Hi there

A week is a long time in politics

Well, it's week 2 (or is it 3?) of the election campaign. And as news media focuses on gaffs and abandoned policies, in this newsletter, Gary Dickson is looking at the media regulator's first Media Diversity Measurement Framework Report, and Michael Davis is looking at the threat of deep fakes in this election campaign and what the Australian Electoral Commission thinks we should do about them. Kieran Lindsay takes a look at OpenAI's new image generation tool, which millions are signing up to use, and Alexia Giacomazi tells us about the latest Double Take podcast!

In the meantime, I'm fascinated by a bold generative AI experiment in Italy where the conservative newspaper Il Foglio is publishing a 4-page insert into one of its newspaper editions, available online and in print, every day for a month – only the insert is generated entirely by AI. Not one story is written or edited by humans. In fact, the only role humans play in the production of the inserts is to plug prompts and questions into ChatGPT. The LLM's responses are then inserted into the paper, unedited. Generative AI is used for all aspects of the production – headlines, quotes, summaries, and of course, actual articles.

Il Foglio's editor, Claudio Cerasa, says it is an experiment to test how AI can work "in practice" in a newsroom setting. He says it forces journalists to ask tough questions about what the technology means for the future of journalism. But does it? And does the experiment tell us anything we don't already know?

It was certainly a headline-grabbing idea, replete with oddities such as one story about 'situationships' which reported a trend amongst young Europeans to leave steady relationships, and the fact that none of the published stories quote human beings. As Digiwatch noted, the seriousness of the experiment was leavened somewhat by an amusing AI-generated letter to the editor in one edition asking whether AI would render humans useless in the future. The LLM spat back a quick "Who knows?" – AI doesn't yet know how to order a coffee without getting the sugar wrong.

What we know about generative AI is that it offers journalism a lot of upside – tools to improve workflows, transcriptions of audio to text, and video to text. It can break down complex documents and take away the time-consuming technical demands of digital production. But there are risks. It still hallucinates – gets things wrong – and replicates bias ingrained in training materials, not to mention the copyright issues which can arise whether or not sources are cited. All of this is evident in Il Foglio's experiment. But the biggest indication that there's little chance consumers will prefer AI-generated reportage to human-generated reportage is that human beings are not centred. News without human beings at its centre can make stories about 'situationships' very odd indeed.

Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

The evidence is in

The Australian Communications and Media Authority's (ACMA) first Media Diversity Measurement Framework Report is out. It's an impressive painting of the news media landscape, drawing on their own and other research to give a detailed picture of the producers, the content and the audience.

The Framework emerged from pre-COVID-19 reviews of media diversity and localism research and measurement schemes conducted by the CMT. ACMA shelved the program during the pandemic but dusted it off after the 2022 election when the new Labor government committed to "secure the evidence base" to inform its media policy reform.

Three years on and we have a sense of what that evidence base is.

The headline figures are familiar. Free-to-air TV is the most popular platform for accessing news, though social media is rising among 18-to-34-year-olds. Trust is highest at the public broadcasters but declining for the industry as a whole. The number of journalists in Australia fell by 19 per cent from 2011 to 2021.

ACMA also sets a baseline of around 2,900 professional news outlets across nine platforms as operating in November 2024.

A 'news outlet' in the Framework's definition is akin to the distribution platform of a 'news brand': the Sydney Morning Herald (a news brand) consists of two news outlets: its newspaper and its website. This explains the difference between this number and that of the Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI), which reported around 1,200 news outlets last December.

The report is full of caveats like this. The analysis is so reliant on external research – the news content chapter, for example, is entirely dependent on PIJI's sampling project – that consistency in methodology is all but impossible. ACMA has done an admirable job of pulling together what data is out there, assessing its quality against their Framework, and incorporating it where possible, which is often a harder task than designing and collecting something specific to your own needs.

ACMA has flagged that as it looks toward the next report it will further develop its own research and collaborate more closely with academia and industry. This work will need to include both media market monitoring and content sampling, following on from the end of this research at PIJI last year.

The next report is not due until end 2026, though ACMA has promised updates to its interactive dashboards in the interim. Two years is a long time in the media industry. Having designed and conducted the PIJI research that ACMA relies on for much of this report, I'd observe it's very difficult to retroactively collect this data. When things close, they tend to disappear from the Internet very quickly, and often without any fanfare. Data needs to be captured regularly if it is going to be captured at all.

The past five years have seen a lot of inquiries into the state of the news sector, mostly retreading the same ground. The Media Diversity Measurement Framework Report can hopefully be the last of these: it is as complete a statement about the Australian news market as has been produced.

