

Hi there

Election season: clicks, cash and chaos



As Australians prepare for the upcoming federal election and early voting is now open, new investigations reveal how industry-backed groups are increasingly using covert campaigns to influence public perceptions. The links were found between seemingly grassroots [Australians for Natural Gas](#) and Tamboran Resources, a gas company involved in the Northern Territory's Beetaloo Basin fracking projects. [Advance](#), another nominally grassroots organisation with affluent backers, recently used [friendlyjordies](#) videos—without

permission—as part of its anti-Labor social media advertising campaign. [Australians for Prosperity](#), a group that received donations from Coal Australia, was pulled up by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) for running unauthorised content on social media. The AEC is also closely monitoring the [Community Independents Project](#) over concerns it may be violating electoral laws by failing to register as a campaigning organisation, despite running online ads for teal independents, soliciting donations, and recruiting volunteers. In other developments, the AEC has issued [updated guidance](#) on authorisation statements for social media content.

Australian major political parties have collectively spent a [record \\$1.4 million](#) on digital advertising through Meta and Google platforms in the opening week of the federal election campaign. This spending spree underscores the increasing importance of micro-targeted digital outreach.

While New Zealanders cite ['Trump fatigue'](#) as the key reason for avoiding the news in 2025, and despite Peter Dutton's [approval rating](#) hitting its lowest due to his perceived alignment with Trump-style policies, Australian [free-to-air evening TV news](#) is experiencing a notable resurgence due to heightened interest in Trump, environmental incidents, and upcoming federal election. Contrary to global trends favouring streaming platforms, 7NEWS and 9News witnessed increased viewership in the first quarter of 2025.

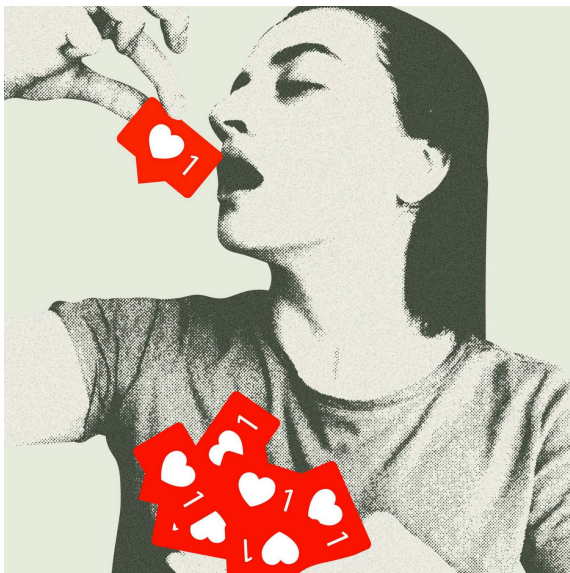
On another front, we have seen far-right ideologies infiltrate various media platforms around the world. [ABC News Verify](#) has uncovered that several Australian politicians have shared content from The Noticer, a news platform linked to neo-Nazi ideologies and supported by the National Socialist Network members. In [Sweden](#), violent far-right groups have been found actively recruiting children as young as ten by leveraging racist memes and videos on social media. And in [Germany](#), far-right actors affiliated with the Alternative für Deutschland have been documented "taking advantage of the EU's Digital Services Act limitations" and using AI to create and distribute propaganda that aligns with their ideologies.

These are turbulent and fascinating times of political upheaval CMT has been following closely. In this newsletter, Derek examines the Federal Trade Commission's action against Meta. Chris analyses YouTube's role in 'electioneering'. I connect the dots between Meta past scandals and Australia's upcoming youth social media legislation. And Alexia shares a must-listen digest of CMT's latest podcasts.



Alena Radina
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Thank you for being a friend



The golden bros at Meta can't make up their minds. Are they about family and friends or are they into public content?

'We've always put friends and family at the core of our experience', said Mark Zuckerberg. 'We will ... prioritize posts from friends and family over public content', said Adam Mosseri, then head of Facebook News Feed, now head of Instagram. That was [in 2018](#) when the company pulled back on its news publisher referrals, in the process damaging the business models of

some online publishers.

But the mood has changed. [Last week](#), Zuckerberg argued that sharing with family and friends is only one priority, with Meta now at the point where around 20% of Facebook content and 10% of Instagram content is generated by users' friends. [Reuters](#) reported Zuckerberg's observation that 'people just kept on engaging with more and more stuff that wasn't what their friends were doing'.

These latest comments were delivered at hearings before the US Federal Court for the District of Columbia in the [Federal Trade Commission's action against Meta](#). The FTC is claiming that Meta is 'illegally maintaining its personal social networking monopoly through a years-long course of anticompetitive conduct'. Meta's acquisition of Instagram in 2012 and WhatsApp in 2014 are central to the allegation that Meta sought to remove threats to what the FTC claims is its monopoly in social media services used to share content with friends and family. The FTC claims Meta engaged in a 'buy-or-bury' scheme.

Not surprisingly, [Meta denies the allegations](#), saying that it did not seek to eliminate its competitors, that it bought the apps to improve and grow them, and that they are now 'better, more reliable and more secure through billions of dollars and millions of hours of investment'. But it also argues that the FTC is working with an old conception of the market for these services. In fact, it has 'gerrymandered a fictitious market' that leaves out TikTok and YouTube.

