

Hi there

## The axe swings on



A month barely passes without news of another media outfit in financial trouble. Last week, the [BBC announced](#) it would cut 10 percent of its staff, or between 1800 and 2000 positions. The organisation attributed the cuts to cost inflation and declining licence fees, BBC's main revenue source. Licence fees are paid by individuals to access free-to-air television. Although 94 percent of adults [use BBC services every month](#), the proportion of households paying licence fees has dropped to 80 percent, down from 90 percent. The cause: the accelerating shift to streaming services. The UK government is in the midst of a review of the BBC funding model, but it seems that it has come too late.

Here in Sydney, on a much smaller scale, local outfits are also again under threat. In this week's newsletter, Monica looks at the announcement by university-run (including UTS) community radio station 2SER that it may have to cease operations.

Turning to a story that has garnered a great deal of attention over the past week, Sacha reflects on the news investigations that led to the arrest of former SAS soldier, Ben Roberts-Smith, on charges of committing war crimes.

Finally, I look further afield to Hungary, where Viktor Orbán lost power after 16 years, in

one of the first elections since Meta and Google pulled political advertising from their platforms in Europe.



**Michael Davis**  
CMT Research Fellow

## 2SER down to the wire



Little can beat on-the-job training – especially for journalism students. Learning to write and fact check news under pressure, with the adrenalin rush of getting it to air, is hard to mimic in a classroom setting. That is not to downplay the value of classroom learning, which has its own merit. But putting what you learn in the classroom into action is a different and highly valuable experience, which is why UTS and Macquarie University created 2SER some 45 years ago.

Since then, it's been the home of some groundbreaking news and current affairs programs, such as *The Wire*, which have helped journalism students spirit their way to legacy media. The roll call is impressive – Michael Rowland (ABC), Robbie Buck (formerly ABC), Jill Emberson (formerly ABC Newcastle), Amanda Collinge (ABC TV Compass), Ginny Stein (journalism discipline lead, UTS), Eleanor Hall (artist and formerly ABC Radio host), and many others. The educational and community station has kick started many a career.

Now 2SER is under serious threat. Its core funding is about to be effectively halved, after a [decision](#) by Macquarie University in September 2025 that the partnership with 2SER was 'no longer part of the university's strategic alignment, financially sustainable, or necessary for student experience.' The university went on to say that 2SER had been given 15 months' notice to find other sources of funding, although it wasn't until early this year that the station began its search for more funds in earnest. And whilst UTS says it's committed to continued support for the station, it seems no one else is – at least not yet! Two other universities have passed on the chance to have a stake in a broadcast licence.

The problem is made even more urgent by the rather significant issue of its broadcasting licence renewal by the regulator, the ACMA. The current 2SER licence [expires](#) in October 2027. That

sounds like it's a long way down the line, but the ACMA [reminds](#) a licence holder 14 months before the expiry of current licences that applications for renewal should be lodged 6–12 months before expiry. That means 2SER needs to lodge the required documentation with the ACMA no later than April 2027 and preferably by October 2026. The clock is ticking – and the process of proving to the regulator that a community radio station can comply with its obligations can be arduous.

To renew a licence, the ACMA may, [at its discretion](#), require the applicant to detail, amongst other things, whether the applicant is able to provide the proposed service. And this is tricky for 2SER, without a commitment from another funder to take over where Macquarie University is leaving off at the end of this year.

That leaves narrowing options, amongst them the transfer of the licence to another not-for-profit interest group. Cheryl Northey, the 2SER Managing Director told staff in an email last week, 'This option would need to ensure that any such organisation could not only meet the requirements of being the 2SER licence holder but also be able to operate at a substantially lower cost basis than the station operates on.' For a station that already runs on the smell of an oily rag, the prospect of lowering operational costs must have sent shivers down the spine of staff who've been working under a huge financial cloud since the Macquarie University decision. And that's before asking whether the ACMA would agree to transfer the licence.

