

## Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

### Balancing free speech & the responsibility of discourse



I believe it was Arundhati Roy who first compared the manufacturing of public opinion to the manufacturing of other mass market products like 'soaps, switches and sliced bread', and free speech to a 'commodity like everything else'. And while free speech is free, it should also be responsible. This becomes particularly crucial when the words run across the front page of a mainstream centre-left newspaper. In my piece this week, I write about the serious issues with the 'Red Alert' series, published in The Sydney Morning

Herald and The Age, which 'predict' that China would attack Australia in three years. As a peace journalism researcher, this kind of conflict-escalatory media coverage is exactly what keeps me up at night.

Professor Monica Attard was at the Adelaide Writers Week earlier this week, which went great but not without controversies. She writes specifically about two Palestinian speakers, whose ideas were not very well-received by those present at the sessions, to an extent that the events curator was told to cancel them both and herself resign.

More on media coverage and women... Sacha Molitorisz turns to media coverage of the online abuse that ABC host Lisa Millar received last week over an outfit she wore to one of her programs. He writes about how the issue of harassment of female journalists turned into news media fighting about the coverage of the issue.

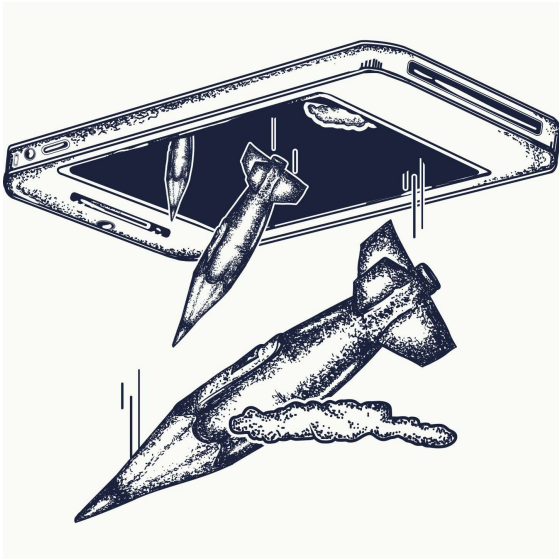
Lastly, the Centre was visited by a delegation of journalists from the Philippines. We had a great discussion on a range of issues from press freedom and journalists' safety to the

changing ecosystem of the media industries and business models in both the countries. We, at the Centre, are now looking forward to welcoming a delegation of Indonesian journalists next week. More on that in our next newsletter.



**Ayesha Jehangir**  
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

## Beating the war drums



Whether or not Australia is at an immediate threat of war from China, it looks like The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age have decided it is.

Over the past three days, the newspapers published several articles under their joint and alarmingly titled 'Red Alert' series – the type of conflict-escalatory reporting that reminds us of the American mainstream media's misleading and exaggerated coverage of the threat of the non-existent weapons of mass destruction throughout

2002. The coverage was later used by the Bush administration as reason to invade Iraq in 2003. Many politics and media experts and critics argued at the time that [the media acted as propaganda](#) in not questioning the legality of the war and had framed coverage to ensure public support for the war. The consequent loss of millions of innocent lives serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers of false and sensationalised reporting.

In what former Prime Minister Paul Keating describes as '[egregious and provocative](#)' reporting by the SMH and The Age, the threat of China's invasion of Taiwan is amplified and China is presented as 'the overwhelming source of danger to Australia'. The articles, which do not include any investigative reporting but are instead a projection of opinion held by some analysts, also predict a war on Australian soil in the next three years. In doing so, the journalists are not only violating journalism ethics by warmongering, they are also presenting the Australian government to the public as incompetent, weak and unprepared according to UTS Media and Communication Studies [Professor Wanning Sun](#), who also says she was not surprised that the coverage came from journalists who had long been vocal advocates of the 'China threat' narrative – 'China hawks' in her words. According to Professor Sun, who has been following the [Australian media coverage of China](#) for some time now, one possible explanation for the timing of the articles could be to prime the public opinion to support for more funding, in anticipation of the release of defence strategy review interim report. Professor Sun says she is concerned that there appears to be a 'cosy' relationship between media and defence/security in Australia, despite the need for a critical distance between the two.

Whether this type of Cold War journalism is framed to undermine the Labour government's efforts to improve diplomatic relations with China or is designed to shape public support for Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines with help from the US and the UK, media coverage can play a decisive role in how China is perceived to the 'average' reader, in particular if it creates fear and anxiety about various Chinese communities in Australia.