Meta's latest downplaying of family and friends doesn't sit so well with the case it makes to Australian policymakers about the News Media Bargaining Code. Or at least, different aspects are emphasised for another regulatory defence. In February last year, when announcing its decision to not renew agreements with Australian publishers, [Meta said](#), 'We know people don't come to Facebook for news and political content – they come to connect with people and discover new opportunities, passions and interests'. In its [submission](#) to the Senate committee investigating social media where it explained people's reasons for using its platforms, Meta prioritised the desire 'to connect with family and friends, join a community group focused on an interest or passion, to connect with public figures, small businesses and other organisations'. This was accompanied by e-commerce and 'creator economy' functions as well communications about natural disasters. And in [evidence](#) before that inquiry, Facebook representative Mia Garlick said, 'there's been a massive shift that's occurred with consumer preferences. People are now primarily engaged in short-form video and primarily with the non-news comment'.

The 'family & friends v public content' dynamic in the FTC case is not exactly the same as 'family & friends v news content' in the Australian policy context. But in seeking to avoid regulation that forces it to compensate news producers, Meta is also keen to emphasise the substitutability of news on its platform: in its Senate submission, it said, 'most people do not come to our services for news and news is highly substitutable on our services – this means that when news is not on our services, people continue to engage with other content'.

In other words, even if it doesn't distribute much professionally produced news, Meta's platforms continue to serve as important sources of public information. As we've said on many occasions, it's reasonable to expect that certain social and regulatory obligations will attach to a prominent platform service that distributes public information.

Of course, it's anyone's guess how long Meta's current explanation of the role of its platforms will last. The 2024 [statement](#) announcing the end of Facebook News tab reassured us that, 'This does not impact our commitment to connecting people to reliable information on our platforms. We work with third-party fact-checkers ...and we will continue to invest in this area.' That's one friendship that didn't last.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

Electioneering on YouTube: opportunity or risk?



As election day draws closer, the electioneering on social media platforms continues. Mainstream [reporting has focused](#) on how politicians, including Prime Minister [Anthony Albanese](#) and opposition leader [Peter Dutton](#), have been appearing alongside podcasters such as [Abbie Chatfield](#) and [Lucy and Nikki](#).

Engaging with media personalities is taken very seriously, and this can be seen by Labor's engagement of Diamantina Media, co-owned by the founders of the satirical

Betoota Advocate, to advise on its ["re-election podcast strategy"](#).

While podcasts are worthy of attention, podcasting "influencers" are often well entrenched in traditional, or "old" media. For example, Abbie Chatfield and Lucy and Nikki have many years of combined experience in [radio](#) and [television](#) behind them.

YouTube has been around since 2005 but is still generally put in the "new media" box, especially by politicians. More than ever, this election campaign has seen political candidates engage with "new media" creators, including independent youtubers. This election-driven desire to reach youtuber audiences coincides with the increasing prominence of ["newsfluencers"](#), social media influencers who produce news content.

Independent youtubers provide political candidates great opportunities to reach younger demographics, as YouTube is where many [young Aussies go to get informed](#). However, it also comes with risks, as independent youtubers are less predictable, and harder to manage, than traditional media outlets. For example, without editorial or managerial oversight, an interviewee may have little recourse for complaint if treated unfairly. In this election's campaign, several politicians and political candidates have taken that risk.

Greens MP Max Chandler-Mather [appeared on Punter's Politics](#) for the channel's first ever politician interview. The questions were sourced from the channel's audience members, and it included live fact-checking of Chandler-Mather's voting record and asset declarations.

In the election lead-up, Six News Australia, a teenager-run YouTube channel and media organisation, has been busy interviewing politicians such as Centre Alliance MP [Rebekha Sharkie](#), Fusion party candidate [Miles Whiticker](#), and independents [Dai Le](#) and [Austin 'Aussie' Trump](#). The channel has even hosted [live debates](#) featuring candidates from the Libertarian Party, Legalise Cannabis Party, One Nation, and the Victorian Socialists.

It is not just independents and minor parties appearing on the channel. The [PM was interviewed](#) by a pair of Six News Australia journalists who, in less than fifteen minutes, grilled him on the cost-of-living crisis, his “broken promise”, the state of AUKUS, and what exactly Labor was offering young Australians.

The PM also recently sat down with another independent youtuber, [Ozzy Man Reviews](#), this time in person, in a pub. The two had a friendly interview with several beers, the PM's being zero alcohol. Despite the friendly vibe, difficult questions were asked—whether changes to negative gearing could help the housing crisis, and “why is it more straightforward to have clear convictions with Ukraine-Russia conflict than the Israel-Palestine conflict?”

Via independent youtubers, politicians may be able to get their messages out to hard-to-reach voters. However, this doesn't mean the topics of discussion will always be easy or predictable. The above examples show that independent youtubers are doing more than producing news content. They are also facilitating public discussion and holding power to account.



