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Centre for Media Transition

Hi there

Money, money, money

Hello CMT followers and welcome to this newsletter.

You can't have escaped news of the Albanese Government's fifth budget, brought down last week by Treasurer Jim Chalmers. The Treasurer clearly has an eye on legacy-making, given the structural tax reforms that begin the shift of wealth-making to younger generations. Given the enormity of the governments' win at the last election, the time until the next one and a calculation that any required legislation will pass the Senate, there could not have been a better time to make some tough decisions. Of course the haggling begun and we will see in the coming months whether the government gets it way.

But for media, there was good news.

The ABC gets an extra $58 million so that in 2026-2027 it will be living on an annual budget of $1.3 billion. By 2030, its budget will have increased to $1.4 billion, which sounds like a lot but, in reality, is probably on the low side, given an increase in the number of employees and an increase in pay rates, following ABC staff’s historic 24-hour strike.

On the upside, the national broadcaster’s work on the government’s Indo-Pacific Broadcasting strategy gets a very healthy $14.1 million lift over two years via DFAT. That strategy “provides a framework to strengthen and expand Australian broadcasting and media sector engagement across the Indo-Pacific". The extra funding will help the ABC continue to build capacity in a region that previous governments cast out of their financial considerations.

The government is also continuing to support Australian Associated Press, which in 2020 was near to closure after a storied 85-year long history of providing public interest journalism. It was saved by a consortium of investors and philanthropists and has since had its coffers bolstered by government. That government support will continue in 2026-27 with a $15 million boost, which is great news for AAP’s journalists and the Australian news media ecosystem.

There was good news too for the commercial news sector. The commercial broadcasting tax is being suspended for a further two years to give commercial television and radio a bit of breathing space. If they spend it on journalism and Australian content rather than new carpet on their executive levels, the projected $111.3 million loss to government over the full five years from 2025 to 2030 will be worth it.

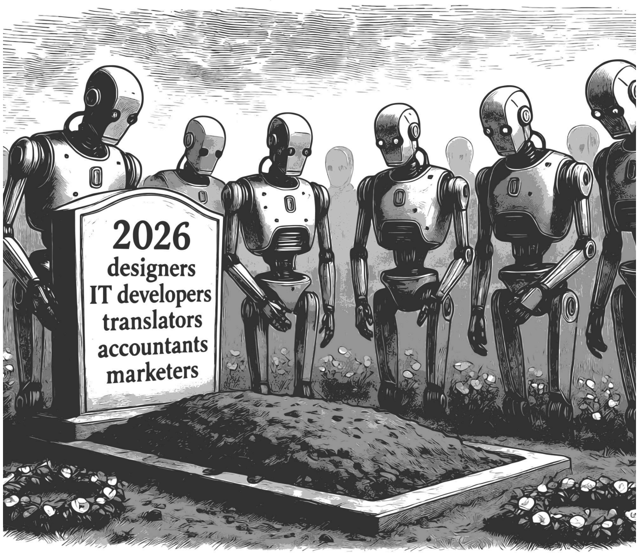
There’s also $6.4 million in 2026-27 to modernise media regulation and support structural changes to the media market. That will support the rollout of prominence and anti-siphoning reforms contained in 2024 legislation which mandated that new smart TV devices must feature free-to-air broadcaster apps on the primary user interface. The anti-siphoning reforms prevent pay streaming platforms such as Prime Video and Netflix from acquiring exclusive rights to big sports events including the Olympics, AFL/NRL finals and cricket ahead of bids by free-to-air broadcasters.

And finally, the budget reaffirms the government’s intention to legislate a formula-based method of distributing funds collected from the platforms to media businesses. This is proposed in the form of the News Bargaining Incentive, which aims to tax platforms such as Google, Meta and Tik Tok to help pay for public interest journalism. Last week we talked about the opportunities and challenges of the proposal; this week we’re recovering from writing two submissions to government, one on the legislation, and one on the distribution mechanism. You can expect more from us soon.