Coverage of national security issues receives a great deal of attention from the public and hence demands greater levels of responsible journalism, instead of presenting asserted claims as facts. How the media report the relationship today provides a valuable benchmark for the direction of Australia–China relations. As a pillar of democracy, no media must fight the battle on someone's behalf.



**Ayesha Jehangir**  
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

## Unhearable views



The Adelaide Writers' Week is done and dusted. But not without a degree of controversy. The events curator, Louise Adler, found herself having to fend off calls to cancel two speakers and to herself resign. All in the name of free speech.

The two speakers whose views were considered 'unhearable' were author Susan Abulhawa and poet Mohammed El-Kurd – both Palestinian writers who hold strong views about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in Abulhawa's case about the Russian-

Ukrainian war too. Mohammed El-Kurd has criticised Israel using language that some consider to be antisemitic. But it was Abulhawa's views, expressed on social media, that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is a 'depraved Zionist with a house on stolen Palestinian land', a 'clown who is trying to ignite World War III' and 'mad and far more dangerous than (Russian President Vladimir) Putin' that attracted the most vociferous criticism when her attendance at the writer's week was announced. Her views run contrary to the national sentiment and to the position of the Australian government, which wholly supports Ukraine in its battle to repel the illegal Russian invasion of its country.

Adler refused to uninvite either writer, judging that to do so would be an act of censorship. Mohammed El-Kurd appeared via video link from New York and Susan Abulhawa made the journey to Adelaide in person. But as a result of Adler's decision to have the two

appear, two Ukrainian writers pulled out of the festival and some sponsors withdrew support. The critics were loud in claiming that allowing the Palestinian writer to appear at the festival was less about freedom of speech and more about permitting hate speech.

Abulhawa vociferously argues against Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. Speaking at the festival, she said that she thought ‘the onus is put on the victims to police our tone ... it really speaks to how little room there is for public discourse in Australia.’

There wasn’t much room for public discourse at another session at the festival – one chaired by this writer – when London-based financier Bill Browder was questioned about his claims about who was responsible for the death of his friend and colleague Sergei Magnitsky, a Ukrainian-born, Russian lawyer and tax advisor who worked for Browder and uncovered widespread corruption by Russian tax and law enforcement officials. Magnitsky’s death and the efforts Browder has gone to since to uncover the truth behind it and the tax fraud he and his company were accused of was the impetus for The Autonomous Sanctions Amendment (Magnitsky-style and Other Thematic Sanctions) [Act](#) in Australia. There was also disquiet when Browder was questioned about how he *knew* corruptly obtained money had flowed directly to the Russian President. Both questions were designed to elicit evidence. Browder responded with details of how he and his investigators had followed money trails. However, it was the fact that the questions were asked that some members of the audience didn’t seem to like.

Freedom of speech is a significant and meaningful concept in democratic societies. Even though the Australian Constitution doesn’t explicitly protect it, and even though there are important limitations on hate speech and other categories of speech, the right to speak freely only has meaning if it applies equally to everyone. Politics, culture, ideas and art are what makes writers’ festivals worth attending. The alternative is freedom of speech, only if you agree with me.



**Monica Attard**  
CMT Co-Director

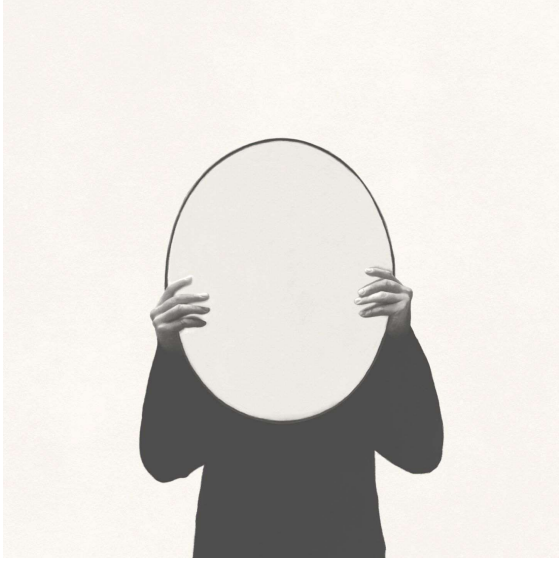
## Being part of the solution

The SMH and The Age weren’t the only news outlets accused of dangerous amplification this week.

