

Title: The Impact of Australia's News Media Bargaining Code on Journalism, Democracy, and the Battle to Regulate Big Tech

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Word count: 4002

Abstract

The Australian News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code, legislation requiring large digital platforms to pay news publishers for content that the platforms display, represents the next front in the war to regulate Big Tech. Its ostensible purpose is to provide financial support to publishers and journalists outcompeted by the dominance of digital platforms—namely Google and Facebook—and, by extension, protect democratic institutions. In this chapter, I outline the different approaches Google and Facebook used in their counterattacks to the Code and how their different business models resulted in a more advantageous outcome for Facebook. There are many concerns regarding the Code's impact on small publishers and net neutrality, and while it is a promising first step to support publishers, I argue that the Code may not achieve its stated goals. Furthermore, Facebook's aggressive actions may have harmed its overall position when considering possible future regulation.

Note: This piece was adapted and expanded from (Hine, 2021), the author's newsletter on technology ethics.

Keywords: News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code, Australia, Big Tech, journalism, democracy, platform regulation

Introduction

In February of 2021, the Australian Parliament passed the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code. The code was promoted by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and is intended to “[address] bargaining power imbalances between digital platforms and Australian news businesses” (Frydenberg & Fletcher, 2020). It requires large digital platforms to negotiate compensation with local news providers for displaying their content (Boom, 2021). The government’s argument is that, by providing access to headlines and snippets of news, online platforms are unbundling the news platforms provide from the advertisements they depend on, impacting newsroom profits and journalists’ livelihood (Stilgherrian, 2021). It allows registered news businesses to demand deals with “designated digital platform [services]” that “reproduce,” link to, or provide an extract of their content. It also requires designated platforms to give news businesses 14 days’ notice regarding algorithmic changes that impact the ranking of news. If the news business and platform cannot come to an agreement, the ACCC oversees a final-offer arbitration process. “Designated digital platforms” are determined by the minister for communications, providing a bargaining chip to hold over the heads of platforms (Stilgherrian, 2021).

This conflict represents a new front in the global battle to reclaim power from Big Tech. Big Tech platforms “thrive on network effects” and are designed to extract market share and revenue as fast as possible, creating “self-reinforcing market-conquering logics” that change entire industries (Fernandez et al., 2021). This is building their power to rival that of some governments. When it comes to journalism, this power, which threatens to quash the industry, is especially concerning. Journalism, to put it simply, makes news (Schudson, 2020). We in democratic societies trust this news to reflect reality because of journalists’ adherence to journalistic ethics, so we rely on it to inform how we participate in democracy (Schudson, 2020). Threats to journalism are thus threats to democracy itself, so embedded in my argument is the assertion that because a healthy press is crucial to a healthy democracy, protecting the press is vital.

In an attempt to preserve their power, Google and Facebook actively lobbied against the bill, winning exemptions for YouTube and Instagram (Barbaschow, 2020). Google and Facebook both threatened to pull services from the Australian market. Google, however, ultimately voluntarily signed agreements with Australian publishers. Facebook followed through on its threats, removing all news from Australian Facebook and restricting international users from seeing Australian news on the platform, before also eventually signing deals with news outlets (Choudhury, 2021; Easton, 2021). In this piece, I will argue

that the differences in business model between the platforms precipitated these different approaches, but that Facebook may have ultimately harmed its position in the battle to regulate Big Tech through its strong-arm tactics. Additionally, I will posit that the Bargaining Code may not achieve its ostensible goal of fostering a healthier news media ecosystem with less influence from Big Tech.

Outcompeted

One reason the Australian government has put forward for regulating digital platforms, specifically Facebook and Google, is that big digital platforms have created a power imbalance with news media providers through their dominance of the advertising ecosystem. Facebook and Google effectively have a duopoly on advertising dollars on the Internet, which is growing as online ads prove more effective than traditional print ads. Together, they take 81 cents of every dollar spent on online advertising in Australia (Associated Press, 2021). Facebook claims that it does a net good for publishers, referring what it estimates to be A\$407 million (\$315 million) worth of traffic to Australian publishers in 2020 (Easton, 2021). And yet, news platforms are still struggling. The pool of ad dollars available for traditional media, even publications with an online presence, is shrinking as print ad spending is shifted to online ad spending, which benefits Facebook and Google far more than the media platforms; even when ads are displayed on news sites, the ad platform gets most of the revenue (Letts, 2016). This is an existential threat to journalism.

