

Essentially, that's the test journalists need to weigh up: respect privacy, unless that privacy interest is outweighed by the public interest. That's what's prescribed under the MEAA Journalists Code of Ethics and the Commercial TV Industry Code of Practice - to name just two codes making up Australia's splintered system of news media standards. So, are these details in the public interest?

Predictably, many media outlets didn't hesitate. It named him, it named her, it published the messages. The woman responded to say she was 'distressed', but the stories kept coming. Presumably journalists felt that, well, hey, the details were now in the public domain, right?

At a time when Australian women are being killed week after week after week by ex-partners, I'd suggest that the public interest dictates that the complainant's name not be published. Even putting aside the specific distress to the complainant, how many women will now avoid lodging a complaint, after what happened here? Sure, we're talking about politicians, and there are questions to be asked about the culture of the party in question. But isn't the public interest best served by restraint about the complainant's identity?

Of course, I understand the commercial imperatives. Eyeballs equal advertisers equals revenue. But, at a time when most people don't trust news media, news outlets that act ethically and respectfully can distinguish themselves. They can rebuild trust, and perhaps even long-term sustainability, even as they serve the public interest by working to change our culture of family violence. Meanwhile, newsrooms need to create the space for staff to discuss such issues of ethical practice, not least so that journalists themselves feel less isolated and injured.

Sacha Molitorisz
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

Wikipedia and our new overlords

As our team works with Wikipedia to help it identify its vulnerabilities and opportunities in a new time of digital transition, its contributors and extensive research flag Wikipedia's positioning in our information systems. Simultaneously, these contributors' concerns over AI tools are entirely comprehensible – extant media and research has regarded the sudden and rapid adoption of Large Language Model and other AI-adjacent technologies with more apprehension than optimism.

This apprehension is already feeding our creative engines (even as AI tools are being positioned to replace them). Adding to a fairly screaming time for cinema, rave reviews were reserved for a tense film highlighting a terrifying technological innovation that frays and reshapes our entire global order. No, not *Barbie*; spoiler alert, I'm talking about

Mission Impossible: Dead Reckoning . Despite being more firmly science fiction than Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks*, its central bogeyman will be depressingly familiar: the growing spectre of information disorder, entrenched and enshrined in algorithmically structured media ecosystems. A recent NYT piece delves into the real-life, and sometimes comically clunky, version of the big baddie in the digital person of ChatGPT, in the process demonstrating that the problems are more firmly rooted in the social sciences rather than the information sciences.

While nailing the zeitgeist of our AI fears, what the film – and its many analogues – misses is the extent to which the problems are rooted not (entirely) in our algorithmically structured digital media systems but rather in the social processes we use to identify, prioritise, and utilise salient and high-quality information. Where the public were once more inclined to look to cultural intermediaries like journalists and academics to separate a world of infinite data into reliable bite size chunks, our burgeoning social media sphere capitalises on stoking rage and sowing distrust, leaving many feeling no source of information can be trusted. NYT's Jon Gertner's investigation reinforces the importance of this role in his findings that the big data trawl on the internet has yielded poorer results than a smaller data set curated by Wikipedia's expansive policies and army of volunteer editors, which has become a cultural intermediary in its own right. Alongside its essential role in Google's knowledge graphs, the importance of Wikipedia in powering our fact machines underscores our rapidly growing need for cultural intermediaries that can intervene in the internet's information disorder, with the better decisively triumphing over the internet's ever-expansive more.

Rather than once again trying to re-create the Torment Nexus, research suggests that we should be focusing on those boring and banal systems of information curation as well as the means to hold both the curators and distributors accountable. There is no magic key to this machine.
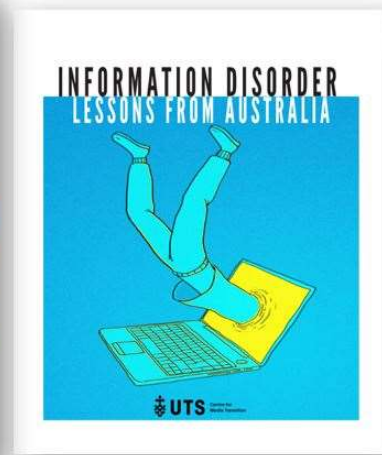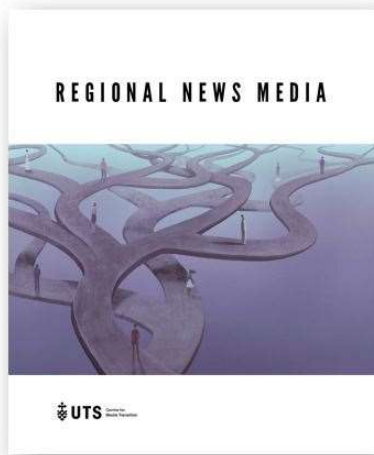

Tim Koskie
CMT researcher

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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.