We have the evidence base – let's get to reform.

Gary Dickson
CMT Research Fellow

Uncensored, unchecked, unstoppable
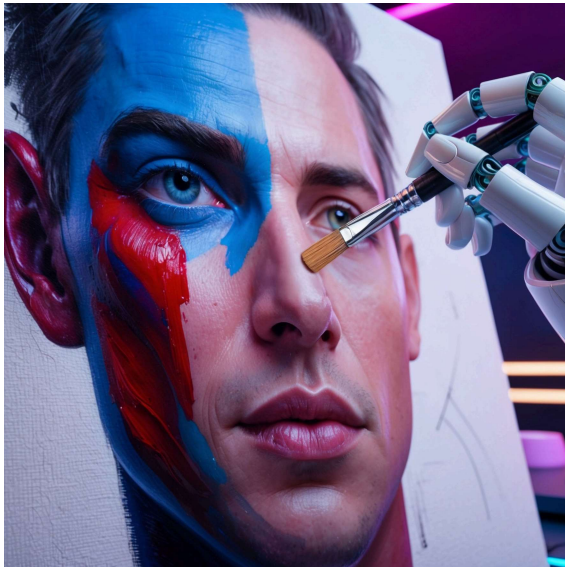
One million in one hour. That is the claimed number of new users to have signed up to ChatGPT on the back of OpenAI's release of new image generation capabilities. The new tool is more powerful, being able to generate legible text and photorealistic images of real-world figures, and at the same time, less censored, with the "aim to maximise creative freedom".

A more accessible, more powerful, and less censored image generation tool only exacerbates fears around AI deepfakes. We've already seen a flood of public figures being generated with seemingly few restrictions. Supposedly, you can opt out of having your likeness generated. A step our politicians seem to have decided against (or are unaware of).

There has been an obvious shift in attitude towards content moderation. OpenAI's previous models refused to produce images of celebrities or works in the style of living artists or studios. Additionally, in last month's update to its Model Spec, OpenAI outlined the preferred conduct of its models, notably encouraging greater engagement with controversial topics to promote "intellectual freedom". Elon Musk's Grok models similarly have few qualms about delving into controversial topics, even if these are to directly label Musk as a top misinformation spreader.

It's not really a surprise. The AI "culture wars" have continued to roll on with its focus on censorship. Last week, US Republican Representative Jim Jordan contacted companies asking for any past correspondence with former president Joe Biden that would suggest that he "coerced or colluded" to censor speech in their AI products.

The new model's release also quickly saw generating images and memes in the style of Studio Ghibli go viral. The White House itself published a Ghibli-style image of a crying woman, supposedly an illegal immigrant, being detained by an official. This "Ghiblification" trend turned up a 2016 clip of studio founder Hayao Miyazaki calling an AI technology he was being shown "an insult to life itself". The studio has not made a statement on this latest trend, but it has raised (*again*) the issue of AI and copyright.

An obvious question this raises is how the model became so good at replicating the Studio Ghibli Japanese animation style. OpenAI states the model was trained on a "vast variety of image styles". While we can't exclude that Studio Ghibli licensed its content for training, it would seem a pretty safe wager that, considering all the distinct styles users have been generating, not all are licenced.

Copyright issues are obviously on OpenAI's mind at present as it fights a lawsuit from US newspapers over the use of stories to train AI. It should be no surprise then that OpenAI is campaigning in the US to allow the use of copyrighted material for AI training.

Whatever concerns there may be, it's not deterring investors, with OpenAI last week raising the world's largest funding round by a private technology company.

Kieran Lindsay
CMT Research Officer

Please consider

With the election campaign in full swing, the Australian Electoral Commission is taking a pro-active approach to tackling the inevitable challenges posed by the digital media environment. It is once again actively engaging with electoral misinformation on social media, often humorously, despite the seriousness of its task. In January, the AEC announced the Voter's Guide to Election Communication, a compendium of advice for voters to promote digital literacy ahead of the election. It expands on resources implemented during previous national votes, such as a register of disinformation on electoral processes, and the 'stop and consider' advertising campaign. But it has limitations.

A series of videos offers advice about checking for reliable sources, being sceptical about motives, reducing impact by not forwarding misinformation, and being more aware of manipulative communication strategies. Reinforcing this message, the communication tactics catalogue explains common manipulative techniques, while the communication channels catalogue provides advice on common questions that arise during election campaigns, including whether bulk text messages, lies or deepfakes are legal. Another page provides advice on political influence, including transparency requirements for donations and restrictions on foreign influence.

