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National [Social media](#)

OPINION

Journalists need to take social media responsibilities seriously



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Four days after the ABC published its story about historic rape allegations against a cabinet minister, ABC journalist Louise Milligan tweeted on her personal account.

She said the NSW police had been “very interested to know if I knew of other complainants against #CabinetMinister. My answer: “Not in your jurisdiction”.



ABC journalist Louise Milligan.

That tweet now lies as a piece of unexploded ordnance in the hugely consequential [defamation action](#) by former Attorney-General Christian Porter against the ABC, and Milligan personally.

The tweet is referred to in Porter's statement of claim, together with other Milligan social media posts. These are used to bolster Porter's argument that Milligan engaged in a campaign against him. He says her social media posts suggested the allegations against him should be believed.

Porter denies the rape allegation. The ABC [denies the allegation](#) it was waging a campaign.

This is the latest in a series of imbroglios that highlight the difficulties for journalists and media organisations in using and managing the still relatively new publishing platform of social media.



Attorney-General Christian Porter is suing the ABC for defamation.

Sadly, the tweet will be combed over in a defamation case – which is a terrible way to examine issues in journalism practice.

In the meantime, the rest of us might reflect on what we want from journalists. Do we want the traditional formulaic voice of news reporting – which can sometimes be deceptive in it is claims to objectivity? Or something more personal and conversational – an insight into the workings of the news creation process?

Any piece of journalism published or broadcast by a media organisation is a collaboration, even if there is only one byline. There will be an editor who commissioned the idea, another who checks the copy, and often a legal team and fact-checkers as well.

None of this applies to the social media accounts of individual journalists. Here, they are most exposed – their judgments entirely their own, their unmediated personalities on display. And here, like Milligan, they can attract passionate followers, who in turn can influence what they do.



We live at a time of increasingly partisan journalism. ISTOCK

Milligan is an excellent, experienced journalist, so we can assume she will say her tweet was true. But what precisely did it mean?

It seemed to go beyond anything the ABC had published or broadcast. Yet it would be unthinkable for the institution not to stand by her. Our public broadcaster is thus ensnared in the implications of a journalist's personal social media use.

We live at a time of increasingly partisan journalism. The domination of [News Corporation](#) acts as a background rumble in the dreary and interminable culture wars. Other media outlets struggle not to define themselves in its reverse image.

Social media is part of this, fuelling partisanship, and sometimes privileging personality over the message.

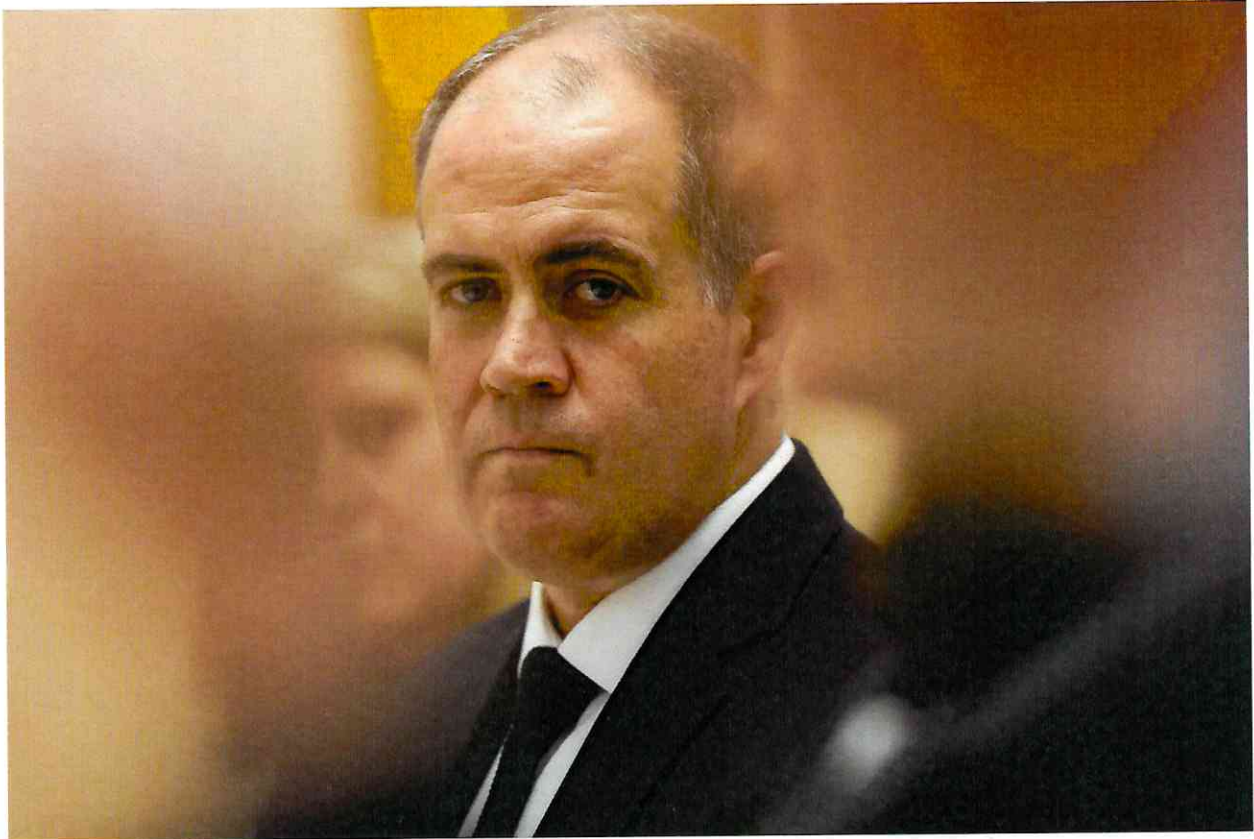
Media organisations try to work out how to behave – when to converse, and when to withdraw. But so far, it is all a bit ad hoc. The public must surely be left unsure of the principles that guide this form of journalistic practice.

