

Editorial: Reporting the Forum

Robert Marks

Editor

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In May 2016 when I took over Editorship of the *Journal*, there had already been a Four Societies Forum at Government House, Sydney, on 14 September 2015, on the Future of Work. The eight papers presented at the Forum were published in the December 2015 issue of the *Journal*. Nine papers presented at the second Forum, on 29 November 2016, were published in the June 2017 issue of the *Journal*. Since then there have been 11 Forums, with presented papers published in the June issue of the *Journal* of the following year.

In 2018 one of the presenters, Sir Peter Glickman, did not supply us with a paper of his presentation, despite our requests. We made a transcript of his presentation, from the YouTube video, including images from his overheads. It was cleared with Sir Peter (then Chief Scientist with the NZ Government) and published in the June 2018 issue, with 9 other papers.

Unfortunately, since then fewer presenters have supplied us with papers of their presentations. At some inconvenience and cost, we transform the video presentations (on YouTube) into papers printed in the *Journal*.

But a departure in successive Forums has been a move away from individual presentations to group discussions of various topics. This happened especially in the 2024 Forum (published here in June 2025) and in the 2025 Forum (published below).

The problem for the Editor is that discussions are not papers: they are difficult to

edit, and transcripts are unlikely to be read when the audio is available on YouTube.

I have reluctantly decided to recommend to my successor that discussions not be transcribed and published, thus avoiding the cost, time, and inconvenience of turning them into written versions for the *Journal*. (This is one reason for the delayed publication of this issue.) We can still publish individual papers (the Governor's introduction and any keynote addresses, etc), but leave the discussions to be viewed on YouTube.

Presentations and discussions in the 2025 Forum are included in this issue. The topic was "AI: the Hope and the Hype, "and the presenters were by and large optimistic about the consequence of the different forms of AI — generative, agentic, etc. — in the economy, despite a general belief that AI will adversely disrupt employment, as reflected in opinion polls. There is a growing literature about AI — its impacts, the prospect of more data centres in Australia, what the Pope has to say about AI, and so on, but this Editorial is not the place to pursue and ventilate this literature. There will be opportunity enough now and into the future.

A post-literate world?

My resolve to stop transcribing Forum discussions and instead to leave them to be viewed on the YouTube recordings (referred to above) was made for the convenience of the editorial staff. But a recent article in *The Atlantic* (Horowitch 2026) argues that an increasingly large proportion of the population would anyway prefer to watch

such events on the screen instead of reading transcripts. Indeed, Horowitch reports that Americans (and I would guess Australians) are reading much less than they used to, especially books, magazines, and newspapers. This is not just among the young: in America, this decline is across all age groups, gender, and education levels, even among college graduates. Moreover, the books that people do read are apparently written more simply than they used to be: shorter sentences, simpler syntax.

And yet people are apparently reading more words than previously: in emails, on social media, text messages, captions, etc. — but not longer written works that convey rich information, and might demand more thought and inferences from the reader. Horowitch dubs this a “post-literate” society.¹ (She characterises Donald Trump, from his writing and speaking habits, the first post-literate president. But not the last.) Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) predicted that the decline of print and rise of electronic media would ultimately push people toward populist leaders. These are worrying trends for democracies.

In the meantime, we push on publishing the *Journal & Proceedings* in a print version as well as on-line. One motivation is to capture and record in libraries across the globe activities of the Society and articles that might otherwise disappear.

Other papers in this issue

Other papers in this issue include Professor Emerita Maria Skyllas-Kazacos writing about the development of the vanadium batteries now being employed in solar electricity farms in China. The development of

this type of battery has been her goal over many years at UNSW, and the designs are now being licensed for use in large-scale generation. A second paper is from a presentation (the 2011 Ben Haneman Memorial Lecture at the State Library of NSW) by the late Peter Tyler, erstwhile RSNSW historian, on European (i.e. non-British) scientists in colonial Australia. Whereas many of the British scientists were self-funded amateurs, the continentals were often government-funded. I am grateful to Peter Keeda for alerting me to this paper. Adrian Lee, at Westmead Hospital, received a 2025 RSNSW Early Career Early Career Research and Service Citation. This resulted in his writing a paper on the Sjögren’s disease biobank and registry in NSW.

The issue contains three PhD abstracts, and, sadly, five obituaries (Heather Goodall, Stephen Hill, Emma Johnston, Sir Anthony Mason, and Keith Suter).

Housekeeping

After more than ten years, this issue is my second last as Editor. I am assured that efforts to find a replacement are well under way. As always, I wish to thank Jason Antony for his sterling efforts at type-setting the *Journal* and Lindsay Botten at maintaining the *Journal* web pages. The Editorial Board has been of great assistance, particularly Jessica Milner Davis and Brynn Hibbert. I would also like to thank Christie Slade and Roy MacLeod for their help. Dr. Toner Stevenson has reluctantly resigned from the Editorial Board; thank you, Dr. Stevenson.

Robert Marks, Editor
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¹ “Post-literate” first appears in Marshall McLuhan’s 1962 *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

References

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