Chris Hall
UTS HDR Student

Tracking kids: Meta exposed, Australia acts



Australia has made global headlines again for its leading role in addressing online safety for minors. [TIME magazine's](#) recent cover story commends Anthony Albanese's proactive stance on digital safety and discusses the broader challenges of implementing the under-16s social media ban. Amid a growing panic sparked by the Netflix documentary *Adolescence*, senior [UK police officers](#) are urging the government to follow Australia's lead and regulate tech platforms that "fuel and enable" crime. Another trending

docuseries, [Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing](#), contributes to a broader dialogue on youth vulnerabilities and child exploitation in the digital era, spotlighting the need for protective measures and education.

While Meta is blocking [under 18s](#) from live streaming on Instagram without parental permission, [The Australian's](#) 2017 investigation has resurfaced in light of new whistleblower testimony. Before a US Senate judiciary committee, Sarah Wynn-Williams, a former Facebook employee, [revealed](#) that between 2014–2017, Meta tracked teenagers' emotional states in real time—based on their uploaded and deleted posts, interactions, and photos—and used that data to target them with ads, exploiting emotional vulnerabilities to drive engagement and ad revenue.

[70% of Australian parents](#) support the outright youth digital access restriction, citing the causal links between adolescents' heavy social media use and mental health decline (the views influenced by New York University Professor Jonathan Haidt's book '[The Anxious Generation](#)'). However, Australian and international academics and child welfare experts have expressed [concerns](#) about the ban, labelling it as "too blunt an instrument" that fails to address the [nuanced realities](#) of youth digital engagement.

To build "[optimal](#)" digital environments, proposed alternatives include stronger enforcement of [safety-by-design](#) settings, better content moderation, youth participation in policymaking, enhanced digital literacy, and parental co-creation and privacy-preserving strategies, encouraging families to navigate digital spaces together.

Although the social media ban has not been central in the federal election campaign, Anthony Albanese and Peter Dutton have previously expressed support for the policy. Australia's protective measure for youth mental health is set to take effect in December 2025, restricting access for young people to Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X and fining tech companies up to [\\$49.5 million](#) for failing to enforce age restrictions. With the UK-based [Age Check Certification Scheme](#) (ACCS) expected to deliver a final report to the Australian government by June 2025 that assesses age verification technologies, we will keep a close eye on how the reform develops in Australia and abroad.



Alena Radina
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

Tuned in? You'll want to be



This year on Double Take, we've had Sacha Molitorisz bring us The Year in Media Transition 2024, speaking with the ACMA's former Deputy Chair Creina Chapman and ABC's former Media Watch host Paul Barry on the state of news media in Australia and who should regulate it.

Derek Wilding brought an expert panel together to reflect on alternatives to the News Media Bargaining Code at a time when platforms are upturning the table. Author of the CMT report Finding a Way Forward for Australian News, Julie

Eisenberg, Editorial Director for Mumbrella Media, Hal Crawford, and lawyer, Angela Flannery provided their insights.

And earlier this month, Monica spoke to Liz Spayd, Lecturer at Georgetown Graduate School of Journalism and former Managing Editor of The Washington Post, on the challenges news media in the United States faces under President Trump, including how best to report his administration.

Listen to these episodes and more on [Spotify](#) and [Apple Podcasts](#) and don't forget to follow us!

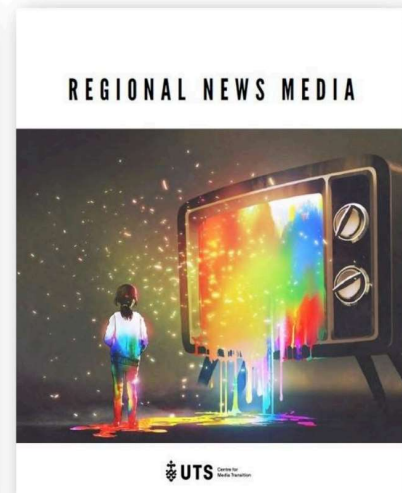
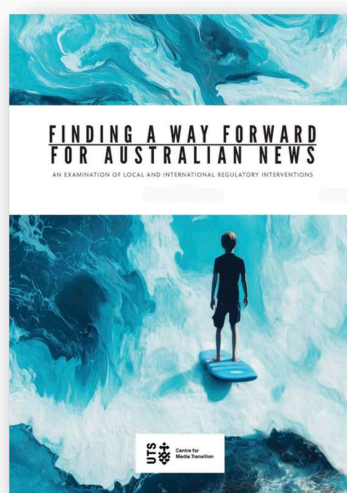
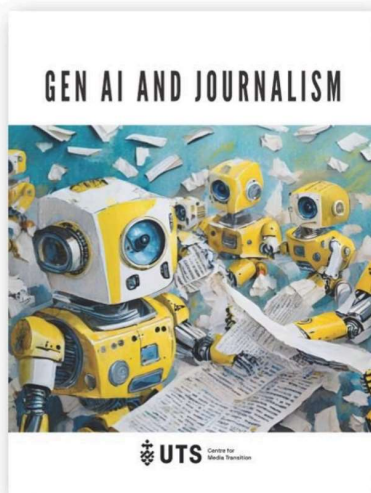


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