There is also a dedicated webpage on AI and elections and video explainers on AI-generated misinformation and deepfakes. The webpage rightly observes that there is little evidence so far of deepfakes undermining elections, and a recent statement from the AEC noted that focusing on the perceived risks of AI to democracy "could by itself damage public

trust in democracy. We need to remember to keep things in perspective." Nonetheless, the webpage offers visitors advice on how to spot deepfakes, as well as where to report content of concern.

What does concern the AEC is a narrow range of communications that mislead or deceive an elector 'in relation to casting a vote', as well as communications that do not include required authorisations. The narrowness of its concern is no fault of the AEC's, since its powers are circumscribed by the Commonwealth Electoral Act. But it does result in the omission of a whole range of information that could support the public sphere in critical election periods.

For example, the catalogue of communication tactics draws on research in inoculation theory, an experimentally supported method of building resistance against misinformation and manipulation. But, as with the theory itself, the focus on individual psychology leaves a whole lot out of the discussion. Thus, while there is reference to political messaging and online media, the catalogue is essentially a compendium of logical fallacies. It includes little information, for example, about how disinformation campaigns work at scale. Understanding logical fallacies is important to critical thinking, but this is not much of a defence against efforts at mass manipulation using bot networks, sockpuppet accounts or state-backed troll armies, orchestrated attacks on trustworthy media, or more humdrum but disingenuous political communication strategies like astroturfing . Nor is it much of a defence against simple partisanship. And like the idea of a carbon footprint, relying on media literacy can deflect responsibility onto the individual rather than addressing systemic issues.

Information on some of these issues is provided on various government websites, including Home Affairs, ACMA, and the eSafety Commission. The government has also provided funding for digital literacy education in schools. But this fragmented approach to the problem won't count for much if we don't demand greater efforts from politicians, media and digital platforms to improve the digital public sphere.

Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

The judge and the journalist

President Trump continues to attack news media – with respected news organisations booted from the Pentagon and the White House media Corp whilst media sympathetic to the new President have been invited in, to silence the din of criticism. Since the interview was recorded, a US District Court Judge has overturned a Trump decision to remove the Associated Press (AP) from the White House press corp, over the organisations refusal to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. The Judge said the US administration

had retaliated against the AP over its editorial choices, violating protections for free speech under the U.S. Constitution. Donald Trump has signaled the White House will appeal the decision.

In the meantime, Voice of America and Radio Free Asia have been shut down and NPR – National Public Radio is expected to have what little federal funding it receives cut in the next few months.

It is hard to imagine - but President Trump has implied journalists getting shot is not necessarily a bad thing. So, how seriously is American news media taking the threats? Indeed, how serious is the threat?

This week on Double Take, Monica speaks with Liz Spayd, Lecturer at Georgetown Graduate School of Journalism and former Managing Editor of The Washington Post. Spayd was also the sixth and last public editor of The New York Times where she oversaw matters of journalistic integrity and evaluated the standards being applied across the newsroom. Monica and Liz discuss the challenges news media in the United States now faces under President Trump, including how best to report his administration. Listen here.

Alexia Giacomazzi
CMT Events and Communications Officer

We hope you have enjoyed reading this edition of the *Centre for Media Transition newsletter | Regulators, the Donald and 'situationships' | Issue 5/2025* **ISSN 2981-989X**

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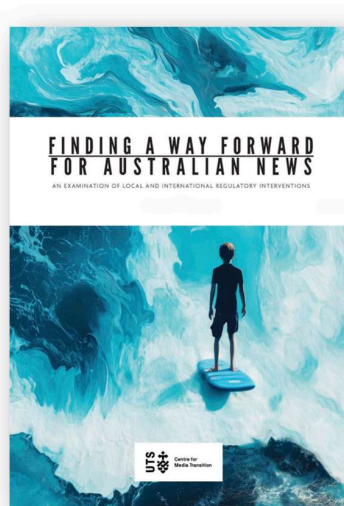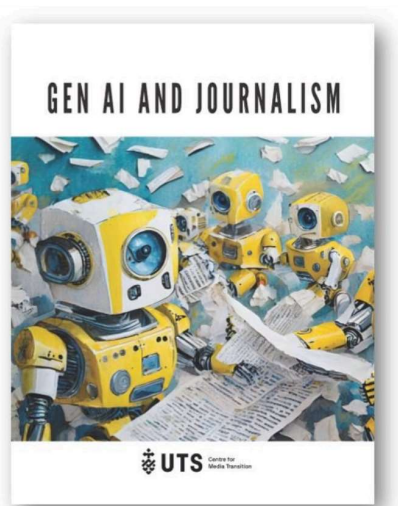
The Centre for Media Transition and UTS acknowledges the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our university now stands. We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for this land.