Now to my colleagues: Michael is weighing up the hype and scepticism around AI; Sacha is looking at why Australia is slipping down the global press freedom index; and Anh Nguyen, a visiting fellow from the University of Amsterdam, examines the legal and geopolitical dynamics shaping emerging quantum technology ecosystems. She writes about how law is actually keeping up with the technological developments in this space, rather than lagging behind. In fact you can hear Anh talk about her research on 2SER snackademics.

Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

Hype train blues



The AI hype train shows no signs of slowing down. Microsoft AI CEO Mustafa Suleyman recently sounded the death knell for white-collar workers in an interview with the Financial Times, giving us 12–18 months before our jobs are completely absorbed by AI. He explicitly mentioned lawyers, accountants, project managers and marketers. Thankfully not academics or journalists, but given what else he said, I'm pretty sure his bell is tolling for us as well.

That was back in February (so that's now 9–15 months away), but for some reason, Suleyman's prediction is getting another run in the business and tech media this week. Perhaps it's just a financial-press version of the giant-shark attack stories running in the Mirror. Whether it's human slop or AI slop, it's slop all the same. Slop about AI. Metaslop.

Like most AI executives, Suleyman is no stranger to hyperbole. Just ten days before the FT interview went to air, he warned against overhyping the capabilities of AI. This was in reference to Moltbook, a just-launched social network where AI agents could hang out with each other and chill, or maybe plot the downfall of humanity. Elon Musk, in his irksome way, called it 'just the very early stages of the singularity.' But really, it's just LLMs given directions to find stuff on the internet that will help them do particular things. And as it turned out, many of the supposedly autonomous posts were not really autonomous, in the sense we might ascribe to humans. Instead, it was a bunch of AI agents who'd been told to act like they were humans, even to act in specific ways, like inventing the kind of code language a child might come up with. Certainly not the birth of a new language, as one AI commentator noted, but 'a statistical sink where overlapping probability distributions converge on common attractors,' particularly given the pervasive puppeteering.

Yet, despite urging that these agents were certainly not conscious, Suleyman downplayed the reality. 'No matter how autonomous it was, in hindsight, it doesn't really matter,' he said, going on to describe some fairly prosaic (for AI agents) things that they might be able to do in the near future, such as writing their own code or making phone calls to one another. After all, Suleyman has put himself in charge of a new Microsoft 'humanistic superintelligence' project, which will ensure that AI is used for good, even if it's way smarter than us, because it will be restricted to particular usage domains.

And this superintelligence (presumably Microsoft's) is what is ringing the unemployment bell, heralding the arrival of AI with 'a human-level performance on most, if not all professional tasks'. But look a little deeper, and the tasks Suleyman imagines here are also pretty prosaic, rote tasks that you do on the computer, like writing word documents, filling in spreadsheets, and looking stuff up on the internet. Medicine, his primary use case, will be transformed, he suggests, by AI which can 'reason over all the contents' of a patient's health record based on their knowledge of current medical science, and come up with an accurate diagnosis most of the time. But it's not that doctors will be out of a job. Instead they will be given over to patient care. As if that isn't their most fundamental 'professional task'!

So, we might ask, what makes this superintelligence, rather than just doing some things really fast, like responding to natural-language prompts with statistically probable answers? If AI is not really conscious, hell, not even really autonomous, is it even intelligent? It might seem we're splitting hairs about what 'intelligence' or 'autonomy' really mean, but it's the vagueness in these terms that AI hypesters trade off. And keeps that hype train rolling on.

Michael Davis
CMT Research Fellow

Press here for freedom

In good news for crooks and tyrants, if not lovers of democracy, press freedom is in retreat globally. Late last month, the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index was unveiled to reveal that press freedom is now at a 25-year low. After analysing 180 countries, RSF found that more than half the world's countries can now be categorised as 'difficult' or 'very serious' for press freedom. You wouldn't read about it, right?