Given how much damage online platforms have done to newsrooms, the claim of benefits from clickthroughs seems spurious. Besides siphoning away ad revenues, Facebook drove the disastrous “pivot to video” by inflating the view counts of videos, which may have directly cost hundreds of journalists their jobs (Meyer, 2018). Permitting the unchecked spread of fake news has damaged trust in news organisations and threatened democracy (Binkowski, 2019), as the storming of the US Capitol—egged on by lies spread by tech platforms—demonstrated all-too-viscerally. While it could be argued that platforms should have seen the writing on the wall and found a new model to ensure their future, the fact remains that they are being outcompeted by online platforms that fundamentally changed the game and now are taking measures to maintain their dominance.

The Australian government is specifically targeting Facebook and Google because of their power, acknowledging that “Digital platforms have fundamentally changed the way that media content is produced, distributed and consumed” (Frydenberg & Fletcher, 2020). The press release on the code’s introduction into Parliament states that its goal is to “ensure that

news media businesses are fairly remunerated for the content they generate” and to “support a diverse and sustainable Australian news media sector” (Frydenberg & Fletcher, 2020). On its face, the Code appears to be designed to give Australian media companies more money (siphoned from Facebook and Google) and negotiating power. In the next section, I will discuss Google and Facebook’s unique situations and **how the Code’s logic may be flawed.**

Google: Pre-Emptive Dodging

In January, Google published a blog post claiming that the Media Bargaining Code would “break Google Search as you know it” because it would make Google pay to link to news content (Silva, 2021b). Google claims that it is merely carrying out its role in serving information as defined by the Internet economy, arguing that “Digital platforms do not owe publishers compensation for the emergence of an internet-based economy” and that the arbitration process unfairly favours publishers (Cerf, 2020), which is by design. The code is meant to give a leg up to legacy media, which has struggled in the internet-based economy that Google and Facebook dominate. While its critics argue that the Media Code is necessary to protect journalism and thus democracy, Google (and, as we will see, Facebook) yoked its counter-arguments to the need for a free and open internet founded on the principles of net neutrality.¹

Google argues that forcing it to treat news links differently (though it should be noted that it does not have to pay per link it displays, just define a dollar value for the news content it makes available) violates net neutrality, which threatens Google’s business model in particular. Despite its power, Google’s business model left it especially vulnerable to pressure from the News Bargaining Code. Google’s only leverage was to withdraw from the Australian market altogether. Google claims that news represents 1% of searches in Australia, but blocking those searches or preventing a website from appearing in results would violate principles of net neutrality, which Google touts its commitment to (Silva, 2021a). However, ceasing to providing service in Australia altogether would open the door to rivals, such as Microsoft’s Bing (Newton, 2021b). Bing only controls 3.62% of the Australian search market to Google’s 94.45% (Dunne, 2021), but signalled its aim to become Australian’s news-friendly search engine if Google pulled out in a blog post by president Brad. Titled “Why an Australian proposal offers part of what’s needed for technology, journalism and American

¹ Net neutrality is the principle that all links on the internet should be treated equally and free to access. The business model of search engines, which provide links to users, is possible because search engines do not have to pay to display certain links.

democracy itself,” Smith writes that the Australian model should be expanded to other countries, including the United States (Smith, 2021). This is grounded in his argument that the disinformation campaign waged by Trump demonstrates the dangers of the erosion of independent journalism and that “the internet and social media have not been kind to the free press” (Smith, 2021).

Microsoft took the moral stance that democracy should be prioritised above all else, countering Google’s argument that net neutrality is more important. Ultimately, Google found that it did not have a moral or economic leg to stand on. Because pulling out of markets is not a sustainable business strategy, Google instead found a strategy that allowed it to pre-empt the bargaining requirements. Instead of waiting to be forced into arbitration, Google began signing publishers to its Google News Showcase, a tab in its Google News product that displays content from official partners (Newton, 2021b). Google boasted that this “financial [investment] in the future of journalism” preserves “a free and open web which works the same way for everyone” and is a triumph for Australian journalism (Silva, 2021b). The Verge, however, characterised these deals as a face-saving move performed “under duress” (Newton, 2021b). Regardless of spin, these deals were successful in preventing Google from becoming a “designated digital platform” bound by the arbitration agreements (Kohler, 2021), and the Australian government succeeded in directing money to news publishers.

