

Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

Media mayhem



Over the past week, we have witnessed some significant developments in the media sector, primarily in the U.S, reflecting ongoing legal, financial, and technological shifts. [The Atlantic's](#) report on aides to US President Donald Trump inadvertently sharing sensitive military information via Signal became the most viral news story of the year. Voice of America filed a [lawsuit](#) against the new administration, alleging attempts to dismantle government-funded media. The U.S. Supreme Court [upheld press protections](#) by refusing to revisit the

1964 *New York Times v. Sullivan* case, safeguarding media outlets from defamation suits by public figures.

Closer to home, the [2025 Australian Media Landscape Report](#) has highlighted concerns from over 500 journalists regarding the impact of AI on media integrity and challenges related to trust, fragmentation, and bias. As well, the Australian government invited [social media influencers](#) to the federal budget lock-up, a very interesting strategy presumably to increase engagement with younger audiences.

Also, last week, CMT held an [event](#) on alternatives to the news media bargaining code. The event occurred at Holding Redlich and was co-presented by the International Institute of Communications. On the panel was Julie Eisenberg – who wrote our report published at the end of last year, [Finding a Way Forward for Australian News](#) – as well as Lenore

Taylor from Guardian Australia, Professor Allan Fels, and economist George Siolis. The future of the News Bargaining Incentive is unknown, although it seems that both Labor and the Coalition are committed to seeing the introduction of legislation to give effect to it. We're now developing a follow-up project to examine the distribution mechanisms that could be used under a charge/levy approach or a tax offset scheme. We'll update you on that as work gets underway.

In this week's newsletter, Michael examines the backlash over Clive Palmer's controversial election ads, challenging the notion of impartiality and the boundaries of acceptable political advertising. Gary investigates concerns regarding Gazette News' affiliation with the teal independent movement. Derek discusses the major American tech companies' lobbying efforts, urging the Trump administration to pressure Australia into relaxing its regulations on social media and streaming services. And my post focuses on the interactions between digital hate and real-world hate crimes.



Alena Radina
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Muted Trumpets



A series of ads from Clive Palmer's Trumpet of Patriots party provoked widespread public backlash when they were run in several newspapers a fortnight ago. Responses from the media were mixed. The Newcastle Herald [apologised](#) 'unreservedly' for running an ad that stated, 'There are only two genders – male and female', while The Age ran the same ad below [an editorial calling](#) the ad an 'unhelpful and provocative contribution to the national discussion that The Age does not endorse.' News Corp left the

commentary to Sky News, running videos from the broadcaster criticising the public backlash – and the Newcastle Herald's response – [on its website](#).

The decision to run the ads was no doubt commercially driven, but the company responses to the backlash show that it is not always easy to separate commercial from editorial, or indeed political, considerations.

The Age's response – to supposedly accept all advertising from political parties without discrimination – professes a stance of editorial impartiality. This stance also underlies the traditional separation of news from opinion pages and the opening of the latter to a diversity of views that do not necessarily represent an editorial position. Similarly, in response to the potential for commercial influence over editorial content, commercial media have developed 'Chinese walls' between their business and editorial arms – though these are [not as impermeable](#) as the term suggests.

For some, the effective monopolies newspapers hold in many markets should give rise to a [right of access](#) for political parties seeking to run ads. While they do not go this far, obligations on broadcasters to carry certain election material, or indeed local content, are similarly justified by the ability to license broadcasting spectrum to the exclusion of others. In Australia and many other jurisdictions, both the right of access and must-carry rules are generally held to be acceptable impingements on the editorial freedom of media companies.

Yet, whether imposed by legal requirements or an expression of media freedom, an open-slatheer approach seems tenable only when political advertisements remain within the [boundaries of public acceptability](#). But these boundaries are fluid, shifting with social mores as well as the political climate. Indeed, as the ABC's Linton Besser noted in the Media Watch [coverage of the affair](#), there are many cases of media outlets refusing to carry particular political advertisements, including an [anti-Murdoch campaign from GetUp](#) in 2013. In such cases, a stance of impartiality loses its footing.