Take, for instance, this troubling 2026 assessment of a specific country once regarded as a bastion of journalistic liberty: 'Press freedom is not constitutionally guaranteed [and] a hyperconcentration of the media combined with occasional pressure from the authorities on media professionals endanger public interest journalism.' Sadly, that country is Australia, which this year slipped four places to 33rd from 29th. Back in 2002, Australia was in 12th place. That's a mighty fall, and that fall is due largely to oppressive laws curtailing the right to information and implementing surveillance. The surveillance laws, which include the metadata retention scheme, prompted Peter Greste to argue last year that though he was jailed for his journalism in Egypt, it's Australia's surveillance regime that's a serious worry.

From top (#1 Norway) to bottom (#180 Eritrea), this year's Index is worrying. As the RSF reports, the US fell seven places. Peru and Ecuador are plummeting. And Palestine, where at least 70 journalists have been killed while on the job since 2023, is at 156th. It makes you pine for the good ol' days of 2002, when 20% of the global population lived in a land where press freedom was categorised as 'good'. Today, less than 1% of the world's population lives in a 'good' country.

For Anne Bocandé, the RSF's editorial director, the Index is a call to action. And to keyboards. As she wrote: 'Authoritarian states, complicit or incompetent political powers, predatory economic actors and under-regulated online platforms are directly and overwhelmingly responsible for the global decline in press freedom. Given this context, inaction is a form of endorsement. The ball is in the court of democracies and their citizens. It is up to them to stand in the way of those who seek to silence the press. The spread of authoritarianism isn’t inevitable.’

Indeed it isn’t. Greste has made it his mission to see Australia introduce a Media Freedom Act. Given that our Constitution has an unfortunate blind spot when it comes rights and freedoms, a Media Freedom Act would be a good way to reverse our slide down the RSF Index.

Sacha Molitorisz
Senior Lecturer, UTS Law

In the thick of emerging tech governance

A familiar lament runs through technology law scholarship: law is perceived as coming “too early or too late.” By the time legal frameworks catch up to a new technology, the technology has already moved on. Conversely, regulators act so early that the rules govern something that does not yet meaningfully exist. This "too early or too late" diagnosis has become a refrain in the governance of emerging technologies, from artificial intelligence to quantum computing to biotechnology. Whilst the diagnosis is not necessarily wrong, accepting it as the full story risks overlooking what law is actually doing in these spaces.

A law and political economy (LPE) perspective offers an account of law “in the thick” of technology production. Rather than treating law as a regulatory response to technological development (thus coming “too late or too early”), LPE invites us to ask how law actively participates in shaping which technologies get built, by whom, and on whose terms. Law does not merely govern technology pre-emptively or after the fact, but conditions what kinds of technological futures are possible, and what futures are foreclosed.

This is fundamental for discussions on the governance of emerging technologies, where the stakes of legal design are often set before markets, standards, or technological applications have crystallised. Consider how export control regimes, patent systems, and public procurement frameworks are already configuring access and control over innovation ecosystems, infrastructure and supply chains for pre-commercial fields, such as quantum technologies, that have neither deployable use-cases nor markets. LPE asks how legal arrangements lock in particular distributions of knowledge, access and power. This perspective prompts reflection on what technological solutions and processes get legally enclosed, and most importantly who owns and gets to set the terms of use and exclude others from underlying knowledge. By the time a technology matures, such legal arrangements may be entrenched, their political origins obscured by the apparent neutrality of legal form.

LPE also provides an important complement to the currently dominant geopolitical framing of technology governance. Geopolitics and its cousin geoeconomics drive much of today's policy discourse around "strategic" technologies and tends to treat law as an instrument of state interests, to be deployed in competition for technological leadership. LPE does not deny that states pursue strategic interests through law, but it shows how legal arrangements in turn shape what those interests become and who can act on them.

