Centre for
Media Transition

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Hi there

'Good' journalist, 'bad' journalist

Free press is fundamental for any democratic society, but the ongoing tension within the journalists' communities – both in Australia and globally – around whether media coverage of Israel-Gaza has been fair has put journalists, and indeed the audience, in a conundrum: how 'free' are journalists, or to put it in other words, how free are they 'allowed' to be?

In Australia at least, answers can be found in the swift action and warnings directed by some media organisations at their journalists, who endorsed an open letter advocating for ethical reporting in Israel and Palestine.

At the same time, the response (especially prohibiting these journalists from reporting on the war altogether), and indeed the letter itself, has also raised more questions not only about journalistic independence and freedom of expression, but also about the broader implications for media integrity and impartiality. In her piece, Monica reflects on the letter, and writes about its implications for journalistic principles of impartiality and the reputation of the profession more broadly.

This is a serious concern as the relationship between professionally generated news media and its audience is already encountering tension, amid rising number of individuals globally professing a lack of trust and interest in news, and instead engaging in proactive avoidance. The global slump in press freedom is also considered a significant factor in the growing news avoidance and related phenomena such as 'news fatigue' or 'compassion fatigue', which can be caused by over-consumption of often-depressing news, such as war or climate change. But all is not lost – not yet – as Sacha writes in his piece, drawing attention toward news sites that are dedicated to uplifting news stories from around the globe, such as the

Good News Network. There is, however, no substantiating evidence regarding whether audiences are gravitating towards 'positive' news or if this too is subject to the prevailing trend of global news avoidance.

Speaking of signatories getting into trouble, Michael writes about the imperative for digital platforms to strike a balance between transparency in information and compliance with legislation. This comes in the wake of X/Twitter being expelled from the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation for closing accessible channels for the public to report mis- and disinformation during the Voice to Parliament referendum. The complaint against X was made to DIGI, the group that administrates the Code, by tech and research policy body, Reset Australia.

Also in this newsletter is a link to CMT podcast: Double Take. For our last episode of the year, I spoke with the founder of Zan Times, a Canada-based news site that is led by Afghan women journalists in exile, and features stories about the condition of women living under the Taliban regime.

Ayesha Jehangir
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Truth and consequences?
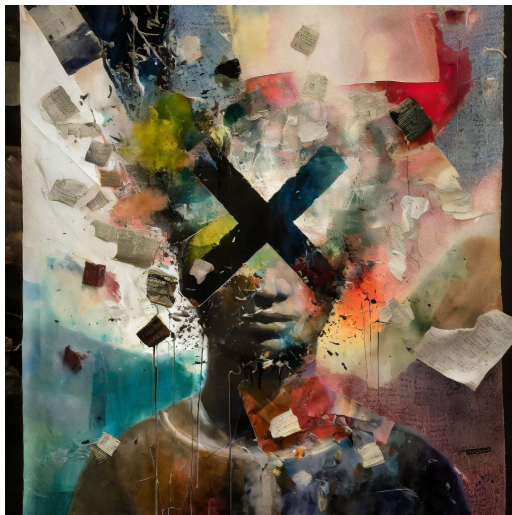
On Monday, X, formerly Twitter, was expelled from the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation following a complaint by advocacy and research organisation Reset Australia. The complaint centred on X's failure to supply a means for users to report electoral misinformation during the Voice to Parliament referendum, despite having a policy that disallows the posting of certain categories of misleading information during a referendum campaign.

X was ejected from the code after a decision from the code's complaints subcommittee, which comprises only members that are independent of both code signatories and DIGI, a tech industry body that administers the code. The complaint was made against code provision 5.11, which states, 'Signatories will implement and publish policies, procedures and appropriate guidelines that will enable users to report the types of behaviours and content that violates their policies under section 5.10.'

The decision turned solely on the lack of means for users to report content that violates X's own policies. As an outcomes-oriented, voluntary code, it is entirely up to signatories what policies they implement, as long as, under code outcome 1a, signatories contribute to

reducing the risk of harms that may arise from the propagation of misinformation and disinformation.

