

## Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

# A kiss-cam and a sex tape



Astronomers usually gaze outward from Earth. Earlier this month, however, two Astronomers found the world gazing at them. And now they're no longer Astronomers.

I'm talking about the couple caught canoodling by the kiss-cam at a Coldplay gig. As the pair tried to dodge and weave, their shame was palpable. Not because they were caught at a Coldplay concert (there's nothing wrong with that!) but because digital doxers quickly exposed

their identities. Turned out they were the CEO and HR boss at a company called Astronomer, which describes itself as an 'observability platform ... building reliable data products that unlock insights'. Spooky, right? And it turned out their canoodling was extra-marital. Late last week, [the HR boss resigned](#), as the CEO already had.

Also late last week, professional wrestler Hulk Hogan died. He too had been publicly shamed after being caught on camera in a compromising position. In Hogan's case, he was filmed having sex with his best friend's wife. But Hogan didn't lose his job. Rather, he pocketed \$47 million.

Today's newsletter explores fascinating and sometimes troubling developments in media and law. Heather Ford writes about landmark new research into climate change misinformation, which is growing more subtle and more insidious. Monica Attard asks

whether fact checking is on its last legs after Google turned off its support and Meta readies to do the same. And Alena Radina explores the curious world of AI influencers, who may not be real, but who make real money, before I return to Hulk Hogan, our hapless Astronomers and the vexing issue of privacy.

Speaking of AI, next week CMT will release its second report on generative AI and journalism. This follows [our landmark 2023 report](#), which surveyed editors in newsrooms across Australia on the ways they were preparing for how generative AI might impact their news output. This time, we widened the survey and found there is increased experimentation with AI, although Australia still lags behind other lands.



**Sacha Molitorisz**  
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

## Hot air and hard truths



The Information Policy and Integrity Exchange (IPIE) has released a [landmark review](#) on climate misinformation and disinformation, synthesising a decade of research across 300 studies. The review reveals a troubling evolution in climate disinformation tactics. Denialism is giving way to more insidious strategies — such as sowing doubt about renewable energy, exaggerating scientific uncertainty, and reframing climate action as elitist overreach. These tactics are increasingly networked and algorithmically amplified,

muddying public understanding and delaying urgent policy responses.

Our analysis identifies five dominant narrative frames used to distort climate science: denial of anthropogenic causes; distraction through unrelated crises; attacks on climate advocates; promotion of false solutions; and strategic amplification of uncertainty. These frames are not random — they are often deployed by powerful actors with vested interests in fossil fuel economies and political polarisation.

The United Nations has declared that access to [information about climate change is a human right](#). They've even outlined a set of [global principles](#) for maintaining the integrity of publicly available information about climate change. [Our study shows](#) that misleading

information is adding to the climate crisis.

Take, for example, the way in which critics swiftly blamed solar and wind energy for the massive blackout in Spain and Portugal on April 28. This was amplified on social media for weeks before the Spanish government finally [declared](#) that the national grid operator and private power generation firms were responsible due to the power grid's lack of capacity to control grid voltage. [According to](#) one of the lead authors of the report, Professor Klaus Jensen, mis and disinformation erodes public trust and impairs collective decision-making. It not only obstructs emissions reduction efforts but also delays climate adaptation.

Our review also evaluates countermeasures. While fact checking remains vital (see next item), it's not enough. More effective responses combine legislation to ensure standardised carbon reporting, litigation against greenwashing, education of policymakers and public media literacy as well as coalition building across stakeholder groups. Yet these interventions are unevenly applied and under-resourced.

For journalists, educators, and policymakers, the message is clear: climate disinformation is not just a scientific issue — it's a systemic one. Addressing it requires cross-sector collaboration and a renewed commitment to information integrity.



**Heather Ford**

Professor, UTS School of Communications

## RIP fact checking?



Fact checking is out of vogue and soon it might be out of options, with Google making moves to limit, if not end, the whole industry. Here in Australia, it's [decided to stop](#) funding [AAP FactCheck](#), which is unwelcome if not unexpected news. Globally, Google is downgrading fact checking too.