LPE's analytical tools are sharpest when used to direct attention to concrete legal mechanisms, e.g. intellectual property regimes, export controls, standards, investment term sheets, public procurement, through which (geo)political and (geo)economic power is constituted and distributed, not merely regulated. LPE shows law as a constitutive force that shapes what interests emerge, and which actors are positioned to pursue them. LPE is not only for the critics to diagnose a “power” problem without actionable solutions. Identifying law as a site of power is also to identify it as a site of contestation. If legal arrangements actively configure technological trajectories, they can also be redesigned to open different ones. Law in this sense is both an instrument of and instrument to discipline power. This means asking not just who benefits from current legal frameworks, but what alternative arrangements might distribute access, participation, and benefit more broadly, and how those alternatives might be achieved through existing legal channels.

Anh Nguyen
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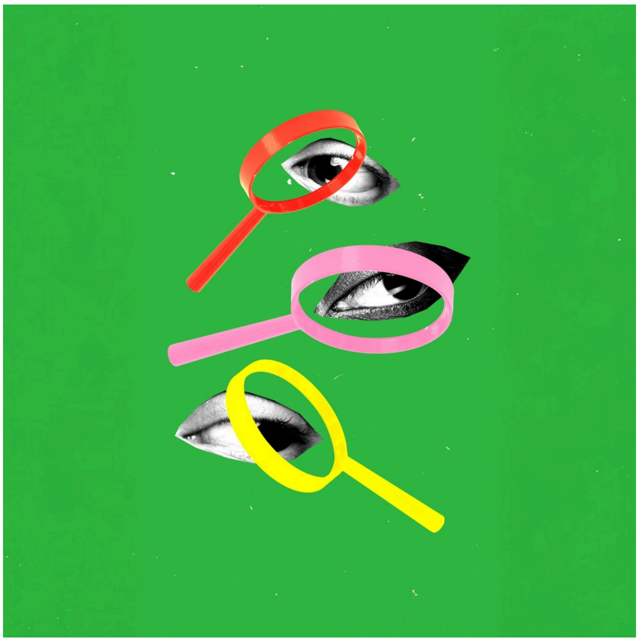
Objectivity and journalism



This month, journalist, academic and author Associate Professor Margaret Simons joins us on Double Take to discuss the evolving concept of objectivity in journalism. Margaret is Honorary Principal Fellow at the Centre for Advancing Journalism at the University of Melbourne and has won a Walkley Award for Social Equity Journalism, a Foreign Press Association Award and numerous Quill Awards.

While most Australians still expect journalists to honour the core principles of objectivity, fairness, and accuracy, the meanings of these terms have shifted, reflecting a more diverse information environment in which news and opinion are often conflated – and where anyone with access to the internet can argue they are a journalist.

Dr Simons tells us that objectivity is an intellectual discipline rooted in methodology rather than an individual’s bias, and she advocates for the scientific approach to disprove hypotheses. Highlighting the importance of public trust and diversity in journalism, she questions how useful advocacy journalism is in today's opinion-saturated media.

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Alexia Giacomazzi
CMT Events and Communications Coordinator

We hope you have enjoyed reading this edition of the *Centre for Media Transition newsletter* - Budget, quantum tech, AI and press freedom - Issue 7/2026

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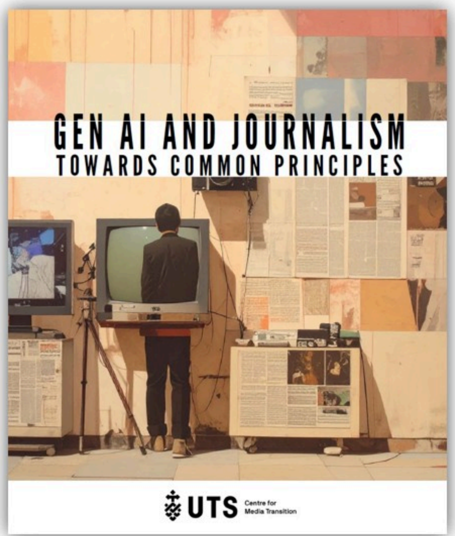

The Centre for Media Transition and UTS acknowledge the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our university now stands.
We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for this land.