An alternative route to impartiality is to refuse all political advertising, a stance some digital platforms have taken, including Twitter before its takeover by Elon Musk. This refusal avoids the problem in the open-slatheer approach of being required to make judgements about acceptability. But the limited revenue sources of commercial news media mean most are unlikely to pursue this route of their own accord. Some regulation, however, also pushes in this direction. Notably, UK political parties [have been banned](#) from advertising on television since the medium emerged, to expressly limit the influence of wealthy parties and donors. In Australia, the parliamentary inquiry into the 1987 federal election and 1988 referendum on rights and freedoms led to the report, 'Who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune', and ultimately to the introduction of the *Political Broadcasts and Political Disclosures Act 1991*. In 2013, the European Court of Human Rights [found the UK Act](#) to be a permissible restriction on freedom of expression, but a High Court challenge to the Australian legislation led – alongside a concurrent decision in *Nationwide News Pty Ltd v Wills* – to the recognition of an implied freedom of political communication.

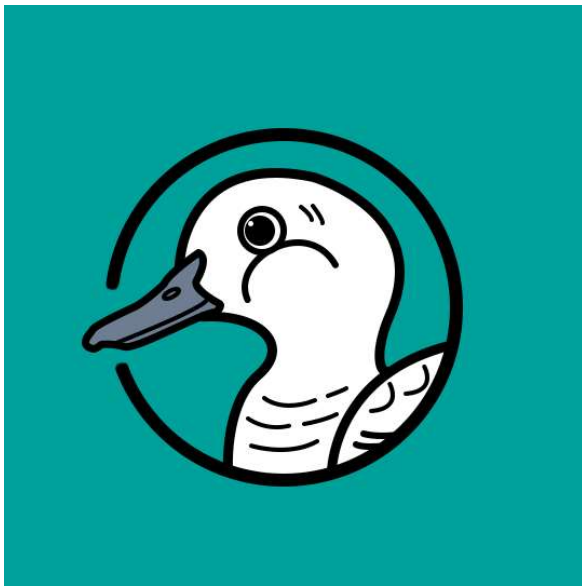
In the end, it seems there is no avoiding hard decisions, and commercial media must weigh up conflicting commercial, political and editorial incentives in deciding whether to accept controversial ads. Australians are [increasingly sceptical](#) of commercial and political influence on news, and seeking firm footing in impartiality is seen by some as a disingenuous refusal to be transparent about those conflicting incentives. But a lack of firm ground does not mean there is no ground at all. Acknowledging the realities of commercial

media may at least get us moving towards a more nuanced understanding of impartiality that recognises the limits of its application.



Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Gazette's grey teal funders



The Australian Electoral Commission has dismissed Victorian Senator Jane Hume's [complaint](#) that a local news startup is a "highly sophisticated digital disinformation campaign" designed to influence the next federal election.

[Gazette News](#), launched late last year, quickly rolled out its first five local news websites in Victoria and NSW. It was accused by the Liberal Party senator of being a front for the teal independents. Country Press Australia [agreed](#).

The complaint was based, in part, on Gazette receiving seed funding from three individuals who have also donated to Simon Holmes à Court's Climate 200 body. Both organisations have [denied that there is any link between them](#).

In [dismissing the complaint](#), the AEC said it did not consider Gazette's content to be electoral material and therefore not subject to authorisation requirements, nor was there evidence that it should be registered as a financial disclosure entity.

The Coalition's claim always appeared weak, but it reflects a familiar unease in the news sector: what expectations are attached to the money being given?

Gazette will be managing expectations through contracts and company policy. We don't know the detail of the former, but since [at least November](#) its website has declared that it has "a firewall between [its] funding sources and editorial process" and that it won't accept funding from political organisations, [including Climate 200](#). This is likely reflected in its agreements with funders: invest because you believe in the cause, not because you want specific editorial outcomes or any influence over coverage decisions.