On Monday at 6.07pm, The Daily Mail published a news story about online abuse directed at ABC host Lisa Millar for her on-air outfit. ‘Most of the insults are too vile to publish with the accounts being called out by a number of Australian personalities on Twitter,’ the story reported. It then proceeded to publish several of the insults.

On Tuesday, news.com.au and The Guardian then published their versions of the story, prompting the ABC to respond [with a statement](#): ‘If Daily Mail Australia and news.com.au





were genuine in their concern about such behaviour they wouldn't amplify it by republishing the comments they describe as 'vile' and 'sickening', accompanied by a screenshot.' Now there were two stories. One, trolls attacking Millar. Two, news media fighting about coverage of the issue.

On Wednesday, [Millar responded](#). It just happened to be International Women's Day. 'The fact that what I wore on Monday attracted obnoxious commentary on Twitter — foul, disgusting personal abuse that I

couldn't and wouldn't repeat — was upsetting,' said Millar, who [quit Twitter](#) in 2021 following a torrent of personal attacks.

'That it then ended up online on some news sites where the photos and the abuse were republished made me angry. I am angry ... on this International Women's Day, on behalf of myself, but also on behalf of other women, young women, who see those stories and see someone like me being violently abused day after day for whatever reason bullies can find. I worry it might make you think that no progress has been made and that it's not worth it to be a woman in the public arena. On this International Women's Day I want to tell you the response over that rubbish yesterday gives me hope. We are making progress, and we will make more, and there are so many awesome women who we can all look up to. Let's celebrate them today. And please, make a conscious decision today to be part of the solution. Play a part in making our communities a better, kinder place, for everyone.'

Should the issue be reported? If so, how? News.com.au editor-in-chief Lisa Muxworthy defended her outlet's coverage. 'News.com.au has a long and strident history of exposing abuse against women ... We believe a clear public interest exists in reporting on the issue of vile social media trolls and the damage they cause.'

She has a point. At a time when domestic violence is killing women at horrifying rates, bullying, harassment and misogyny need to be called out. In the process, however, it's vital that misogyny isn't amplified. For reporters, that means one thing: not republishing insults. When I checked yesterday, the [News Corp report](#) and [The Guardian report](#) both outlined what had happened, without including insults. The Daily Mail story, by contrast, still included insults.



**Sacha Molitorisz**  
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

# Exchanging ideas



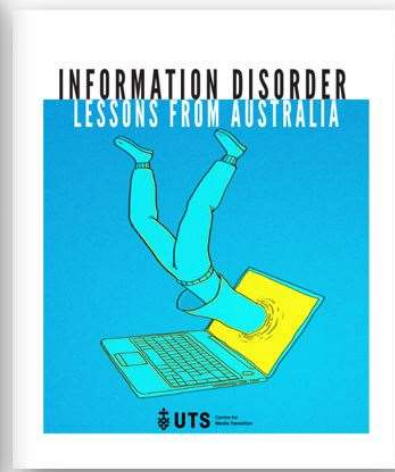
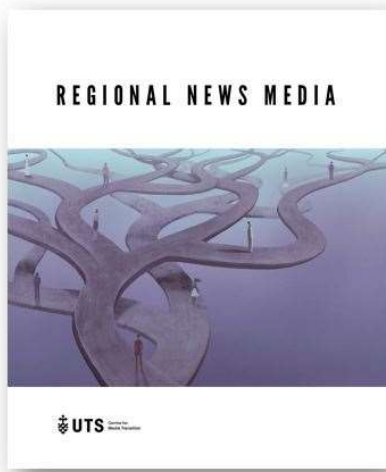
Following on the successes and rigorous discussions of the 2022 TechCamp, CMT in conjunction with DFAT has had the opportunity to work with visiting journalists from across the Asia Pacific to compare and contrast our media environments to address problems and share potential solutions. This started with a team of Malaysian journalists and scholars, who raised the challenges of a highly conflicted political environment and a society divided – both within itself and by external forces. CMT has also met with a delegation of journalists from the Philippines where politics is also a considerable concern given that country's authoritarian government continues to enjoy popularity in an environment where accountability and transparency are lacking.

After an upcoming meeting with Indonesian journalism associates, we hope to continue not just maintaining but elevating international dialogue about media, both as it endures ongoing transition and as it contends with the complex history of its local and international development. It is our goal to collaborate using these meetings as a steppingstone for future and more successful events like TechCamp as well as international and inclusive scholarship that identifies shared problems and the opportunities for shared solutions.



**Tim Koskie**  
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.



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