With Macquarie University funding ending in December this year, the station may need to stop broadcasting in July if it's to meet all employment termination obligations to current staff. There will be an outpouring of grief if that happens. 2SER has been a fixture in the Sydney metropolitan broadcasting landscape over the years, if one whose output has waxed and waned in impact and reach. Its supporters say the almost half-a-million dollars needed to top up UTS's contribution and keep 2SER alive isn't much to ask for, and it doesn't sound like a lot until you consider universities across the country are making academics and professional staff redundant in their hundreds, claiming financial distress.



**Monica Attard**  
CMT Co-Director

## Lest we forget

On the eve of our national day commemorating wartime sacrifice, the Ben Roberts-Smith saga takes on even more significance. On the one hand, Roberts-Smith is Australia's most decorated soldier. On the other hand, he has been charged under a provision that carries a maximum penalty of life in prison. Whatever your view, this is a big story, squarely in the



public interest and deserving of news media attention. So, how does the news media coverage stack up?

When Roberts-Smith was arrested at Sydney airport on a sunny Tuesday morning earlier this month, the Australian Federal Police didn't name him [in their media release](#): 'A former Australian Defence Force member, 47, has been charged under a joint investigation between the AFP and the Office of the Special Investigator. The man ... has been charged

with five counts of war crime – murder under section 268.70(1) of the *Criminal Code* (Cth). The maximum penalty for this offence is life imprisonment.'

Naturally, the news media were more forthcoming, [publishing detailed accounts](#) of how the arrest unfolded aboard a domestic flight, as well as extensive photos and videos. [Roberts-Smith later described](#) the arrest as a 'sensational' and 'unnecessary spectacle.'

With Roberts-Smith behind bars, there were contrasting approaches taken by journalists. There were even contrasting approaches on Sky News. While Peta Credlin called the arrest a 'tragedy' for the armed forces and Australia, [Andrew Bolt backed the arrest](#): 'Even if we wanted to ignore the allegations against Ben Roberts-Smith, that would be more dangerous than charging him – as well as being, in my opinion, disgraceful.'

Last Friday, after 10 days in Silverwater prison, Roberts-Smith was released on bail. Naturally, a scrum of journalists was waiting to meet him, but Corrective Services officers tried to sneak him out the back door. They nearly succeeded too, but for *Sydney Morning Herald* photographer Sam Mooy. The paper later published a [behind-the-scenes account](#) of how he'd captured his photos, despite officers trying to block him. While Corrective Services said the measures were necessary to ensure the safety of the high-profile inmate and the public, the behind-the-scenes account was compelling and illuminating.

On Sunday, [Roberts-Smith addressed the media](#) for the first time since his arrest, recognising the public interest in the case, but requesting privacy for his family. And on Monday, he reported to police, although news accounts didn't specify the location of the police station. As [news.com.au reported](#), 'The former Australian Special Air Services (SAS) Corporal appeared relaxed on Monday morning — dressed in sneakers, shorts and a singlet when he arrived at a police station as part of his bail conditions. Pictures obtained by news.com.au showed him flashing a grin at the camera as he visited the station, which he must do three times a week.' It cited an 'undisclosed NSW station'.

The whole saga started with the sustained investigative journalism conducted by Nick McKenzie and Chris Masters. As McKenzie [told 2SER's Fourth Estate program](#) this

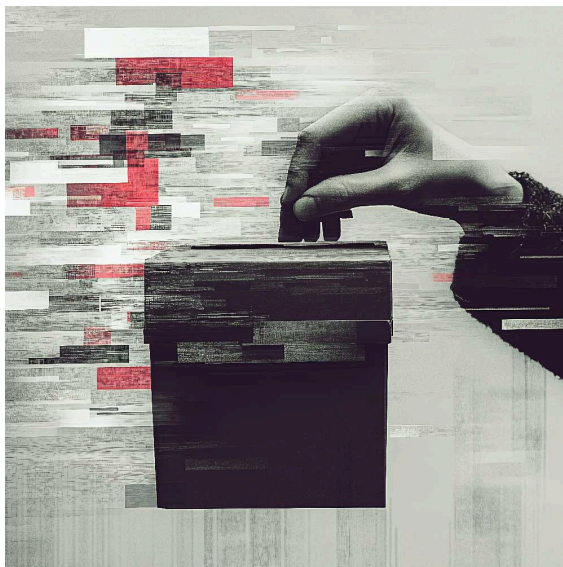
month, their collaboration started in 2017, after Masters published his book, *No Front Line: Australian special forces at war in Afghanistan*. During his research into Australia's elite special forces, Masters had encountered many stories of bravery. However, he'd also heard whispers about misconduct. So the pair started digging. Initially, McKenzie says, he was 'very skeptical', but the independent accounts kept corroborating one another. Their stories were published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, leading to arguably [Australia's most expensive defamation trial](#), which ultimately found the reporting of McKenzie and Masters to be substantially true. An appeal was dismissed [by the Full Court of the Federal Court](#) in May last year.