Facebook: Strongarm Tactics

Facebook’s business model is significantly different from Google’s, which gave it more leverage over the Australian government. Unlike Google, Facebook’s business model is not to provide lists of links to users. While organizations can de-list their pages from Google, doing so is business suicide,² so allowing Google’s web crawlers to index one’s site is effectively mandatory. Posting on Facebook, though, is voluntary. Facebook’s argument is that Facebook should not have to pay for “content it didn’t take or ask for,” given that news providers use Facebook’s free platform to disseminate content. By Facebook’s reckoning, the traffic they send to news publications is worth far more than the “business gain” to Facebook from news, estimated at 4% of users’ News Feeds (Easton, 2021). Facebook says it is doing publishers a service by allowing them to use Facebook to promote their content, and that if

² An experiment by deals site Groupon showed that de-listing their site from Google showed that search-engine-attributable search dropped to near-zero, while “direct” visits also dropped by 60% (McKenna, 2014).

they have to pay publishers, providing this “service” will not be worth it for Facebook (Easton, 2021). Facebook has never promised neutrality in the service it provides, and given the small proportion of content that news represents on Facebook, was able to carry through on its threat to block Australian users from viewing or sharing all news (domestic and international) and prevent users worldwide from seeing and sharing Australian news, without impact to its business (Easton, 2021). In fact, Facebook disabled the pages of Australian publishers altogether. This led to an overall 13% drop in traffic to Australian news sites from within the country (Purtill, 2021c), and thus a corresponding drop in revenue. Facebook only restored news access after the code passed with amendments negotiated between Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg (Purtill, 2021b).

Facebook’s strong-arming won them several key concessions from the government in the final bill. Under the version that passed the Senate, the Treasurer must consider whether a platform has already reached commercial agreements with news businesses before declaring them a “designated digital platform” and forcing them to negotiate deals. In addition, they must be given a one-month notice that they will be subject to the code (Purtill, 2021b), providing an opportunity for further negotiations. Other concessions include the assurance that provisions in the code prohibiting platforms from differentiating between both registered and non-registered news organisations at various stages of the registration, negotiation, and remuneration processes will not apply if a commercial agreement has been reached between the platform and organisation (even if the remuneration provided by the agreement differs from “usual business practices”); and a statement that final arbitration is only a last resort for when commercial deals cannot be reached (Treasury Laws Amendment, News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code, Bill 2021, 2021; Barbaschow, 2021). Furthermore, Facebook retains the right to shut off news in Australia again, keeping the nuclear option on the table (Brown, 2021). Safety net secured, Facebook proceeded to start signing news organisations to its Facebook News silo, which operates similarly to Google News Showcase. However, though the two outcomes appear the same on their faces, Facebook is still coming out ahead of Google. While Facebook is still paying Australian news organisations, its strong-arm tactics mean that it will likely pay far less than it would have under arbitration, and media law researcher James Meese estimates that it is also less than what Google, with its much smaller leverage, is paying. He also points out that Facebook had already been rolling out Facebook News in other countries, and so may ultimately just pay organisations what it would have anyway, while also winning what is essentially an exemption from the News Bargaining Code (Purtill, 2021b).

Concerns Over the Media Code

The Media Bargaining Code has—at least in the case of Google News Showcase—succeeded in securing additional revenue for Australian media companies (estimated at A\$200 million (Smyth, 2021)), but at a potentially high cost to individual journalists, small publications, and the structure of the Internet as a whole.