In this sense, the case is a clear example of the intended focus of the proposed misinformation bill, namely platform policies and processes, rather than individual content. By the same token, the consequences of the decision – X's removal from the code – illustrate the fundamental purpose of the bill: to provide genuine accountability through a set of enforcement powers, including the ability to issue fines for non-compliance. Instead, as a voluntary code, there are no substantial consequences for X besides another hit to its reputation, which seems of no consequence at all to its management. It's a bit like expelling a student for truancy. Indeed, X failed to respond to Reset's complaint and pulled out of the meeting of the subcommittee. This demonstrates contempt not merely for an established governance framework and the other platforms which participate in it, but also for the public – both in their role as users of the platform, and in the interest they have in a public sphere that enables the free and civil participation of all.

In her speech at the National Press Club last Wednesday, communications minister Michelle Rowland reiterated the purpose of the misinformation bill, to 'increase the transparency and accountability of platforms', and noted that it is crucial to understand that the virality and connectedness of social media require a different regulatory approach. We agree, but as we've written recently in this newsletter and in our submission on the bill, there are weaknesses in the proposed regulatory approach. In particular, the concerns of many about government imposition on freedom of expression are, though in some cases overstated, not without foundation.

Secondly, the government's understanding of the framework itself seems flawed. Rowland said that the exemption for government information was to ensure that information such as disaster alerts 'could not be removed by platforms under the new misinformation laws'. As things stand, platforms can remove government information, just as they can remove news content (as YouTube did, for example, with Sky News videos) or anything else, for that matter, that they wish. Nothing in the current code or the proposed bill makes this otherwise. The bill makes no rules about what information platforms may or may not remove. It merely sets a scope for content that comes under the transparency and accountability provisions of an industry code, and ties ACMA powers to that same scope. To set rules about what information may or may not be removed would be an entirely different prospect from what the government has so far indicated, and one which would be very concerning. The regulator should have no role in policing the boundary between content considered to be misinformation and content that is not. That is a matter for platforms, but it is also a matter for which they must be accountable to the public, whose information they control.

Certainly, what platforms do with government information should be transparent and accountable. But to be so it must come within the scope of the legislation. As we argued in our submission, to maximise industry accountability while keeping ACMA powers within acceptable limits, the bill needs to decouple the scope of the code from the extent of ACMA powers. This will permit a broad scope to ensure all platform actions are accountable, while focusing ACMA power on ensuring systems of accountability are in place. In addition, an independent mechanism for assessing platform content-moderation decisions would be of great benefit in improving the legitimacy of platform decision-making. An industry code could, for example, include a provision to ensure that government emergency information

remains online. A failure to do so could be referred to the independent mechanism, and systematic non-compliance could then be addressed by ACMA enforcement powers.

Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Scrutinising journalism

To date, some 270 journalists and media workers have signed a petition calling for 'ethical reporting' of the Israel-Hamas conflict, a petition endorsed by the journalists' union the Media Arts and Entertainment Alliance. In doing so, the signatories, including the union, have opened debate about what journalism is and what is required to perform it.

Impartiality as a necessary requirement is called into question, particularly in the coverage of conflicts such as this, where the stakes are high, and over 15,000 people have died since October 7th.

The signatories include some senior names, who bolster a list of younger, newer entrants to the journalism business drawn from across Guardian Australia, the ABC, The Conversation and the Nine papers. The reaction from editorial leaders at the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age was swift. They have banned any journalist who signed the petition from reporting on the conflict lest readers are left believing the journalists' personal views are influencing their reporting. The ABC hasn't been quite as harsh, but it has come close, warning its journalists that if they choose to sign, their impartiality might be questioned.

The petitioners claim news media give less credence to information from Gaza when sources from Israel are cited to 'balance' information and that Israel's version of events is reported verbatim whilst that from Hamas is questioned. They offer no examples to support this claim. They also claim inadequate coverage is given to allegations of war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing and apartheid – all of which the signatories appear to be claiming Israel is guilty of.

The ABC's Managing Director David Anderson last week strongly opposed his reporters using such descriptions, unless citing reputable agencies and NGOs because the burden of proof is too great for a media organisation to meet and furthermore, is not its purpose. For the ABC, not making such claims is an important element in how public interest journalism is done – to do otherwise is to show impartiality by believing one side over the other. Clearly, the editors of Nine's newspaper also adhere to this belief even if their

position is somewhat tainted by some of them having accepted [fully paid information gathering trips to visit Israel.](#)

Overall, what the signatories are calling for has the appearance of adherence to the principles of public interest journalism, but it is couched within a narrative about the importance of believing one side over another. For example, the need to cite only the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from their native lands to make way for the state of Israel, without acknowledgment of the inter-generational trauma behind the birth of the Israeli state.

