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TIME FOR THE DIGITAL BEHEMOTHS TO PAY FOR NEWS CONTENT

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Platforms such as Google and Facebook are undermining credible journalism

ADAM SUCKLING

The recent announcement that Australian Associated Press will close is not only terrible news for AAP journalists, credible news reporting and transparency, it is also a strong example of what happens when digital platforms take too much of the value of journalists' work.

AAP provides a vital service, available to us all. It is often invisible to the public, but its value is illustrated by pictures circulating on Twitter, capturing a lone AAP journalist at a press conference.

The stories these journalists produce are packaged up and published across any one of the many news organisations that subscribe to AAP. This symbiotic relationship delivers readers a diverse range of coverage from court cases to sporting events.

AAP chairman Campbell Reid described the service as "journalism's first responders". The Guardian called it "Australian democracy's safety net". I'd add it is "bloody productive" — last Thursday, AAP's top 10 news stories were republished more than 2500 times.

The sad demise of AAP is partly attributable to the fact the value created by original news content now is appropriated by digital platforms. Such companies use news content to attract customers, to collect and analyse the biggest data set in history, and to sell ads. However, they do not pay publishers for the use of this critical input into their business.

So if a large percentage of possible news revenue does not go to producers of original content, how do we sustain healthy and vibrant journalism? The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission grappled with this complex issue in its Digital Platforms Inquiry report delivered last year.

It is not an easy question to an-

swer, not least because, until recently, companies such as Google and Facebook have confused, overawed and intimidated policy-makers across the world. Quite remarkably they appear to have ripped up all regulatory norms on things such as competition law, privacy, copyright and content regulation.

In the face of this, the ACCC was detailed and analytical in its assessment. It found that news media content is "important to digital platforms (like Google and Facebook)"; that there was likely an "imbalance in bargaining power" between media companies and platforms; and it recommended a regulatory code to address this imbalance.

Time will tell whether this is an effective remedy. But early signs are not good. In Europe, Google has responded to comparable regulatory interventions with ruthlessness, effectively telling French President Emmanuel Macron, who championed the changes, to "go jump" and tightening the screws so French publishers would agree to no payment.

Perhaps it is naive, but it is possible to imagine a different response, one where the digital platforms accept that they should be true to the early promise of the internet as a liberating and democratic force; that the "fake news" they carry has undermined democracy; that they should support real journalism; and that there is a vast difference between conspiracy theories and professional journalism.

If Google and others had taken this sort of view into the ACCC inquiry the outcome surely would have been different. The digital platforms are able to really help resolve the question the ACCC is seeking to address — namely, how to sustain the production of original Australian news content via a flow of revenue to media companies for the use of their content.

We are talking about some of the smartest companies in the world, which are deploying some of the world's most advanced technology. It is not a difficult problem for them to allocate a pot of money attributable to revenue generated by news content; to distribute this money to the relevant publishers or their representatives; and to ensure there is a weighting in the allocation of such money to value original content over rip-offs of that content.

There are already such schemes operating. For instance, the Copyright Agency licenses the content of many Australian publishing companies to media monitoring companies such as Isentia and Stream. The processes and technology used by such companies are similar to the major digital platforms. Their technology collects news stories with web crawlers; copies them on to servers; analyses the stories; and provides relevant ones to their customers.

Of course, as in any commercial relationship, there can be disagreements over the price. Indeed, we are before the Copyright Tribunal, seeking for the tribunal to set the price we can charge media monitoring companies for the use of a publisher's content. But the principle is established and clear: these companies pay for their use of copyright material and this helps to support and sustain Australian journalism.

None of this is to suggest that payment from companies such as Google and Facebook to publishers is the only solution to the challenges facing journalism. All publishing companies I deal with are focused on publishing quality journalism, enhancing their digital products and payment models; and managing costs. But it is critically important that in addition to all this they get paid by some of the wealthiest companies in history for the use of their content. Otherwise there will be more tragic ex-



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amples such as AAP, fewer
journalists getting up yams and
much less transparency in the
working of our key institutions.

*Adam Suckling is chief executive
of the Copyright Agency.*

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has responded
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