Centre for Media Transition

Hi there

Trust, technology and turbulence

Welcome to this fortnight's newsletter. A lot has been happening on the media frontline.

The Guardian, in partnership with researchers from the University of Cambridge, has introduced Secure Messaging, an encrypted and anonymous messaging platform within the Guardian news app. Based on Cambridge's CoverDrop technology, it even conceals that communication is happening at all. The open-source code for the technology will allow other news organisations to adopt the system for whistleblower safety.

Meanwhile, Australia's media landscape is facing continued disruption. Network 10 has announced job cuts across its Adelaide, Brisbane, and Perth newsrooms as part of broader restructuring and cost-cutting efforts. Staff were told they must relocate to Sydney or Melbourne or face redundancy. This happened just weeks after the cancellation of 'The Project' following a 16-year run. Similarly, the ABC has axed Q+A after 18 years, reflecting a wider shift in how newsrooms are rethinking content formats and audience engagement.

These changes come as public trust and consumption habits are in flux. A staggering 69% of Australians admit to news avoidance, citing negative emotional impact or distrust, while 57% identify online influencers as major sources of misinformation. In this newsletter, Michael takes a closer look at findings from the 2025 Digital News Report, focusing on public comfort with AI use in news.

As correspondents face growing risks while reporting on conflicts around the world – with Australian journalists recently struck by rubber bullets in Los Angeles – Simon explores a pressing legal question: should there be stronger institutional protections for public interest reporting in crisis zones?

Following discussions of "deliberate information warfare" between India and Pakistan, Tamara examines the rise of 'slopaganda', AI-generated disinformation crafted to manipulate political and social discourse.

And in light of the Erin Patterson triple murder trial and recent legal warnings issued to several news outlets and influencers for breaching suppression orders, Derek explores the growing friction between digital creators and the justice system.

Alena Radina
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Putting the AI cart before the news horse

This week saw the release of the annual Digital News Report: Australia (DNR) from the team at the News & Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra. With the report now in its 11th issue, longer term trends are becoming clearer even as they are disrupted by emerging developments.

One of these developments – and a focus of the CMT – is AI. We have been conducting research on the impacts of this technology since early 2023 and will soon be publishing a report on the second phase of our study. While our research focuses on industry perspectives, the DNR provides important insight into the thinking of the Australian public. In our research we have found that newsrooms are particularly concerned about maintaining audience trust; indeed, this appears to be a strong driver of the relatively limited implementation of AI in Australian newsrooms compared to many other parts of the world.

It is therefore interesting to see that public comfort with newsroom AI use is relatively high in Australia, and growing year on year. 21 percent of Australians (compared to 18% globally, and up from 17% in 2024) indicated they were comfortable or very comfortable with news

produced mostly by AI with some human oversight. Almost half of Australians (45%, up from 43%) were comfortable with news produced mostly by journalists with some help from AI. Newsrooms may be heartened by this latter figure, as according to our research, assistive uses of AI are the focus of experimentation in newsrooms, certainly far more than AI-produced content.

The young and highly educated are the most comfortable with AI use in news, as are news subscribers. These groups also tend to be the most trusting of and engaged with news and the most politically engaged, but also more likely to be concerned about misinformation. General trust in news in Australia is slightly higher (43%) than the global average (39%). But those countries where trust is highest, such as strong democracies in Europe, tend to be the least comfortable with AI news. This is not a straight correlation, however. A notable exception is South Africa, which has the third highest trust in news of surveyed countries at 55 percent and the second-highest comfort with AI news at 34 percent.

Interestingly, while 47 percent saw AI news as cheaper to make and 31 percent as more up to date than human news, 26 percent saw it as less biased, and 22 percent saw it as more accurate. However, only 17 percent saw it as more trustworthy. As Hal Crawford observes in his commentary on AI in the report, these figures should not necessarily be taken at face value. AI – to the extent that it is not hallucinating – relies entirely on published news for its content. Of course, any one news report may be inaccurate, but the idea that AI output could be generally more accurate (not to say more up to date) than published news is to put the cart before the horse.

The question of bias also needs unpacking. Bias in AI output is a well-known defect of the technology, and recent qualitative research from RMIT and others found AI bias to be a significant concern amongst audiences. It may be that those who perceive AI news as less biased than human-produced news have particularly strong concerns about bias in the latter.

Turning again to our research at CMT, we have found that newsrooms are particularly concerned about the long-term effects of AI on the news industry. This, unlike problems of accuracy and bias, is something over which they have limited control. Although audience use of AI chatbots for news remains very low, the increasing integration of AI into search engines and other platforms may reduce click-through rates to news sites, affecting subscriber and advertising revenue. Perceptions of AI as more accurate and less biased may drive greater use of AI for news, with the ability of these tools to quickly summarise multiple sources a potential boon for those seeking to verify or diversify their news.

