

Centre for Media Transition



Hi there

A 'new deal' to support news?



The 2026 [Digital News Report](#) was released this week by the University of Canberra. Monica gives us a report on some of the highlights below.

Measuring our preparedness to pay for news is a key theme the DNR has been charting for the last decade. Over that same period, other ways of supporting the news have also emerged. Digital platforms, international media and the rise of influencers and content creators have all challenged traditional business models. It's

not surprising that the industry has sought government support in the form of direct funding as well as a legislative scheme known as the News Media Bargaining Code. The most recent version of this is the proposed News Bargaining Incentive, which we spoke about in our most recent newsletter. But the conduct last week of one of the likely recipients of NBI funding has led me to question its entitlement to this form of public support.

On Monday and Wednesday last week, The Sydney Morning Herald ran ads for Clive Palmer's United Australia Party across the bottom of page 1 of its print editions. Many of us have probably seen the party's pleas for 'a new deal' in which it spruiks everything from a 25% tax on the export of iron ore to an increase in pensions funded by the abolition of the NDIS and net zero. But these ads went further. In the usual yellow and black design,

they read: “Smash the Labor and Liberal Una party”. This seems to me to cross a line, but it’s hard to identify which line. It’s not incitement to violence, and because it’s an ad, we don’t assess its performance against a set of standards as we do for news reports and even commentary such as cartoons – as seen in Alena’s discussion below about last week’s [Australian Press Council finding](#) that the same organisation, Nine Entertainment, breached one of the Council’s rules when it published a cartoon by Cathy Wilcox earlier this year.

And yet, the language in the Palmer ad is extreme. When Treasury published its [consultation paper](#) on the development of the NBI, it explained that payments under the levy “would be for a clear and valid public purpose: ongoing investment in news and journalism in Australia”. Treasury said, “This reflects the important role that news and journalism play to support a healthy democracy, keep local communities connected and promote social cohesion.” That’s something many of us would support, but it seems in this case the Herald is partnering its news and journalism with ads that undermine this very purpose. And it follows the dismal practice exposed last week by [Media Watch](#) where the same company, Nine Entertainment, promoted Sports Bet during an editorial segment on the Today program.

At CMT we’ve consistently argued that a substantial public policy intervention like the NMBC or the NBI to support news should bring with it a greater commitment to media standards. The evidence is mounting.

Finally, an update on my item from last week. I mentioned the criminal conviction of a man in Victoria for sexual assault committed against two school girls in the 1980s. After publication, and after speaking to the journalist Nina Funnell, I made a few amendments to [my article](#) to provide additional contextual information, to correct an error, and to respect survivor rights and interests. In keeping with that approach, I’m not naming the man, who has now been sentenced.



Derek Wilding
CMT Co-Director

The young arise! DNR 2026

Like clockwork, every year the Digital News Report (DNR) provides a healthy balance of good and bad news about the way Australians relate to and consume news media. [2026](#) is no different, particularly with the headline news that whilst a majority of surveyed under 25-year-olds have never used newspapers or radio as a source of news (yes, never!) their



overall interest in news is on the rise – and markedly so. In fact, interest in news amongst 18–24-year olds has risen to 47 percent (+12 percent) and in yet more good news for the news industry, they're more likely to pay for it than older generations.

As well, interest in politics amongst under 35's is now higher than it is in older cohorts according to the DNR produced by the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra as part of a global survey by the Reuters Institute for the

Study of Journalism at Oxford University. But this younger cohort isn't using traditional sources to access the news they've become more interested in. A whopping 60 percent have never used a newspaper as a source of news, while 53 percent have never listened to a radio news bulletin to source news and for 25 percent of that cohort, even TV is simply not a thing. Aside from all this, it appears that young people – 71 percent of them – came across news on social media, and of those, some 48 percent encountered it on TikTok. Overall, 89 percent caught news in online videos – the ones that now crowd out social media platforms, keeping us glued to the platform for hours!

As the DNR's researchers [state](#) "This generational shift is not just about platform choice. It is redefining what news is, who delivers it, and why they are paying for it. News is no longer something people deliberately seek out at set times. It is embedded within everyday scrolling, sharing and entertainment." Traditional news media is not yet dead, though the trends are giving it a very unhealthy hue. Across generations, 57 percent of Australians still use TV as a main source of news, but this is followed very closely by their use of social media at 56 percent and online news at 52 percent.

Perhaps the most striking finding – even though it should not be – is that 43 percent of those surveyed said they got their news from creators or influencers. Amongst 18–24-year-olds, some 70 percent use influencers to source news because they say influencers are more relatable, more entertaining and easier to understand. [According](#) to the researchers: "The growth of influencer-led news is closely tied to questions of trust. Audiences who distrust mainstream media are more likely to turn to influencers. People who distrust news in general are much more likely to perceive influencers as trustworthy (40%) than those who trust mainstream news (32%). Distrusters of news also think influencer-led news is more authentic (61%)."