The controls Gazette has in place could be stronger. Its [editorial policy](#) requires reporters to declare to management any conflicts of interest they may have with a subject, but there's no apparent requirement to communicate this to the public, nor guidance on how it manages organisation-level conflicts.

Proactive disclosure of its major funders also needs to be a priority. The three donors complained of [were named in a LinkedIn post last year](#), but the company's website contains no information about them. It is unclear whether these are the only three backers, or the only three willing to be named.

The US-based Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) [requires](#) its members to publicly disclose the names of any donors who contribute more than US\$5,000 in a year, and anonymous funding cannot make up a material part of revenue – it sets the cap at 15 per cent. Gazette is not a charity, and INN has no equivalent body in Australia, but the standards are an indication of how a more mature philanthropic news sector handles the tricky relationship between money, coverage, and trust.

Gazette was always going to face this kind of scrutiny on its independence from competitors. The company was founded by a former Change.org manager with no background in news, is cagey about the financial interests behind it, and has rapidly expanded into five highly competitive local news markets with well-established local products. It has not joined either the Australian Press Council or the Local and Independent News Association. It has acted like a disruptor, and the protective newspaper industry has responded to it in kind.

The AEC's dismissal vindicates Gazette, but there is still room for more openness, starting with disclosing its funders. Firewalls between business and editorial are good, but transparency is better. It's not enough just to tell your audience that you're independent of your investors; you need to give them enough information that they can reach that conclusion for themselves.



Gary Dickson
CMT Research Fellow

Liberating the tech bros

Every budget week for over a decade, I've recalled the audacity in Sarah Ferguson's opening question to then Treasurer, Joe Hockey: 'It's a Budget with a new tax, with levies, with co-payments: Is it liberating for a politician to decide that election promises don't matter?' Having since served as Australian Ambassador to the US, the former Treasurer is



now a source of advice on how to manage the Trump trade wars. And this week the trade wars came to the tech sector as it took objection to, among other things, a new tax.

On the weekend news broke of the attempt by [the Computer and Communications Industry Association](#) to have the US Government pressure the Australian Government to drop current and proposed regulation that it doesn't like. Included in the CCIA's lobbying efforts is the News

Media Bargaining Code as well as the proposed [News Bargaining Incentive](#). The 'incentive' is an offset against this charge that would be applied to deals the platforms make with news publishers. It's designed to address the possibility of Meta withdrawing from news in Australia if it's designated under the existing NMBC.

Also on the hit list is any proposal to make streaming services invest in Australian content, despite decades of regulation seeking to protect a small audiovisual market being swamped by the output from much larger English language markets (not just the US).

The real hutzpah of the tech claims lies in the apparent aim to have the US government *threaten* Australia with tariffs if the tech rules aren't dropped, without going as far as to *impose* these tariffs because tariffs would likely hurt their own business interests.

It should be said that our government has itself strategised, cajoled and bargained with the tech industry before. As a tech sector rep observed to me and Monica this week, our government played hardball back in 2021, threatening Google and Meta with designation under the News Media Bargaining Code if the deals with news publishers weren't lucrative enough. But in all of this, there was a genuine concern for the sustainability of public interest journalism. In contrast, the latest trade war opportunism comes after some companies have already taken steps to dismantle initiatives like fact checking, once seen as necessary to maintain public confidence, even in the US.

As one tech firm chases another in the march to 'liberation day', Ferguson's [question](#) might now be put to the bros: is it liberating to decide that commitments to the community no longer matter?



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

The viral hate machine



Earlier this month, Samantha Strable, also known as Sam Jones, fled Australia after a viral [wombat snatching](#) video sparked public outrage. Unfortunately, other women with the same name received hate messages and death threats on social media. In a similar but unrelated event, a mosque in Sydney's west was last week targeted by social media comments calling for a [repeat](#) of the 2019 Christchurch shootings. Both incidents bring to the fore the dangers of the rapid spread of online abuse.

