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The AI Tightrope.

Balancing AI, Reputation and Workforce Impact.

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The AI Dilemma: Friend or Foe?

There is no denying artificial intelligence is playing a more visible role in people's lives, with these technologies regularly making headlines in 2025. In the corporate sector, adoption of AI has been a hot topic.

When AI works. AI poses opportunities for companies to be seen as leaders in innovation, delivering positive outcomes for shareholders and customers, and driving AI adoption in Australia more broadly.

When it backfires. However, employees and their unions have not always been as enthusiastic, with a diverse range of stakeholders speaking emphatically on the workforce impacts, and challenging organisations for more transparency.

How can these corporate leaders navigate this unprecedented scrutiny and focus on Australia's AI adoption?

Medianet Insights reviewed more than 50,000 traditional and social media items focusing on AI adoption in the business sector. Our team identified several key trends and effective communication approaches for corporate leaders to walk the tightrope.

1. **Thought Leadership can fortify your reputation** when you have to make tough calls. **CBA**, while attracting scrutiny, has steered the bank through recent AI-related job cuts. **CEO Matt Comyn's** thought leadership has framed him as one of Australia's leading voices on AI technology.

2. **Inconsistent messaging can get you in hot water.** **Telstra** has experienced this first-hand after **CEO Vicki Brady** proudly announced the telco's AI developments, and later denied a connection between redundancies and AI. Unions and employees were quick to platform this inconsistency, driving highly unfavourable sentiment.

3. **Transparency around job cuts is key.** If efficiency is the goal, the narrative must focus on reinvesting in new skills, retraining the workforce, and creating higher-value roles. When executives authentically communicate this kind of messaging, job cuts attract less emotive commentary.

Read on to unpack the most important trends our team uncovered, and ways you can strategically manage the evolving narrative around AI.

# The AI take: More Hope than Hype, with cautionary notes

Organisations within Australia's corporate sector are increasingly implementing AI-tools and solutions, presenting leaders with opportunities and challenges for managing media reputation.

Over the past year, Australia's media narratives have taken a slightly more optimistic approach, with 71% (28k) mentions framing AI in a positive light. Reporting often highlighted benefits of AI adoption, including **productivity**, **innovation** and **economic growth**.

Positive themes attracted more mentions than negative themes, with 29% (11k) of coverage emphasising the negative impacts of AI. Negative coverage was still prominent and often spilled onto social channels.

These themes largely included **job cuts**, **redundancies** and **workforce displacement**, with some reports framing the **copyright sector** and the **environment** as casualties of AI.

There also appear to be two distinct camps driving these competing narratives – the **business community** versus their **employees**.

29%

71%

■ Positive mentions ■ Negative mentions
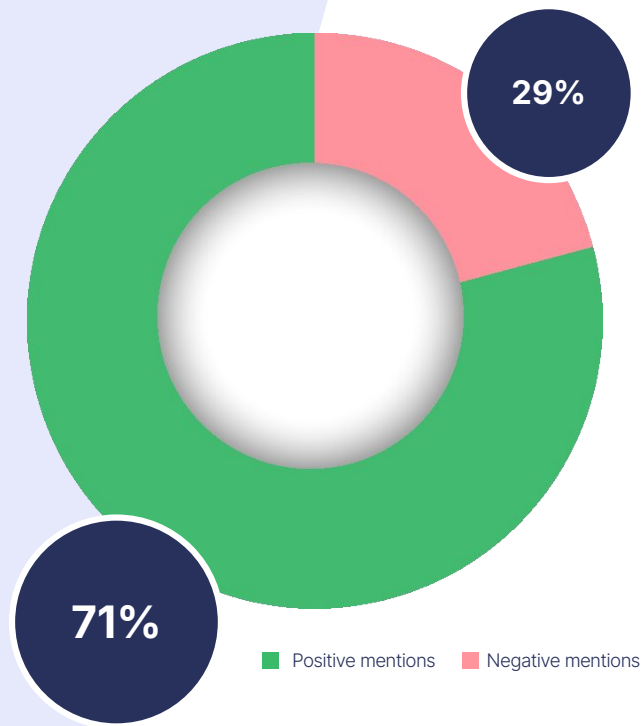
Share of positively framed versus negatively framed stories covering Artificial Intelligence from a dataset of 39k print or online media items.