What the petition writers also appear to be asserting is that reporters should be able to give prominence to voices asserting that Israel's intention is to commit genocide, in the absence of any judicial or even United Nations determination. As we wrote in our last newsletter, for journalists to use the language is a significant burden and critically, slides dangerously towards advocacy.

Some of the journalists who signed the petition would understand the dangers of advocacy journalism and the loss of audience trust which is its unhappy bedfellow. The others might benefit from knowing that picking a side runs against the principle of impartiality and doesn't always deliver the truth and context they want Australian audiences to be exposed to. Journalists are of course entitled to personal views. They're not entitled to make them the basis of their reporting.

Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

That's an awful headline

There's been an abundance of distressing news lately. Climate change. Sexual assault. Gaza. No wonder [more than two-thirds of Australians say](#) they actively avoid the news some of the time.

Then again, the news has long had a habit of being bad. That's because there have always been evil acts and tragic disasters. But it's also because of deliberate choices made by editors (and also increasingly by algorithms). One oft-cited maxim for news editors is, 'if it bleeds it leads'. And so, the news served up to us is full of war, conflict, death and despair. Kindness, good fortune and peace don't get much of a look in.

It doesn't have to be like that. In 1997, Geri Weis-Corbley launched the [Good News](#)

Network, or GNN, as distinct from CNN, for which she'd previously freelanced. As detailed in a recent Columbia Journalism Review feature, Weis-Corbley was worried that the barrage of bad news was going to turn her young child from carefree to cowering. Twenty-five years on, GNN is going strong, featuring, for instance, rescue stories, rare wildlife births caught on camera, and getting juveniles into environment support programs instead of jail. Other purveyors of good news include David Byrne's Reasons to Be Cheerful project and Good Good Good.

And in Australia? While some major outlets have developed dedicated 'good news' sites, including the ABC, news.com.au, Nine and SBS, we don't know how often they are updated, how many resources they get, and how much traffic they attract. It's noteworthy that Stan Grant left the ABC this year to become Asia Pacific director of the Constructive Institute at Monash University in Melbourne. Headquartered in Denmark, the Constructive Institute aims, in Grant's words, to 'improve the quality of public discourse, to acknowledge that we don't do conflict well, and to make media part of the solution rather than the problem.'

As people are turning away from news, trust in news is also alarmingly low. In part, these are problems of news media's own making. Sure, bad news needs an airing, but it needs to be covered well. That is, in a way that doesn't exploit its subjects, that treats subjects and audiences with respect, that doesn't unfairly intrude upon privacy, that isn't motivated by stoking division and polarisation and that, fundamentally, seeks to inform rather than just infuriate or upset. As well as that, good news needs more of an airing.

Sacha Molitorisz
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Double Take – reporting from exile

The Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul in August 2021 marked a devastating blow to civic liberties and human rights in Afghanistan, with journalism being one of the most affected professions in the country. In the last two years, over two-thirds of the country's 12,000 journalists abandoned their profession, and 80% of women journalists inside Afghanistan were forced to cease work altogether. Reporters Without Borders reveals a dire situation: half of 547 media outlets vanished, with TV channels reduced to 70 and radio stations to 170. Censorship and threats have escalated, prompting around 1,000 journalists to flee the country.

In this podcast, CMT Post-Doctoral Research Fellow Ayesha Jehangir speaks with Canada-

based Afghan journalist Zahra Nader, who, in exile, launched Zan Times – a women-led news website that features stories of Afghan women living under the Taliban regime.

In their conversation, they delve into the challenges confronted by women journalists reporting from within Afghanistan, and whether practicing journalism from exile can have an impact on audiences in the homeland.

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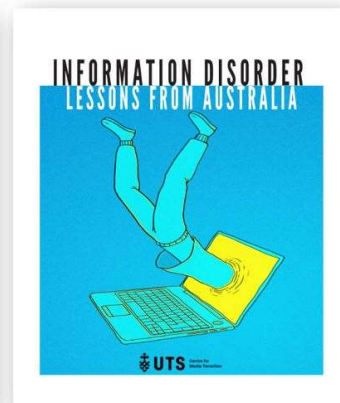
The Centre for Media Transition and UTS acknowledges the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our university now stands.
We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these places.