In the pre-internet age, fact checking was the domain of journalists, done in the normal course of their work. But in an era where information and misinformation has

flooded into newsrooms from all directions, including social media, fact checking done by

specialists has grown into an industry. It was given a financial boost by Meta after the 2016 US election, where Russian misinformation farms reportedly flooded US social media sites – primarily Meta-owned Facebook - with anti-Democrat messaging. But even before the election that spawned Donald Trump 1.0, it wasn't unusual to see a Facebook or Instagram post plastered with notices that the post contained unverified information, or false information.

Those labels originated with external fact checkers, now mostly extinct thanks to the politicisation of the industry since 2016 based on claims that fact checking bumps up too hard against free speech. The industry limped along until free speech 'absolutists' such as X owner Elon Musk agreed with political conservatives that people should be able to say what they like regardless of its veracity. The crowd will correct wrong information, said Musk, without the influence of ideological bias. Meta's Mark Zuckerberg agreed. In January 2025, as Donald Trump moved back into the White House, Zuckerberg announced Meta was abandoning fact checkers for X-style community notes. [As he said](#), 'Fact checkers have just been too politically biased and have destroyed more trust than they've created, especially in the US.'

Along with its decision to end funding of AAP FactCheck, Google has decided to end a global program called ClaimReview, a tagging system that lets apps, search engines and social media platforms find fact checks and surface them in individual newsfeeds or even search results. The system allowed fact checkers to attach code 'behind the scenes', [says Andrew Duffield](#), head of AI at Full Fact, a US-based fact checking site. 'Platforms like Google can read these signals and choose to show the content differently to a normal search results page.'

As the [Poynter Institute for Media Studies notes](#), 'More than 250,000 fact checks have been tagged with ClaimReview, and Google itself reported in 2019 that annual impressions likely reached 4 billion.' With 4 billion impressions, why get rid of it? Unlike with AAP, the decision isn't one that will save money, because the fact checks were provided to Google for free. Google says the end of ClaimReview will 'help streamline the results page and focus on other experiences that are more useful and widely used.' But Duffield is alarmed, because he says the move comes as Google AI begins to push quality information further down the page.

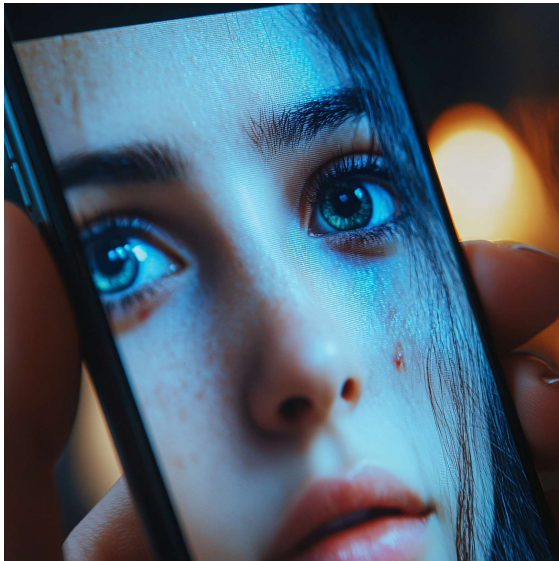
Without fact checking, the internet is going to be an even more unreliable source of information. AAP Fact Check might limp along till the end of 2026, when its current contract with Meta expires. After that, Australians will seemingly be left to rely on journalists to get it right. Apart from that, we'll be on our own to sort through the dross that floods our searches and feeds.



**Monica Attard**  
CMT Co-Director



# Monetising a mirage



In a world obsessed with shortcuts to success and wealth, [Mia Zelu](#) is the ultimate fantasy: a virtual influencer who skipped the everyday grind and even the basic requirement of existing. But audiences are still double-tapping.

Like the self-help hustlers and ['infogypsies'](#) selling success without substance, Mia Zelu markets effortless perfection, having gained 169k Instagram followers since March 2025 thanks to the careful curation of her AI-generated content

by an anonymous team. While Mia's Instagram posts are not labeled as AI-generated, her bio reads 'digital storyteller & AI influencer', a detail that some users may easily overlook, as Mia's divided comment section shows.