It is likely to be some time before these trends are clarified.

Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Foreign correspondents and the duty of care

Last week, four Australian foreign correspondents, including Channel Nine's Lauren Tomasi, were shot at by officers from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The journalists were covering a matter of public interest: demonstrations against President Trump's Executive Order targeting the deportation of undocumented migrants, an issue affecting 11.1 million people living without legal documentation in the United States.

While much of the commentary has focussed on the conduct of the LAPD, the wellbeing of the journalists has also been at the forefront of reporting on the issue. One aspect that hasn't received much attention, however, is the extent to which employer media organisations have responsibility for their foreign correspondents. While this arises in the case of the LA demonstrations, it's even more pressing in major international conflicts.

In the absence of an international convention, we can turn to Australian common law and ask what protection it offers foreign correspondents. In particular, is there a duty of care that applies?

In 1975, five foreign correspondents (the "Balibo Five") were shot at and killed by Indonesian soldiers whilst reporting on the invasion of East Timor. A subsequent inquest demonstrated that although risk is endemic to this type of work, media organisations still have a responsibility to exercise a level of care for their journalists.

In 2008, the Suffolk Coronial Court acquitted the BBC from responsibility in the murder of producer Kate Peyton in Mogadishu, Somalia. However, the Coronial Court did offer some guidance on how the media organisation could improve its practices – recommendations that hold relevance within the Australian jurisdiction. More recently, in the 2019 case of *YZ v The Age* , the Victorian County Court established that the media organisation ought to provide "reasonable care" to a journalist suffering from trauma.

In 2016, Channel Nine was accused of lacking adequate procedures when gathering material for a 60 Minutes program on the purported abduction of Australian children in Lebanon. In 2024, the relevant ethical frameworks for Channel Nine were again reviewed. Yet the recent eighty pages long report into Channel Nine does not mention the potential Duty of Care once.

While there is no suggestion that Nine failed its journalists in Los Angeles, broader recognition of the Duty of Care could help media organisations develop stronger protective frameworks, especially in situations where they lack the capacity to directly intervene to secure the safety of foreign correspondents. At the least, foreign correspondents should be able to rely on a common law right to request training before being deployed to high-risk environments. While major media organisations provide training to meet the threat of accidental and mistaken attack, there has been less certainty about the benefits of a Duty of Care. This is likely to be a greater issue for those working for smaller media outlets.

Ensuring that the Duty of Care is adequately recognised by all would help beleaguered foreign correspondents scrambling for protection in unsafe situations. And foreign correspondents are more likely to have added confidence and protection in the event of physically witnessing conflict if they are reassured that they have strong support at home.

Simon Levett
UTS HDR Student

Slopaganda - a new word for AI spin

What do 'slithy' and 'mimsy' have in common? Aside from sounding like pet names for English aristocrats, they're both portmanteaus – words formed by blending two or more words that share similar sounds and meanings. Lewis Carroll popularised its literary use in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), where 'slithy' combined 'lithe' and 'slimy', and 'mimsy' fused 'miserable' and 'flimsy.'
It's a common way to describe new things or events, and love or hate it, we do it regularly. Personal favourites include 'Volfefe,' 'Bennifer,' 'brunch,' and 'tomacco' (clearly, some are more successful than others.)

At CMT this week, we had a good chortle about a new portmanteau describing a growing trend – 'slopaganda', a blend of 'AI slop' and 'propaganda' coined in a paper by Michał Klincewicz, Mark Alfano and Amir Ebrahimi Fard. As with any good portmanteau, it does what it says on the tin: it refers to unwanted AI-generated content aimed at manipulating beliefs for political ends.

Like traditional propaganda, slopaganda is designed to overwhelm the information environment with plausible-sounding material that distracts, misinforms or influences ideologies. The difference is, it's distributed instantly and at an unprecedented scale using social bots and algorithmic mechanisms.

Its other key distinguishing feature is that slopaganda can be personalised in a way traditional propaganda cannot. With a TV programme or leaflet, it's the same information for everyone. With slopaganda, messages can be tailored around a user's characteristics.

This taps into our tendency to seek out repetition and confirmation bias, making it easier for slopaganda to flood newsfeeds and overshadow credible reporting. With advances in AI technology increasingly accessible, slopaganda can be created by anyone, anywhere, anytime. It's no secret that terrorist organisations like ISIS are already using the technology for interactive recruitment, alongside groups looking to influence election outcomes.