So, what's going on with young audiences? It seems they want news to be delivered to them on their mobile devices – but they also think about whether it's trustworthy: there's been a marked increase in the level of concern about misinformation in the 18–24-year-

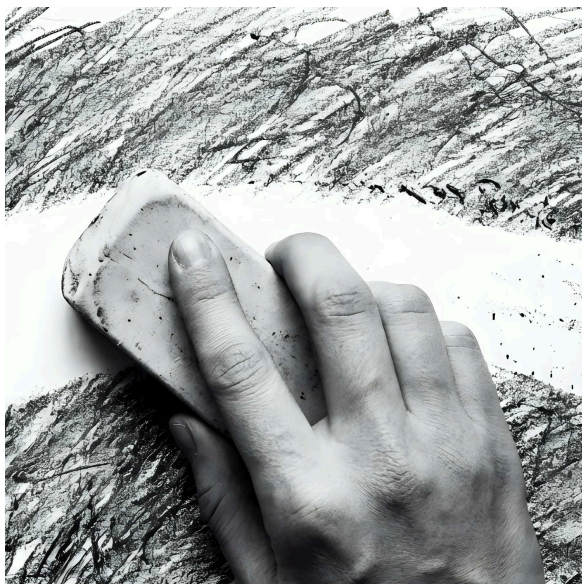
old cohort, from 65 percent in 2023 to 81 percent in 2026 (+16). Then again, there's been an increase (+5, 54 percent) in the proportion of those across all cohorts saying they trust the news they personally choose to consume whilst trust in news in the broader news environment remains unchanged in 2026 (43 percent).

Another fascinating finding is that young people are more likely to believe public service media (think ABC and SBS) is valuable compared to older generations; a higher proportion of under 35's value public service media compared to over 35's. In fact, those aged 25-34 (68 percent) are far more positive about public service media than those aged 55-64 (34 percent). That may account for another finding that around 71 percent of those more likely to value public service media identified as left wing and 41 percent identified as right wing. Swings and roundabouts as they say, though that one will give News Corp talking points for the next year!



Monica Attard
CMT Co-Director

Too hot to handle



When we met back in December 2025 to discuss the state of cartooning, Cathy Wilcox stressed that “The Israel-Gaza war has emerged as one of the most significant flashpoints since the Danish cartoons portraying the Prophet Mohammed and the Charlie Hebdo murders.” In describing her role as a cartoonist, she said “I’m not the gatekeeper. I’m a cartoonist here to talk about all sorts of things and not to have certain areas hived off. But cartoonists must use anger really carefully.”

Fast-forward to June 2026, Wilcox finds herself at the centre of a heated debate about political cartooning, interpretation, and artistic autonomy. The Australian Press Council (APC) determined that her “Grass roots” cartoon, published on 7 January 2026 by *Sydney Morning Herald/The Age*, breached its Standards of Practice (General Principle 6) by failing to ["take reasonable steps"](#) to avoid causing or contributing materially to substantial offence, distress or prejudice." The Council concluded that the depiction of the Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “encodes” the antisemitic trope that Jewish people “control or manipulate global events, governments, financial systems, or media.”

This decision has produced polarised reactions. Defenders of the cartoon – and Wilcox’s integrity as a political cartoonist – argue that criticism of Netanyahu has been conflated with antisemitism. Critics of the cartoon have responded by denying the conflation of [concerns about antisemitism](#) with support for Netanyahu. Others have pointed to questions around the degree of lobbying and [free expression](#), harmful meanings, and the inconsistency of [APC rulings](#).

The latter issue is particularly interesting. Bill Leak’s 2016 cartoon depicting an Indigenous father unable to remember his son’s name received over 700 complaints, but the APC – in deciding not to send the matter to adjudication on the basis that the complaint had been resolved through the publication of two op-ed pieces – emphasised the importance of free speech, “ensuring that citizens are able to [hold powerful individuals](#) and interests accountable.” Another Leak cartoon in 2016 showed several people in traditional Indian clothing trying to eat UN-supplied solar panels with mango chutney. The APC found no breach, stressing that cartoons are based on exaggeration and absurdity and accepting the publisher’s explanation that the cartoon “[did not intend to](#), and did not, ridicule Indian people.”

In 2019, the APC explicitly stated that Warren Brown’s cartoon, accompanying a news story about an asylum seeker who had been charged with allegedly inappropriately touching two nurses, and which depicted a man with pointed teeth and in stereotypical Middle-Eastern attire chasing a terrified white nurse, conveyed “a level of stereotypical offence and a prejudicial inference that the man was guilty although not yet convicted.” Nevertheless, the Council accepted that there was “[sufficient public interest](#) in commenting on the case of the man in the context of the charges against him and the political debate.”

