

# Opinion: Australia doesn't have to give Facebook a free ride

March 7 2024, by Misha Ketchell

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Last week we learned that [Facebook \(Meta\) is getting out of the news business](#) to avoid paying for journalism under the Australian Government's News Media Bargaining Code. Naturally as journalists we

are disappointed—jobs will go—but no one is surprised. Facebook is doing what it has always done, which is to pursue its interests ruthlessly.

For over a decade, Facebook courted the Australian media, now it has tossed it aside. Its conduct brings to mind the old fable of the scorpion and the frog. The scorpion wants to get to the other side of the river and asks a frog to carry it. The frog agrees, even though it fears the scorpion will sting. Halfway into the crossing, the scorpion stings the frog. It is in my nature, the scorpion explains.

So it is with Facebook, which convinced Australia's media that it was a good idea to produce high-quality content and put it on Facebook for free. When ACCC chairman Rod Sims came up with a plan to make Facebook pay, out came the stinger. Facebook removed news from its Australian platform and threatened to withdraw from publishing news altogether. (It's currently using the same tactic in Canada to avoid similar laws.)

In some markets, Facebook's popularity is waning, but it persists because it is engineered to be addictive—just like smoking and arguably as toxic. A few years ago whistleblower Frances Haugen claimed Facebook knew its products were harmful but it [put profits above user safety](#). That was just the tip of the iceberg.

Facebook has a well-documented history of allowing hate, threats and misinformation to flourish. It also allowed Cambridge Analytica to scrape data from tens of millions of users and use it to [aid political candidates](#), including Donald Trump. Profiting from misinformation and disinformation is core to its business model. The [campaign of character assassination](#) on Facebook against the Philippines-based journalist Maria Ressa speaks volumes about the company's commitment to journalism, [journalists'](#) safety and human rights.

A few years ago, Facebook flatly refused to pay SBS and The Conversation for journalism under Australia's News Media Bargaining Code. We were disappointed—the money would have allowed us to produce more fact-based journalism written by experts to inform public discourse. It could have helped us in our mission to use facts and evidence to bring people together at a time when the half-truths and propaganda circulating on social media are tearing them apart. It would have helped Facebook show it cared about fighting misinformation.

But perhaps we dodged a bullet. The Albanese government now has the option of "designating" Facebook under the News Media Bargaining Code to force it to pay for journalism. If it were to do so, there's a very slim chance Facebook would pay up. More likely it would just pack up and go home.

Either way we'd be better off. As journalist Peter Greste wrote in his analysis for The Conversation last weekend "Meta's interests are not the same as our democracy's. Meta doesn't need high-quality news, particularly if its users are more interested in sharing family photos than sober reporting on inflation rates. But collectively, our society does need it."

In Australian law there is a concept known as "unconscionable conduct" that describes people who trick others into believing something for profit. It's not a bad description of what Facebook did to the Australian media over the past decade. It's what it will continue to do to communities around the world—it's in its nature.

So what can you do? Encourage anyone who gets their news from Facebook or Instagram to sign up to a reputable news service. The Conversation's [daily newsletter](#) is free and a good place to start. We also have specialist weekly newsletters, including [Science Wrap](#), [Books & Ideas](#) and New Zealand Weekly. Or if you are reading us on your

desktop at home or work, bookmark our homepage.

In Australia, at least, we don't have to give the scorpion a free ride.

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