Timeframe: 1 Jan to 31 August 2025

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An engine for productivity

Productivity gains and economic growth underpin the optimistic narrative.

- Australian media outlets – particularly national mastheads *The Australian* and *Australian Financial Review* – have closely followed the narrative that the adoption of AI tools necessary catalyst for business productivity and economic growth.

- These perspectives have pervaded government as well. Major cross-industry events including the recent national Productivity Commission Economic Roundtable in August 2025, saw AI – which wasn't even an official agenda item – dominate media reporting.

- The most common AI-related media narrative amid reporting on the Economic Reform Roundtable was that the technology is inevitable and necessary, and that businesses need to be open to AI adoption.

26%
AI focus

74%
Non AI
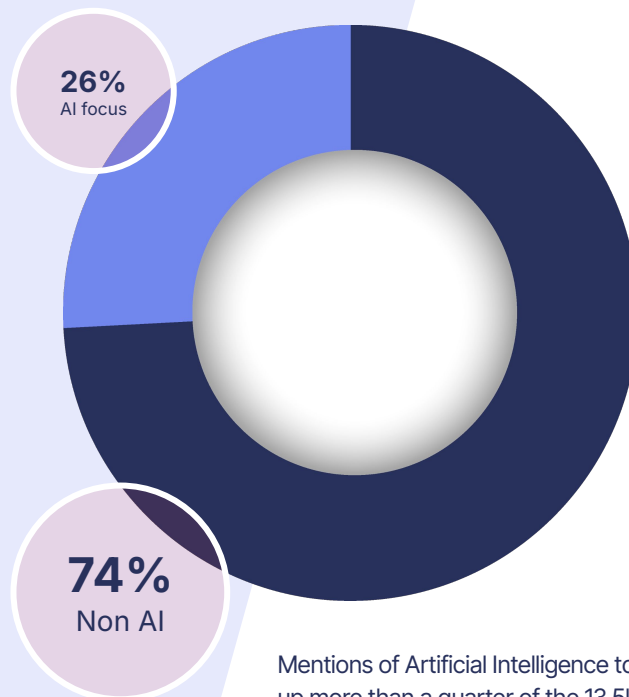
Mentions of Artificial Intelligence took up more than a quarter of the 13.5k print and online media items covering the Economic Reform Roundtable.

Date range: 1 June to 31 August

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Corporate leaders are influencers

It is no coincidence that much of this positive commentary has also featured high-profile industry leaders and government representatives sharing their voice, whether directly via interviews and op-eds, or for their contribution at major national conferences and summits.

Many of these leaders – largely heading up ASX 300 organisations and centered in the financial services sector – have unquestionably influenced media narratives and sentiments around AI. For some, this has created both opportunities and challenges when it comes to their own organisation's embracing of AI and subsequent staff restructuring.

"I certainly believe that technology will fuel a growth agenda and the race is on for countries to get their head around it." – **Ed Husic (Former Industry & Science Minister)**, *ABC Insiders, 11 May 2025*

🔗 Read full story

"The reality is, we're all facing uncertainty in our roles in different, but I'm absolutely convinced that the best way to prepare for the future is to be part of the future – to have the agency and engagement, rather than being sort of a reluctant or a late adopter." – **Matt Comyn (CBA CEO)**, *AWS AI Summit, 11 June 2025*

🔗 Read full story

"When we look at where Productivity gains, gains in our living standards... it is largely those new technologies... they touch every part of the economy and AI is clearly one of those." – **Danielle Wood (Productivity Commission Chair)**, *ABC 730* Report, 11 June 2025