The criminal trial will take time. Whatever the result, the reporting of McKenzie and Masters has already been vindicated for its accuracy and bravery. No wonder they both rank among Australia's most decorated journalists.



**Sacha Molitorisz**  
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

## Poll-axed



The electoral defeat of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, after 16 years in power, brings to an end his long and relentless campaign to [undermine media freedom](#), including purges at the public broadcaster and the targeting of independent journalists with charges of espionage and sedition.

The Hungarian election was also one of the first national votes after Meta and Google, which dominate the European online advertising market, both decided last October to

prohibit political advertising on their platforms within the EU. Their decision was brought on by the obligations each faced under the EU Regulation on the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising.

This law, which came into effect on 10 October, places obligations on actors across the political advertising supply chain, from political parties, advocacy groups and PR companies who buy advertising space, to digital platforms and other publishers which sell

advertising spots. These obligations include clear labelling of political advertisements, periodic reporting and public complaints mechanisms.

The law also disallows ads by non-EU citizens in the lead up to elections, prohibits user profiling using sensitive or 'special category' information, including political opinions, and requires explicit consent from users for data harvesting for the purpose of political advertising. As well as onerous regulatory obligations, then, the law potentially undercuts the business model of large platforms, which relies on user data.

In the run up to the Hungarian election, some feared that Meta's and Google's shutdown of political ads would open space for disinformation and propaganda to spread through other channels and make campaigning difficult for opposition parties. Indeed, online platforms were reportedly [flooded with deepfake videos and messages](#) attempting to discredit opposition candidates, with many promoted by Russian-backed disinformation operations. Some of these were even propagated via Facebook advertisements, circumventing the platform's ban. Yet, journalists at Hungarian fact-checking outfit Lakmusz [argue that the shutdown](#) had a net-positive effect by severely disrupting Fidesz's propaganda machine, which [spent 5.4 million euros](#) on political advertising during the 2024 EU elections.

[Meta contends](#) that the EU's political advertising regulation left it with an impossible choice: 'to offer an advertising product which doesn't work for advertisers or users, without guarantee that our solution would be viewed as compliant, or stop allowing political, electoral and social issue ads in the EU.' Of course, since they made it, the choice was not impossible. Yet, although the effect in Hungary may have been a reduction in state-backed disinformation, [concerns remain](#) that the ban will generally make it more difficult for political candidates to reach voters, particularly if they are not savvy with social media.

We will see how this plays out as other European nations go to the polls over the coming years. Either way, it will have lessons for other jurisdictions, including Australia, as we continue to grapple with how to manage online misinformation and misleading political advertising.



**Michael Davis**  
CMT Research Fellow

We hope you have enjoyed reading this edition of the *Centre for Media Transition newsletter* - Swinging the axe - Issue 5/2026

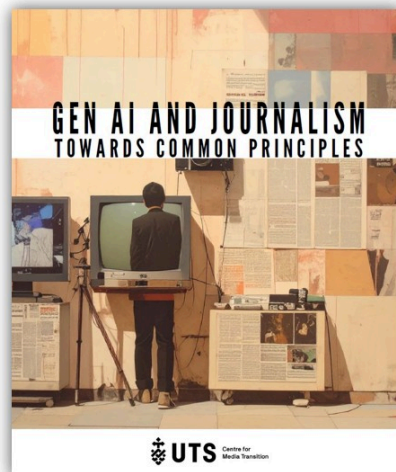
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The Centre for Media Transition and UTS acknowledge the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our university now stands. We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional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



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