Many followers praise her 'natural beauty that glows indefinitely', send bot-like repetition of heart and rose emojis, ask to meet in real life, inquire about her outfits, and relate to the everyday challenges and future anxieties expressed in her captions. Others (a smaller group), however, find the content and user engagement disturbing. They point out odd visual details, like a professional video camera in the middle of the Wimbledon audience or a man in the background holding a tennis ball in front of his right eye, and question: 'Does it make him see the match better?'

Mia's viral Wimbledon imagery, including the Pimm's glass, sparked debates around potential branded partnerships, but there is no evidence of sponsorship or affiliate-based content. Although Mia's bio invites collabs, her team seems not to have monetised her following yet, although who can be sure?

Many other AI influencers have already carved out a new lucrative market ecosystem. Take Aitana López, a hyper-real AI model with 4.3 million followers, created by Spanish software developer Rubén Cruz. With recent Instagram paid posts featuring Adidas, Tiffany, and YSL, Cruz reportedly earns up to [\\$11,500](#) a month. At the lower end of the uncanny valley is Lil Miquela, launched in 2016 by an LA-based digital design company Brud. With 2.4 million followers on Instagram, her brand was built through collaborations with Chanel, Prada, Louis Vuitton, and even landed on [TIME's](#) list of the 25 most influential people on the internet.

Another cartoon-like AI influencer is a Brazilian digital retail queen Lu of Magalu, [number one](#) among the virtual influencers that earn the most from Instagram. Originally launched in 2003 as a chatbot for department store Magazine Luiza, Lu has since become a fully-fledged celebrity, with 7.8 million Instagram followers and an estimated \$34,320 fee per sponsored post, partnering with some of the biggest brands in the world, including Adidas, McDonald's, Red Bull, Maybelline, and Samsung, among others. Lu appeared in a music video alongside Brazilian singer Anitta and DJ Alok. She also competed on Brazil's version of *Dancing with the Stars*.

Over on TikTok, Nobody Sausage, an animated sausage, is the biggest AI influencer, with 22.1 million followers, partnerships with brands such as Netflix and Hugo Boss, and earnings of an estimated [\\$33,880](#) per post.

Sitting in the middle of the realism spectrum is Shudu, self-proclaimed 'world's first digital supermodel', created by a former fashion photographer Cameron-James Wilson. With 238,000 Instagram followers, Shudu gained viral fame through collaboration with [Fenty Beauty](#) and photoshoots for *Cosmo*, *Elle*, and *Vogue*, deliberately blending digital art and high fashion photography. Her posts are tagged with #Alart and #virtualinfluencer, but her lifelike appearance often leaves followers guessing.

A [recent Australian study](#) demonstrated that audiences may prefer less human-like AI influencers. Virtual influencers with moderate and high levels of human likeness left audiences feeling unsettled and were deemed as 'creepy' and less trustworthy. This is the [uncanny valley](#) effect in action. Participants were found to more likely accept messages from 2D digital personas that did not attempt to visually mimic human appearance.

In many ways, the integration of AI-generated materials into the social media influencer space seems a natural fit. Both trade on surfaces over depth, aesthetics above authenticity, and the history of Instagram's development has been rife with ethical dilemmas regarding transparency, trust, and representations of realness.

While some AI influencers trade on ultra-realism, and others bet on the appeal to digital fantasy and satire, the question lingers: with AI influencers, when does illusion outperform truth and fiction become the better business model?



**Alena Radina**  
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

## Telescopes and microscopes



The facts of the Hulk Hogan privacy saga are stranger than fiction. In 2012, a sex tape appeared online showing Hogan having sex with a model who was married to his best friend, a radio DJ. The sex was apparently consensual. The twist was the DJ was the one filming, with Hogan (and the model) saying they didn't know they were being filmed. Hogan sued the couple and settled out of court.

Then, when the Gawker website published an excerpt from the tape, [Hogan sued](#) the website for an invasion of privacy, intentional infliction of emotional distress and infringement of personality rights. Gawker refused to take down the clip, citing freedom of speech and the First Amendment. But in 2016 Hogan was awarded a staggering \$212 million by a jury, which was later reduced to \$47 million. The judgment bankrupted the Gawker website. It also set an enduring legal precedent: even in the US, where freedom of speech is highly protected, celebrities can successfully sue for some privacy invasions. The whole saga is complicated further because Hogan's privacy lawsuit was bankrolled by Peter Thiel, co-founder of data giant Palantir, which has attracted controversy for its involvement in government surveillance.