🔗 Read full story

"The AI opportunity is huge and it's a shared one that could create gains for all Australians – it shouldn't be a zero-sum game between employers and employees." – **Scott Farquhar (Chair, Tech Council of Australia)**, *Economic Roundtable, 21 August 2025*

🔗 Read full story

"For every business and person, it is going to have an enormous impact on what we do every day and how productivity and growth and innovation is derived." – **Andrew Irvine (NAB CEO)**, *NAB Melbourne event, 3 September 2025*
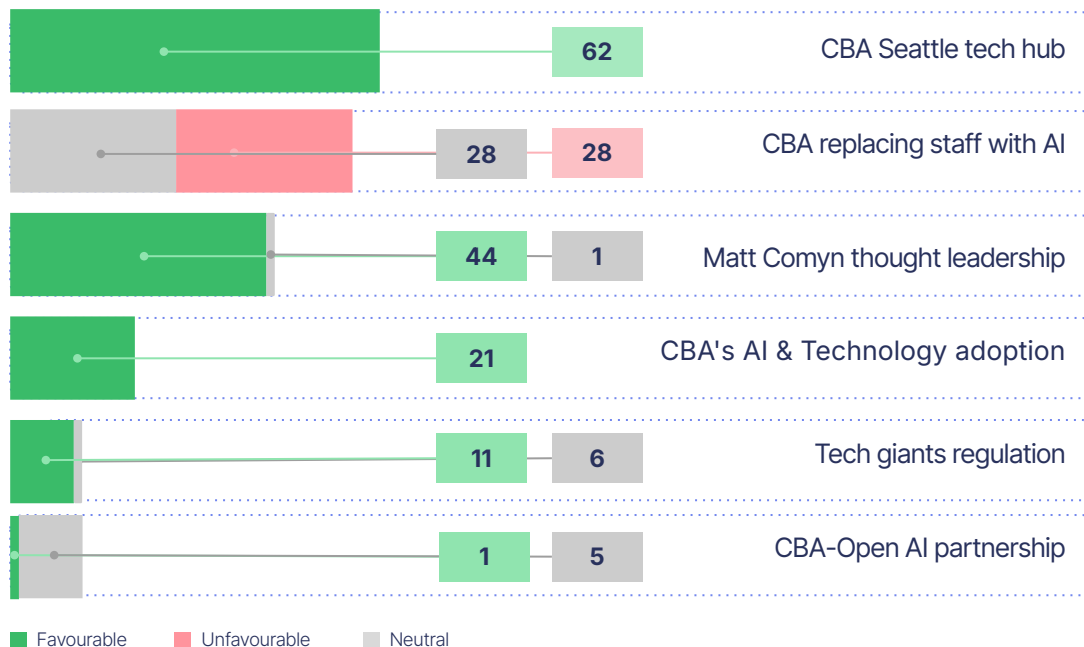
🔗 Read full story

When your CEO is the innovator.

CommBank CEO Matt Comyn has positioned himself as one of Australia's leading voices on AI.

Comyn has been upfront about the **CBA'**s adoption of AI since 2024. These themes have tended to drive highly favourable coverage for CBA.

- **How AI adoption benefits customers**. When CBA first announced the implementation of AI, the bank shared data showing the technology had seen a 50% reduction in customer scam losses, a 30% decrease in customer-reported frauds, and 40% reduction in call centre wait times.

- **Proactive Thought Leadership.** Comyn has also presented several high profile engagements including the *AFR* Banking Summit, Microsoft Technology Showcase and the recent Productivity Commission Economic Roundtable – where he was the only CEO keynote speaker. Coverage overwhelmingly framed him as an industry leader.

- **Promote Industry partnerships.** Coverage of CBA's Seattle Tech Hub, and partnerships with Amazon Web Services and Anthropic demonstrated the bank's commitment to attracting the 'best and brightest' technologists and learning from the world's most advanced technology ecosystems.