From a financial side, one major concern is that the payments from Facebook and Google might benefit news companies, but not journalists. Small publishers with under A\$150,000 in annual revenue aren't eligible for payments, and billionaire Rupert Murdoch owns News Corp., Australia's largest publisher (which has deals with Facebook and Google), so where the monetary benefits are going is unclear (Newton, 2021a). There is no requirement that the payments be used to directly help journalists, who have borne the brunt of the paradigmatic shifts in the media ecosystem, which is a major oversight. After all, journalism cannot be produced by faceless corporations; it is the journalists on the ground who deliver the crucial information. Rod Sims, chair of the ACCC, stated in June that "We are on track for deals all around... the media companies are happy—and that's the key point," but made no mention of whether journalists are also satisfied (Smyth, 2021).

Economically, small publications ineligible for payment are doubly impacted because they are more reliant on Facebook and Google for traffic (Samios, 2021). News may only be 4% of content on Facebook (Easton, 2021), but that is still a huge number of links, and for smaller publishers these platforms are their lifeline. One Australian youth publication said that Facebook and Google account for 75% of its traffic (Rigby, 2021). Smaller publications may also be less likely to get deals with Google News Showcase and Facebook News, leaving them in the same situation they were in before. Small publications are often targeted towards groups that can be overlooked by mainstream media. They are thus just as important to sustaining a healthy media ecosystem and should be offered support.

The other major concern—and the one that Facebook and Google piggybacked on in their responses—is that the Media Bargaining Code, by treating news links differently than other links, violates the principle of net neutrality. Furthermore, the final Code includes a provision that appears to allow media platforms to treat content from platforms that have signed agreements "preferentially" (Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2021, 2021). Sir Tim Berners-Lee (the inventor of the Web) thinks that these challenges to net neutrality could open the door to the death of the open Internet as we know it (Cellan-Jones, 2021); Facebook and Google piggybacked on

that argument. However, Facebook ignored that in its furious counterattack, it violated the very principle it claims to hold dear. For many, Facebook is the Internet. This is true both figuratively in terms of the attention share it has and literally when it provides Internet access to developing areas through its Free Basics program,³ and so banning categories of content wholesale is itself threatening net neutrality (Binkowski, 2019). The concern over net neutrality is valid; having free and equal access to information online is important to ensure that the democratic public stays informed. However, because Facebook and Google have been striking independent deals and the Media Bargaining Code is not actually being enforced, these concerns may be obviated for now. Future work should examine the knock-on effects of the passage of this bill and potential consequences should the Australian government elect to enforce it in the future.

Predatory Aggression

Facebook, with far more leverage than Google, emerged as the main combatant in the battle over the News Media Bargaining Code. In blocking news content, Facebook demonstrated the enormous power it has over the survival of media platforms, illustrating the danger of having an entire media ecosystem dependent on a dominant power. Facebook's news ban shows that, with a snap of its fingers, it can single-handedly devastate small news providers, increase the prevalence of fake news, and potentially even cause physical harm, displaying its danger for the news industry and democracy itself.

With a single action, Facebook drastically reduced traffic to Australian news sites. There was an overall drop in domestic traffic to Australian news sites of 13%, which is likely to be even higher for small organisations that depend on Facebook for the majority of their traffic (Purtill, 2021c). Smaller publications are more likely to rely on Facebook for a larger proportion of their traffic—and thus revenue—and so were more likely to be hit hard by the news ban (Rigby, 2021). This directly displays how Big Tech platforms have altered the news industry and made it dependent on its suffocating presence.

In addition to impacts on publishers, Facebook's ban on news negatively impacted the larger online news ecosystem. Fake news quickly rushed in to fill the void created by the

³ Free Basics, a Facebook-developed app that gives users free access to a Facebook-selected list of websites, has itself been criticized for infringing on net neutrality, as well as encouraging clickbait and “digital colonialism.” Mark Zuckerberg's position that “Arguments about net neutrality shouldn't be used to prevent the most disadvantaged people in society from gaining access or to deprive people of opportunity” shows that Facebook sees net neutrality as one tool in its efforts for platform supremacy that can be deployed and discarded at will (Solon, 2017).