Recent investigations by [ProPublica](#) and [FRONTLINE](#) have linked 35 crimes (including the Christchurch shootings) to Terrorgram, a Telegram-based hate network used by white supremacists worldwide to disseminate hateful content and promote violence. Terrorgram has been disrupted by recent arrests and Telegram's moderation reforms, but experts warn that users may migrate to other platforms.

There is a broader cause for concern with the content oversight of social media platforms. In the months after Elon Musk's acquisition of X (formerly Twitter), the relaxing of content moderation rules led to a [50% increase](#) in hate speech. Likewise, Meta's [turnaround](#) on "free expression" is expected to enable an annual surge of nearly [277 million](#) instances of hate speech and other harmful content on their platforms.

Since the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023, [real-life](#) and [online antisemitic](#) incidents have increased fivefold across Australia, while [anti-Muslim hate](#) more than doubled, predominantly targeting Muslim women.

Professor [Jorg Matthes](#) from the University of Vienna identifies three key processes that make combating online hate difficult: biased perception, where perpetrators see their actions as normal; moral disengagement, where they rationalise their behaviour "pointing to a greater moral purpose" or framing the targets as deserving the hate; and political polarisation, which reduces the effectiveness of content moderation and digital literacy trainings.

The Australian government's Criminal Code Amendment ([Hate Crimes](#)) Bill 2025 introduced mandatory minimum sentences for hate crimes but sparked criticism from

crossbench MPs and legal experts, who argued that the rushed legislative process could lead to serious injustices, particularly for vulnerable groups. While 70% of Australians refrain from reporting online hate because they don't think anything will change, and US and German citizens [oppose](#) severe sanctions (permanent bans, job loss, prison sentences) targeted at the sender, there is support for stronger regulation and action [targeted at the message](#) (post deletion).

Combating digital hate requires a multifaceted approach that includes an understanding of the perpetrators' psychological and social motivations, enhanced content moderation balanced with freedom of expression, and better cooperation between tech companies and transparent law enforcement.



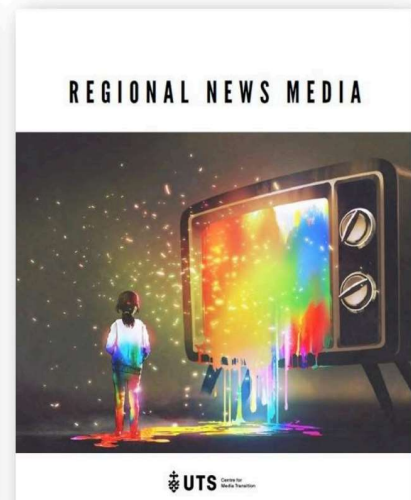
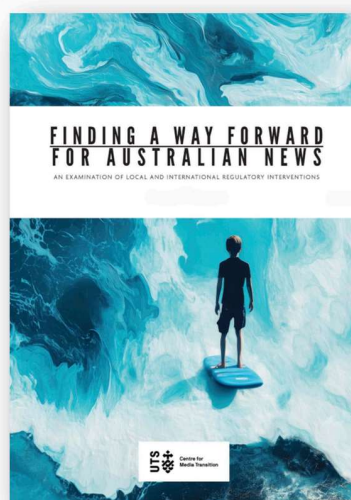
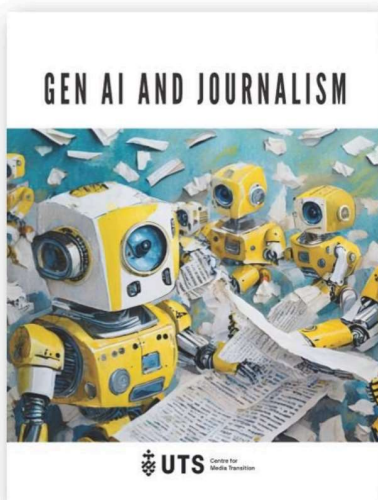
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We hope you have enjoyed reading this edition of the *Centre for Media Transition newsletter* | *Follow the money: legal battles, tech lobbying, and viral hate* | Issue 4/2025
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