Matt Comyn's leading topics discussed in major metropolitan media in relation to AI & technology

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Topic	Favourable	Neutral	Unfavourable
CBA Seattle tech hub	62		
CBA replacing staff with AI		28	28
Matt Comyn thought leadership	44	1	
CBA's AI & Technology adoption	21		
Tech giants regulation	11	6	
CBA-Open AI partnership	1	5	

■ Favourable   ■ Unfavourable   ■ Neutral

"How Matt Comyn is rebuilding Australia's biggest bank with AI". *The Australian*

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CommBank's AI journey.

From January to July, Commonwealth Bank generated prominent and positive media coverage associated with the bank's technological developments and CEO Matt Comyn's high-profile thought leadership on Artificial Intelligence. Things took a turn from July 2025, when reporting turned to CBA job cuts which carried negative reporting. CBA's strategic response and messaging has helped neutralise potentially contentious coverage.

January 2025
Matt Comyn positions himself as as a thought leader in embracing AI.

February 2025
CBA announces AWS partnership on AI agent tool to support customer services.
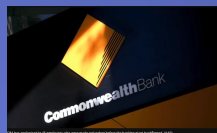

March 2025
CBA launches Seattle Tech Hub to leverage expertise and upskill staff.

June 2025
Matt Comyn appears at AFR Business Summit calling for transparency around the impact of AI on employees.

Telstra's Vicki Brady says CEO's need to be honest about the impact of AI on their staff. **Renee Nowytarger**

July 2025
CBA announces replacement of call centre jobs with AI chatbot, becoming the first organisation to proactively confirm job cuts associated with AI adoption.

CBA has apologised to 45 employees who were made redundant before the banking giant backflipped. (AAP)

August 2025
Amid the job cuts announcements CBA and OpenAI sign a 'landmark' AI deal to co-develop AI-powered scam and fraud detection. Matt Comyn is the sole CEO asked to present at the federal government Economic Reform Roundtable.

Commonwealth Bank CEO Matt Comyn is playing both offence and defence on AI. AAP/Bianca de Marchi

August 2025
CBA admits new AI call centre technology was premature, rehiring staff previously made redundant. Media widely characterises the news as a 'U-turn'. The Financial Sector Union (FSU) appear widely in media headlines 'celebrating' CBA's admission.

element of Prime Minister and Cabinet secretary Steven Kennedy and CBA chief executive Matt Comyn for dinner with the summit's participants on Wednesday evening. **Dominic Lorrimer**

September 2025
Former CBA employee criticises bank for making her redundant and replacing her with the AI chatbot she claims to have trained. Media sentiment tends to cover the story in a negative light

Kathryn Sullivan was one of 45 CBA workers sacked to be replaced by AI. **Alex Ellinghausen**

September 2025
Focus on sacked CBA worker quietens. Comyn has a quieter profile and adopts a more pragmatic, cautious tone in discussions on AI.

Counter Attack

🟩 Favourable   🟥 Unfavourable   ⬜ Neutral

Case Study: Commbank

4%
Unfavourable sentiment neutralised by CBA input

39%
Neutral/Balanced sentiment towards bank

57%
Unfavourable sentiment

The proportion of unfavourable versus neutral print and online media mentions of the 150 items related to CBA's job cuts due to AI 'backflip'.

When AI doesn't work.

Comyn's AI positioning has set the company up to manage backlash.

Recently the bank had to admit they prematurely cut 45 call centre jobs as new AI technology wasn't ready. While largely unfavourable, some coverage took a balanced and factual tone, or was neutralised by strategic messaging and engagement from CBA:

- **Acknowledge setbacks.** CBA didn't disappear when things went wrong. The bank was frank in its communication, factually explaining what happened and admitting the technology was not ready. Some headlines even praised CBA for the bank's response.

- **Defer to the tech.** Comyn acknowledged the error while simultaneously emphasising 'the technology will continue to mature over many years'. Other industry experts echoed these sentiments, noting that AI adoption requires experimentation, trials and errors, and patience to get the tech right.