The editor of *The Age*, Gay Alcorn, withdrew from social media a few months ago after [one story provoked a Twitter storm](#). She said: “I was hoping as editor I could continue to discuss things on Twitter but it seems not – I don’t mind criticism of the media at all. But reluctantly, am out of here.” (She’s back now, but in a much more limited way.)

Nine journalist Chris Uhlmann has rather gleefully poked the tiger, describing people on Twitter as “sewer rats”.

Meanwhile, the ABC’s managing director David Anderson has repeatedly been questioned about [ABC journalists’ social media posts](#) before Senate estimates. Mostly, this has involved

opinionated comments. Milligan's tweet falls into a different class. It can only be understood as factual assertion.



ABC managing director David Anderson has defended the national broadcaster's reporting on allegations against the Attorney-General. DOMINIC LORRIMER

Spectacularly unhelpful in the present context, an ABC lawyer tweeted that the Morrison government was “fascist” and the Prime Minister was an “awful human being”.

Further back, ABC journalist Laura Tingle commented on the departure of a valued ABC colleague with a tweet – now deleted – about ABC funding: “we grieve the loss of so many of our colleagues to government ideological bastardry. Hope you are feeling smug @ScottMorrisonMP.”

And even further back *Four Corners* executive producer Sally Neighbour did not hold back when then ABC managing director Michelle Guthrie was sacked by the board in 2018 . “Excellent decision”, she tweeted.

Four Corners went on to screen a program about the Guthrie departure. It's hard to believe Neighbour's tweet was helpful.

The ABC updated its social media policy last year. It instructs employees not to use social media in a way that “undermines your effectiveness at work”. My sources suggest this is not consistently policed. Implementation is left to the judgment of individual managers, not all of whom are comfortable with limiting journalists' freedom of speech. Not all are sure that they could, even if they wished to do so.

Other media companies have gone further. The BBC, in a recent update to its policy, stated: “Your personal brand on social media is always secondary to your responsibility to the BBC”.

The New York Times has also toughened up its social media policy, which now says: “Our journalists should be especially mindful of appearing to take sides on issues that *The Times* is seeking to cover objectively.”

But what does objectivity mean? The traditional, bloodless, voice of news reporting can conceal the value judgments innate in the journalism process – what to cover, who to interview and how to present the result.

This can be gendered. Once, when male journalists dominated, sexual harassment and abuse were scarcely regarded as newsworthy. Now there is a fresh field for the traditional journalistic role of exposing abuses of power. Some have called this advocacy, but there is nothing inherently “objective” about old ways, particularly when they incorporate sexism.

Social media is here to stay. For journalists it is a means of promotion, a source of tips and contacts. The feedback of audiences can be scarifying, but educative. You can’t be a robot on social media. Milligan displays her heart, constantly caring for the feelings of the survivors of sexual abuse. That’s easy to admire. But where are the limits? On the day the High Court overturned the verdict against Cardinal George Pell, Milligan tweeted: “Hug your children”.

I believe responsible use of social media is part of good citizenship. Journalists carry particular responsibility. They should not withdraw, nor throw “sewer rat” abuse.

They should work out how to behave.

We can’t expect a defamation action to help. It’s time journalists and their audiences thought it through – and took it seriously.

Margaret Simons is an author, journalist and academic.

Correction: A previous version of this article made reference to a tweet said to have been published by an ABC lawyer credited on *Four Corners*’ “Inside the Canberra Bubble” program. This was incorrect. The lawyer was not attached to that program.



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