In Australia, we're in the middle of major privacy reform. Just last month, the new statutory tort for serious invasions of privacy came into effect. This belatedly brings Australia into line with comparable jurisdictions. However, journalists have an exemption from the tort, just as they do in the Privacy Act itself. This means you have little recourse if your privacy is invaded by journalists, even when such an invasion is not in the public interest.

This is poor. [In a 2023 submission](#), we argued that the journalism exemption in the Privacy Act should be retained, but only if accompanied by the introduction of a statutory tort without an exemption for journalists, and with increased requirements for journalists to be subject to professional standards and effective complaints mechanisms. Sadly, neither of those two provisos came to be legislated. In Australia, freedom of speech is badly under-protected; but privacy remains under-protected too, particularly when it comes to protections against unscrupulous journalists.

If a Hulk Hogan-style sex tape were published by news media in Australia, the Privacy Act and the new statutory tort would offer no protection. That's not to say there would be no recourse. The Crimes Act now contains s 91Q, which criminalises the distribution of intimate images without consent. And under s 91P, the recording of such images is also a crime. The maximum penalty under these provisions is a hefty fine or three years in jail.

What about our errant Astronomers? Would they have had any legal recourse if the concert had been in Sydney? Probably not, given all the disclaimers and notices about filming

usually posted around venues. What's more, I'm not suggesting that the kiss-cam should be illegal. But there is something creepy about it. At a 2012 college basketball game, one couple caught on a kiss-cam were visibly unimpressed, leading to boos and heckles from the crowd. As [one commentator noted](#), it looked a lot like 'harassment dressed up as stadium banter'.

The law can, and should, only go so far. I wouldn't propose a law that bans kiss-cams. On the other hand, I do think the law should prohibit the non-consensual recording and sharing of sex tapes, even of celebrities. And of course, the law is only one way to protect privacy. Tech solutions are possible too. This month, Michael Davis and I were part of a team from UNSW and UTS that was awarded a grant to research an AI agent that will empower individuals in the face of digital services that pay scant regard to consent as they vacuum up data. You know, like the way your [personal health app might be sending data to Facebook](#).

With all these AI news and AI influencers, it's hard to know where to look. But one thing's for sure: it's increasingly hard to avoid being looked at. How many cameras and microphones are trained on you right now? Your phone? Watch? Laptop? TV? Car? Doorbell? We live in a world of pervasive surveillance, of kiss-cams, sex tapes and Cambridge Analytica (for which [Meta has agreed to pay](#) Australian Facebook users \$50million). With our private lives being squeezed, we need to cherish the privacies that matter. The privacies that make us human. To help with that, we need to keep working to improve both privacy law and privacy tech, so that sometimes we can gaze out at the stars, or even just gaze starry-eyed, secure in the knowledge that no one is watching us.



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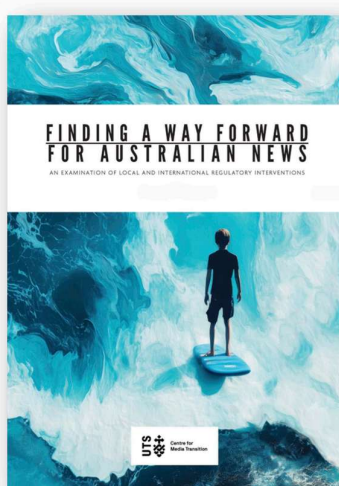
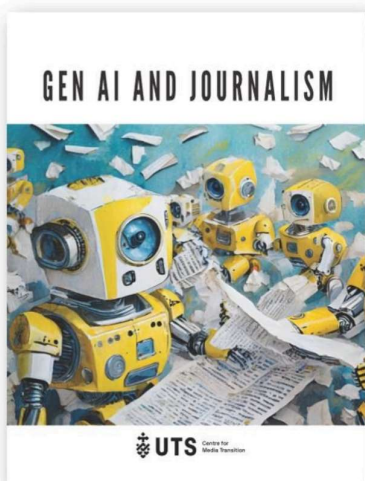
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