- **Consistent messaging.** Comyn's longer term messaging has not downplayed the likely impact of AI for workforces, and this has been communicated in external engagements and in investor updates. Expectations were managed early on, leaving fewer narratives for unions and employees to dispute.

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Anxiety around job security

## Job losses and mass unemployment drives the pessimist narrative with emotional charge.

The most prominent concern is **job loss** and **unemployment**, a fear that can resonate strongly with the public and employees. **Negative discussions on job cuts** dominated across the full timeframe.

Concerns around **IP, copyright and creative ownership** also featured highly. This has pitted Australia's tech sector against creatives, with tech companies advocating to open allow AI model training on copyrighted material. Copyright Agency CEO

Josephine Johnston and Tech Council of Australia Chair Scott Farquhar are prominent voices sitting on opposing sides within these debates.

The impact on the **environment** is the elephant in the room of AI-related discussions. While there has been growing scrutiny around the voracious energy consumption demands of data centres, environmental concerns represented a small share of overall mentions in comparison to other themes.

6,381

AI &
Job Cuts

4,837

AI &
Copyright

1,085

AI &
Environment
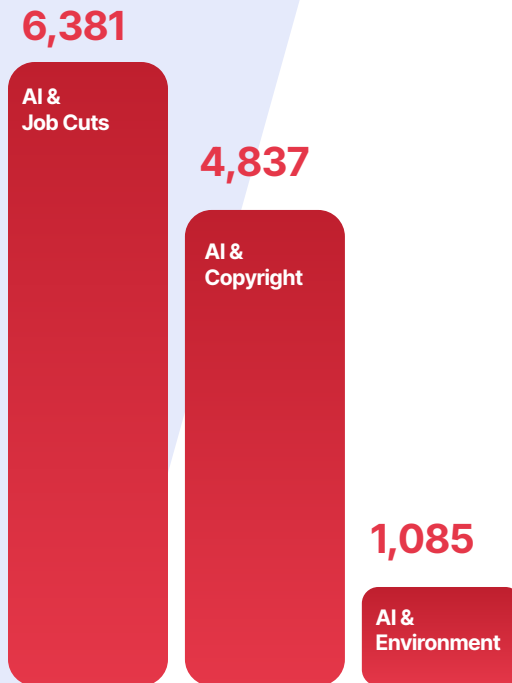
Unsurprisingly, the potential impact of AI for redundancies and job cuts had the leading number of media mentions across the period.

Timeline: 1 Jan to 31 August 2025

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Job Cuts: How unions amplify the issue

An emerging stakeholder in the AI workforce debate has been Australian **union** organisations.

Employees are understandably concerned about how this technology will affect their work – and their job security. In media coverage on this issue, input from relevant industry unions are ever-present.

The most persistent voices across the past nine months have included the **Communications Workers Union** and **Australian Council of Trade Unions**. Notably, however the **Financial Services Union** and **Professionals Australia** have dominated media conversations in recent months.

Media focus on AI and the impacts for workforces has given these organisations a newfound platform for visibility – which they are very keenly capitalising on.

+265%

123	387	189	140	237	492	960	1,375
Jan -25	Feb -25	Mar -25	Apr -25	May -25	Jun -25	Jul -25	Aug -25
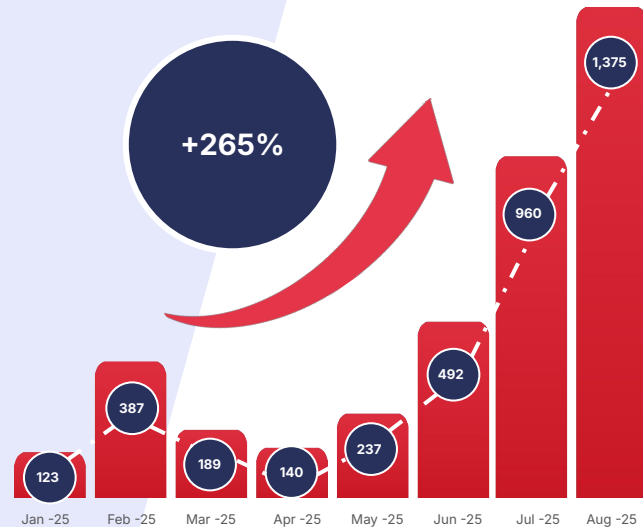
Media mentions highlighting Union commentary around artificial intelligence **increased by 265%** between May and June 2025 compared with the four months prior.

