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Centre for Media Transition

Hi there

Influencers, illusions and information integrity

In recent weeks, the rise of influencer tourism in Afghanistan attracted Media Watch attention. It reminded me of the 'glossy' posts from North Korea that spammed my Instagram and YouTube feed last year.

In 2024, North Korea briefly opened its borders to Russian influencers, and earlier this year, to visitors from the UK, Canada, France, and Germany. But the experiment quickly backfired. 'Throwing off the careful rhythm' of official tours, influencers posed uncomfortable questions, filmed in non-designated places, and disrupted the carefully curated image Pyongyang aimed to project.

The Taliban seem to be taking notes and executing a more calculated strategy. Dr. Ayesha Jehangir, UNSW Lecturer in Journalism and Communication, stresses that through ‘special deal’ tours and direct recruitment online, the Taliban deliberately target influencers: ‘While Afghans in the country are going through one of the worst humanitarian crises and the systematic dismantling of social justice, Western influencers, including some women, are afforded special privileges such as security, access to restricted sites, and freedom of movement that ordinary Afghans do not have. These influencers are co-opted to whitewash the Taliban atrocities, depoliticize the regime’s repression, and spread misinformation about the harsh realities of living in Afghanistan, especially as a woman. They reduce Afghans to consumable “content” for foreign audiences, appropriating their

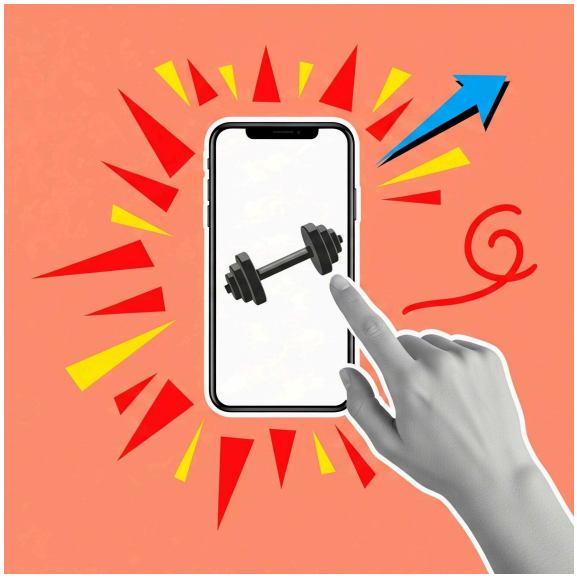
culture and presenting it through a problematic Western gaze.' CMT will continue watching this space.

In other news, CMT has written two submissions this month. Our submission to the Senate Select Committee inquiry into 'Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy' emphasised the importance of a broad-based accountability framework for digital platforms, greater attention to the spread of misinformation through traditional and online news sources, and efforts to improve scientific, information, and media literacy among the public. The other submission was on the Productivity Commission Interim Report 2025 – based on our recent Gen AI and Journalism report – and highlighted the failure to account for widespread unauthorised use of journalistic content by Gen AI developers, warning that a proposed text and data mining exception to our copyright law might harm public interest journalism; and called for holistic policy development to protect intellectual property and the sustainability of creative industries.

In this newsletter, Sacha examines the issue of privacy in light of the Productivity Commission's Interim Report on data and digital technology. Michael surveys recent tensions between government information practices, media freedoms, and the public's right to know. And I explore the future of political satire after a series of interviews with political cartoonists.

Alena Radina
CMT Postdoctoral Fellow

On privacy and dumbbells



Protecting privacy is a bit like doing bicep curls. Sometimes the effort hardly seems worth it. Will I really be stronger tomorrow? Or will I just have sore arms? I mean, really, it's so much easier just to sit on the couch and scroll through other people's workout fails, right?

Last month the Productivity Commission released its Interim Report, Harnessing Data and Digital Technology. Note, the report's title was not, *Harnessing Data and Digital Technology while Giving Privacy the*

Protection it Duly Deserves. At the risk of oversimplifying its 116 pages, the report recommends more productivity and less privacy. Sadly, the report was silent on bicep curls.

The Commission called for two reforms to the *Privacy Act*: one, the introduction of 'an alternative compliance pathway that enables regulated entities to fulfil their privacy obligations by meeting criteria that are targeted at outcomes, rather than controls based rules'; and two, that the government not enact a 'right to erasure'.

We argued against both these recommendations. In our submission, David Lindsay, Genevieve Wilkinson, Sarah Hook and I argued that an outcomes-based approach has significant limitations. What's more, we argued that a flawed assessment underpins the report. Above all, the economic *benefits* of robust privacy protections aren't adequately taken into account.