news purge. In a small experiment, the BBC found that after the ban, searches for posts related to COVID-19 and vaccines revealed more posts with “misleading content” than before (Reality Check & BBC Monitoring, 2021). The Verge dismissed concerns about the rise in fake news that will result by removing high-quality news sources, asking, “But what if, in the meantime, Australians simply... visit websites? Subscribe to newsletters? Read... books?” (Newton, 2021b). The statement’s acknowledged naivety is an understatement, as Facebook is a major source of news for a large number of people. 39% of Australians use Facebook for general news, and 49% use it for news about COVID-19; for many, social media is the only way they access the news (Purtill, 2021a). In a poll by The Guardian, only 30% of respondents agreed that “If Facebook stopped offering news on its platform, I would use it less often.” Three-quarters claimed that they would “Go directly to news sites to read content,” but Facebook is designed to trap users’ attention, decreasing the likelihood that users will venture off the platform even if the balance of content shifts. A whopping 69% of respondents agreed that in the event of a Facebook-Google news ban, they would “Continue to use Google and Facebook and read less news” (Lewis, 2020). Facebook and Google are major drivers of traffic for a reason: they give users news they are interested in, obviating the need to go directly to the site and sift through the headlines. Internet denizens have gotten used to having the news delivered to them, rather than having to seek it out. This may be doubly true for international users, who may be far less likely to directly navigate to an Australian publication unless it is presented directly in their News Feed or Google search. Seeing less genuine news and more fake news injures the informational health of the public (Floridi, 2016), and when the public’s information has been poisoned, democracy suffers.

Facebook also threatened direct physical harm in its purge. Claiming to be complying with the letter of the law, Facebook disabled the pages of local health departments, hospitals, emergency services, and even suicide and domestic violence services (Dye & McGuire, 2021). When protest arose, Facebook stated that Australia had gotten what it was asking for: “As the law does not provide clear guidance on the definition of news content, we have taken a broad definition in order to respect the law as drafted” (Taylor, 2021). However, perhaps realising the danger of disabling state health department pages in the midst of a pandemic, Facebook took action to restore those pages, but faced immense criticism. Facebook actually impeded the function of the Australian state, displaying its power over an entire democratic nation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this fight is not about who is posting what links on the Internet. It is about the fact that Facebook and Google dominate the Internet and have fundamentally changed the media and communications ecosystem such that news organisations are outcompeted before they can adapt, which threatens democracy. These platforms are a rogue wave that have capsized the ship; there is nothing the publications can do. Publications, stuck in a toxic lockstep with data platforms, are more and more reliant on the platforms that do not need them. Publications will always lose in this vampiric codependency. To maintain their power in this relationship, Google and especially Facebook worked to assert authority over a world government. Clearly, some action is necessary. Though the Media Bargaining Code is promising, compelling payments only to large publications is not the way forward. It does not provide enough support for the journalists impacted by the changing tides of the media ecosystem and fundamental to the health of the journalism ecosystem or the small publications most affected, and it threatens the principles of net neutrality. A cynic might say that the Australian government devised the Media Bargaining Code to provide pay-outs to Australia's large media corporations, and if that was the goal, then it has succeeded. If Australia and other governments truly want to balance power between platforms and media outlets and foster a healthier news ecosystem, protecting democracy in the process, they could tax data platforms and use the revenue to directly support journalism and address the externalities these platforms have caused. Alternatively, social media companies could set up an independent foundation to support journalism, as suggested by Brooke Binkowski, former managing editor of Snopes (Binkowski, 2019). Ultimately, the Code does not address that Big Tech has changed how people access and consume news, nor does it curtail its power to mediate what news we see. This would require states to take action to regulate platforms' recommendation algorithms, the core of their business, and something they would not take lightly.

This battle is only just beginning. Canada is pushing to create a similar payment structure (Karadeglija, 2021), and Microsoft, after breaking with Big Tech to side with the Australian government, is now teaming up with EU publishers to lobby for journalism payments, which could impact initiatives in the EU and US (Chan, 2021). As shown by its forced acquiescence, Google may be a sitting duck for these initiatives. Facebook, on the other hand, has a larger playbook. However, its aggressive actions in Australia may have increased regulatory scrutiny on it, with politicians from the US and UK criticising the news ban (Cellan-Jones, 2021). Its borderline authoritarian tactics, rather than forcing governments to back down, may instead encourage regulators to adopt even more aggressive tactics in the

war to regulate Big Tech. Whether this will see shots fired at the inner keep—content recommendation algorithms—remains to be seen.

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