While all three cartoons were “punching down”, targeting groups with comparatively less social and political power, another one by Mark Knight from 2018 punched up in some respects and depicted Serena Williams’ tantrum during her loss in the US Open tournament. Despite the APC stating that the cartoon contained some “features” of racist and sexist stereotypes, it concluded that the representation of Williams “spitting the dummy” was a “non-racist caricature familiar to most Australian readers.”

In these previous rulings, the APC considered context, authorial intention, publisher explanation, public interest, and freedom of expression. In fact, the APC has shown deference to the long-standing tradition of cartooning that exaggerates, provokes, plays with stereotypes and absurdity, which relies on visual shorthand and contextual interpretation, and which may at times offend.

In Wilcox's case, despite the Council's recognition of cartoons as "expressions of opinion that often use exaggeration and absurdity," the ruling placed greater weight on the intended message "encoded" in the imagery to be "interpreted in different ways."

Wilcox continued, "When the APC said the cartoon 'encodes' an antisemitic trope, I thought: 'Encodes? What's that?' To me, that suggests a kind of dog whistle... that I was sneaking a message into the cartoon. That implication is really wicked."

So, has the balance in the reception of political cartoons shifted from intent of the cartoonist, their target, and wider latitude towards literal interpretation and the harm that might be caused? It seems so: political cartoons have been increasingly interpreted through a cautious and anticipatory lens of the permissibility of certain representations. We are moving away from a more cartoonist-and-their-target-centred model of satire towards an audience-centred one.

It is no longer, *'What was the cartoonist trying to argue? What issue was satirised and in what context? What is the tradition of cartooning and guiding principles?'*

Instead, we are asking, *'What potential harmful meanings might audiences extract from the cartoon and what would be the result?'*

The central tenet of political cartooning is that satire should 'punch up' at institutions and elites, never down. But even this longstanding ethical boundary and form of protective legitimacy is becoming increasingly contested. The controversy is less about the intended target, powerful or powerless, and more about the target's symbolism. Criticism of a powerful political figure may be interpreted as criticism of that individual, their government, political lobby, associated communities, or all the above.

The Wilcox controversy resonates with a broader theme emerging from my interviews with cartoonists from Australia, Europe, and North America. Many describe rising polarisation, ideological purism on both the left and right, and institutional risk aversion. "Newspapers get some pushback, and then they go, 'We're really sorry, we've taken it from our website'," a Norwegian, UK-based cartoonist Morten Morland notes. "The fact that they took it down justifies the outrage. The cartoon just becomes too hot to handle."

And Israel-Gaza is the clearest flashpoint in recent interviews, particularly in the UK and Australia. Cartoonists describe requests to tone down imagery and growing sensitivity around symbols and language. While established voices like David Rowe acknowledges that he now "self-censors a bit," Australian freelancers have been facing approval chains or bans on self-publishing under threat of losing their jobs.

"I've always respected editorial boundaries, and my editors have always given me extraordinary leeway and trusted me to make my comment rigorously and in good faith,"

Wilcox told CMT. “My concern is that after a ruling like this, editors will be twice shy and decide it’s simply not worth the trouble.”

In the realm of political cartooning, artistic autonomy is an aspirational ideal. There has never been pure autonomous creation, since cartoonists must continuously negotiate within a relational network of overlapping fields. Contemporary “no-go zones” are not formal bans but rather constraints on who and what are targeted, how an issue is framed, which symbols and subjects are permissible, and ultimately whether the work gets published at all. The main shift seems to be away from the sharp truth that may offend to the more cautious [ethics of responsibility](#). The question is not whether political cartooning survives, but on what and whose terms.



Alena Radina

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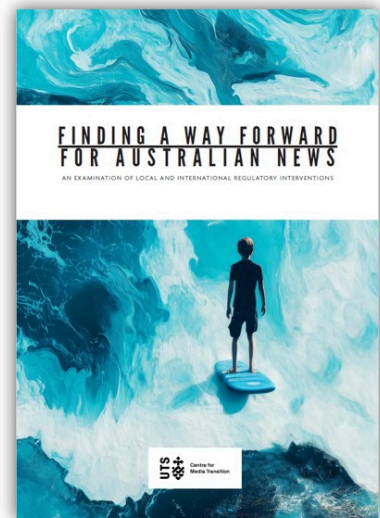
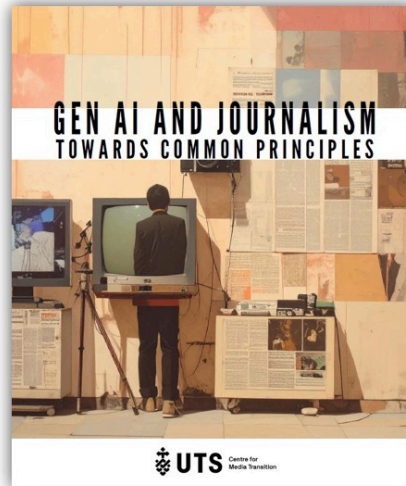
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