When people's data isn't held securely, there are enormous costs. We've seen this countless times, with the 2022 Optus data breach, the 2025 Qantas data breach and whatever data breach we'll all be reading about next week. These data breaches cost us all billions. Ironically, advances in AI, for which the Productivity Commission is advocating, will enable the development of sophisticated new data breaches.

But there's something further, which centres on trust. Productivity can only flourish in an environment of trust. Indeed, the Commission recognises this, when it writes:

> The productivity benefits of data access and use can only be realised if there is trust that the party providing access to the data has the right to do so, trust that the system of access is safe and secure; and trust that the party accessing the data will handle the data safely.

Trust hinges on respect for privacy. People need to be confident that information about them is being treated in a way that is not misleading or deceptive, and that respects their consent, and that is not unfair. People will be much more prepared to engage in a digital economy if they are confident that the conversation they have in a private online chat is not going to be used by a bank to deny them a loan, or by an insurance company to deny them a policy, or by an employer to deny them a job.

Currently, such trust is in short supply. Engaging online, people can have little confidence in confidentiality when data is being used by search engines, social media companies and data brokers for maximum profit. Today's digital environment isn't a case of maximising productivity; it's a model for maximising profit at the expense of privacy.

To protect privacy properly, we need rights-based protections, including a right to erasure. On this, the Report fails to address the costs of *not* implementing a right to erasure, which would allow individuals to request deletion of personal data from an organisation's records

under specific conditions. Put simply, Australians deserve the right to informational self-determination.

The adequate protection of privacy needs more, including ex ante protections, just as the ACCC has recommended for better consumer and competition protections from harms caused by digital platforms. Just like cars need seat belts, businesses who deal in data need legal limits. Their data practices need to respect consent, be fair and reasonable, and be transparent.

As with bicep curls, the due protection of privacy involves some heavy lifting. And as with bicep curls, privacy is important for reasons that are often subtle, indirect and long-term. But those benefits can be cumulative. Ultimately, proper privacy protections will not only enhance our well-being, they can boost productivity.

Sacha Molitorisz
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

Privileged narratives

Despite being elected partly on a platform of increased government transparency, the Albanese government is by many accounts even less transparent than its predecessor. Research released by the Centre for Public Integrity in July showed that the current government is performing worse on both Freedom of Information requests and Senate production orders than the Morrison administration. These are critical means for informing the public about government decision-making. But the government's poor performance is evidence not so much of operational difficulties as of a deeper problem in how it understands its relationship with the media and with the public. On this view, information about the workings of government is a privilege to be granted, rather than a duty to be fulfilled.

This understanding is revealed across a spectrum of examples. At one end, we might hold up the government's refusal to drop the prosecution of whistleblower Richard Boyle; at the other, perhaps, the disrespect shown to local journalists who were excluded this month

from the prime minister's press conference during the Pacific Islands Forum. While they were not Australian journalists, they have as much, if not more, of an interest in the Albanese government's plans in the Pacific as Australians do. And part of this interest is in understanding how Australia projects its relationship with Pacific nations. While Albanese spoke of Australia's membership in the 'Pacific Family', his exclusion of local journalists, as Jone Salusalu put it in the Fiji Times, 'threatens to reinforce a narrative that Australia is more focused on controlling its own story than on being a responsible regional partner to Pacific communities.'

That narrative is being reinforced on our own shores, too, in reports of a creeping parliamentary culture of 'strings-attached drops', where press releases are embargoed until a particular time of the government's choosing and many include instructions that no third-party comment is to be included in the initial coverage. ABC reporter Gareth Hutchens describes being subjected to a tirade of abuse by a Turnbull staffer — an ex-journalist no less — for including a third-party quote in his write-up of a release, even though it was taken from previous coverage of the issue.

The government should have no expectation that journalists will support their own carefully managed narrative. The public's 'right to know' is not satisfied by the amplification of government narratives across the media, but only by the application of the rigorous scrutiny appropriate to a free and robust democracy. Hutchens argues that it is within the media's power to curtail the culture of parliamentary capture. But to do so, they will have to overcome the problem of collective action, where no journalist wants to break ranks for fear of being ostracised by the government. Here, perhaps, industry bodies could play a role, including the seemingly moribund Right to Know coalition. This collective action could go beyond a refusal to kowtow to the government's demand to control the narrative. There is certainly room to consider developing a code of conduct that sets explicit expectations for government practice. While it may not be enforceable, it would at least provide a public benchmark.

Looming over all this is the prospect of the government legislating its warped understanding of the public's right to know in proposed reforms to the Freedom of Information Act. These would allow all but the simplest requests to be denied on the basis of the work it takes to comply with them and expand the range of documents exempt under cabinet privilege. Now would seem an opportune time for the industry to band together once again.

Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Low-level hum in the background

Although it was later reconsidered, the kneejerk decision by ABC America to suspend Jimmy Kimmel's late-night talk show became a flashpoint in the ongoing debate around free speech and the limits of satire. And if a flagship TV program can be threatened to be shelved indefinitely, what hope is there for the world of political cartooning?

'Comedians and editorial cartoonists are from the same family,' notes Ann Telnaes. They are all satirists. Over the past few months, I've been interviewing political cartoonists from a range of countries and career stages to gauge the future of cartooning. Many believe their artform will withstand growing editorial pressures, the rise of AI, and reduced avenues for young creatives to hone their craft. But they warn that cartooning depends on democracy itself enduring, and that new forms are needed to reach younger audiences.

Reflecting on the resilience of his medium, British editorial cartoonist and writer Martin Rowson says, 'They may try to suppress political cartooning, which they're very successful at doing, but it will find another route… There'll always be somebody else to do it… Laughter is an evolutionary survival mechanism.'

This sentiment is echoed by Chinese-Australian cartoonist, artist, and right activist Badiucao (known internationally by this pseudonym to protect his identity), who sees satire evolving rather than disappearing: 'I wouldn't really cry for the dying of cartooning itself… The desire to create political satire will always be alive, and online tools are helping ordinary people keep it booming.'

Yet the profession faces tangible challenges. Editorial illustrations, historically a training space for young cartoonists, are under AI threat. Morten Morland – the Norwegian UK-based cartoonist – anticipates 'a counter-movement to the AI-ness of everything… While cartooning would probably be one of the later ones to go, illustration jobs – the bread-and-butter jobs in visual – are properly at risk.' New generation British cartoonist Ella Baron agrees: 'Fewer entry-level illustration jobs mean fewer young cartoonists learning the craft and developing their style.' Ella also points to AI's limits in producing a truly nuanced work: 'Because I draw digitally, I'm always worried about people thinking it's AI-made. I occasionally do use AI to generate references for complicated objects or specific angles, but that will never make it into the actual drawing. AI can't replicate the control, accuracy, and specificity cartoonists need.'

It is not enough to compose accurate political commentary deciphered only by news junkies. As Ella observes, reaching Gen Z requires speaking to their concerns: ‘Cartoons work well on social media, but we need to tackle issues younger audiences care about, like climate, gender… bigger topics, not just Westminster gossip.’ The new generation of cartoonists like Ella are increasingly moving beyond traditional political coverage – experimenting, for example, with the graphic reportage forms facilitated by NGOs – to tackle global issues, humanitarian crises, and broader social debates.

The practice and dissemination of political cartooning must always be understood in the context of the political ideologies and regimes influencing audiences. Badiucao believes the survival of political cartooning is inseparable from the perseverance of healthy democracy. ‘The real threat is the retreat of democracy as a mainstream narrative globally,’ he says. ‘Political cartooning, the dissent, the media depend on civil freedoms to hold government powers to account.’

Despite pressures, the cartoonists agree that the core impulse of satire remains strong. As Martin Rowson captures vividly, ‘the end of cartooning will come when we have universal peace and happiness. And then somebody’s going to come along and produce a cartoon complaining about the deafening noise of the angels’ wings beating.’

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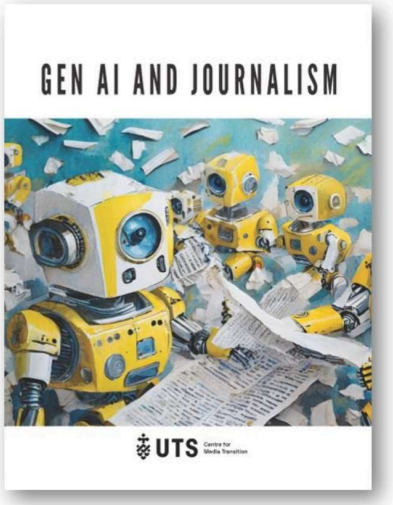

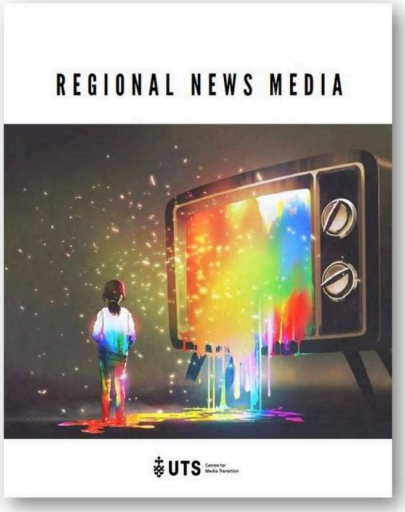

The Centre for Media Transition and UTS acknowledge the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our university now stands.
We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for this land.