Fighting slopaganda, or AI slop in general, may feel like a losing battle, but Klincewicz et al suggest that its impact could be curbed with a multi-layered strategy. This includes tactics like 'prebunking' (warning people in advance about misleading information) and introducing improved content moderation tools for AI detection. They even float the idea of a global wealth tax to limit the influence of corporations and oligarchs who use their capital to interfere with politics.

Despite the fun new name, our growing awareness of slopaganda – with its slithy knack for speed and mimsy half-truths – is a good thing. It reminds us that vigilance, media literacy and a commitment to journalistic rigour are more essential than ever.

Tamara Markus
CMT Research Assistant

Speaking in code - influencers & the law

Influencers don't want to be known by that name. They prefer 'content creator', even though the code governing their conduct is known as the Influencer Marketing Code of Practice.

Interesting point about the name, so let's start with that. I learned about this tussle over terminology at a Communications and Media Law Association (CAMLA) seminar on the law of influencer advertising. It was held at Gadens and featured one of their partners (Marina Olsen) along with an established influencer (and law student) Vanessa Li and

Adrian McGruther, founder of su:ku:ya, an artist management business.

I get the point about 'influencer': for some creators, the work is a lot more than just the commercial part and, indeed, it can be creative. That said, I'm hesitant to ditch the old term. This risks confusion of commercial and non-commercial content. Commercial intent was acknowledged at this seminar as a defining feature of influencer conduct. The need for disclosure of that intention remains critical, but more generally, the blurring of lines reminds me of that other dilemma: who should be recognised as a 'journalist'?

So let's go back to firmer ground and look at what the Influencer Marketing Code of Practice says. Oh, we can't, because I'm not allowed a copy, only a summary. That's according to AiMCO, the body that operates the code, which only makes it available to members. This makes me even more cautious. A few years ago, with colleague Karen Lee, I looked at various self- and co-regulatory schemes in the communications sector. The Influencer Marketing Code of Practice wasn't in operation at that time, so it's not in our study. But we did look at other schemes that would apply to content in influencer posts, if not to influencers themselves. Some of these codes deal with specific products or practices (eg, advertising of alcohol) while the AANA Code of Ethics is the more general self-regulatory code for advertisers (ie, brands), with a complaints scheme run by Ad Standards. I suspect if Karen and I ran our original research again today, we'd have no choice but to omit the AiMCO code; it's hard to assess accountability of a secret scheme.

So far we're not doing well in unpacking influencer regulation. Let's look at the final aspect covered in the seminar: the law. As the CAMLA participants and others have made clear, there's a lot of law that applies to influencers. For example, there's the Australian Consumer Law (eg, rules about misleading and deceptive conduct), copyright law, defamation and contempt. The last of these was in the spotlight recently when The Australian reported that a few publishers were warned of a possible breach of suppression orders or sub judice contempt in the Erin Patterson trial. One of these was an influencer who revealed she had no knowledge of the law.

It's great, in principle, that the industry appears to have taken ownership of the need to promote ethical practice. And I know it's galling when people who make no contribution to your scheme later claim they follow your rules. But this week's Digital News Report from the University of Canberra – see Michael's piece above – shows that in Australia, we're more likely to consider influencers and online personalities a major source of disinformation than any other source, including activist groups or foreign governments.

Closing ranks and not letting the public see the rules by which you work will not help protect consumers and build trust.
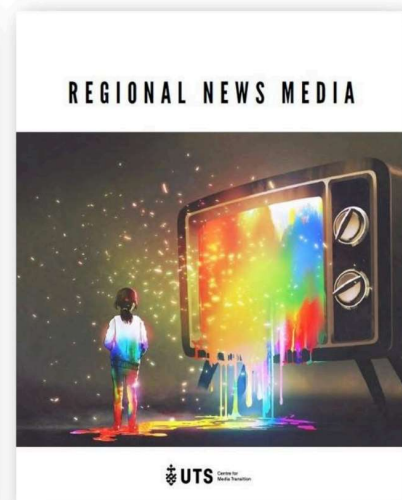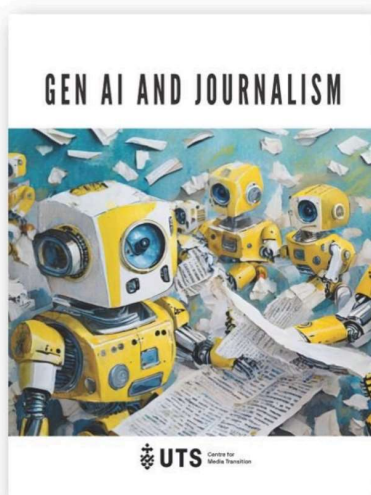
Derek Wilding
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We hope you have enjoyed reading this edition of the *Centre for Media Transition newsletter* | *Trust, technology and turbulence - Issue 10/2025* | **ISSN 2981-989X**

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