"Using AI as a cover for slashing secure jobs is a cynical cost-cutting exercise, and workers know it."

FSU National Secretary, Julia Angrisano
August 2025

"Westpac sends jobs to Manila". *The Australian*

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How are unions gaining cut-through?

The underdog narrative

Unions can position themselves as David against Goliath, fighting to defend 'underdogs' against CEOs who are willing to replace them with computers to help their bottom line.

Emotive and hyperbolic language

Mainstream media tends to emphasise the tension and conflict in any story, because that's what drives engagement. Unions can play this game without the restrictions binding company spokespeople or PR statements.

A sympathetic audience

Employee Generated Content (EGC) has been a winner for brand reputation, delivering authentic messaging for corporate brands (think Bunnings). However, this can be a double-edged sword. The majority of the media-consuming audience will have a much easier time seeing things from the perspective of disenfranchised employees – and may be concerned about what AI might do to their own jobs in the future.

Unions always position workers and customers at the centre of their narratives

"

Workers want a tech-savvy bank, but they expect to be part of the change, not replaced by it.

(FSU, July 2025)

"

Telstra customers should prepare for the possibility that they will be talking to more machines than actual people, and the customer service they've come to know will no longer be available.

(CWU on Telstra job cuts, July 2025)

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Inconsistent messaging leads to hot water.

Telstra has been undergoing a major AI transformation over the past 18 months, which has seen the organisation forge a major partnership with **Accenture** and launch an AI Silicon Valley hub. The telco has also maintained that major redundancies are not associated with these developments.

In the most recent round of layoffs, media headlines and commenters were easily able to forge a connection and in some cases imply deception and inconsistency, given this message was at odds with the story they were telling just a few months prior. The **CWU** maintained a consistent message through the last 12 months of job cut announcements, making statements that snatched headlines, and emphasising the plight of Telstra workers.

This highlights the double-edged sword of AI investment; **what was seen as an exciting and profitable development in May became evidence of duplicity by July**.

Telstra may have been able to proactively address this by acknowledging the potential impact of AI ahead of announcing job cuts. Negativity began to quieten following Telstra's acknowledgement of the impact AI may have and highlighting its internal reskilling initiatives.

Case Study: Telstra

How an AI narrative can unravel.

Telstra's AI narrative on job cuts crumbled due to inconsistent messaging, creating a credibility gap. Their public AI-driven workforce reduction goal made subsequent denials seem disingenuous, allowing media and unions to control the narrative and making Telstra's defense difficult.

May 2024
Telstra announces up to 2,800 potential job cuts and notes these are not related to AI. CWU calls planned cuts a "national disgrace".

Telstra To Sack 2,800 Jobs As Telco Accelerates AI Use
THE PROJECT

December 2024
Australian Council of Trade Unions begin positioning on AI issue calling for "a fair go in the digital age".

January 2025
Telstra announces $700m AI investment, attracting favourable media mentions.

May 2025
Telstra CEO Vicki Brady updates investors on Telstra's new autonomous AI agents along with expectations of future job cuts.

Telstra expects to shrink workforce as it leans in 'hard' on AI — including in customer service
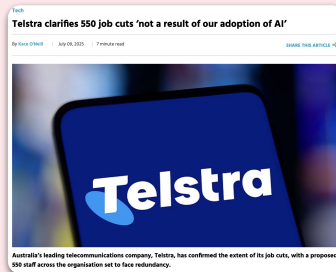
Company tells investors 'we will embrace AI' and suggests autonomous AI agents could soon play a role

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July 2025
Telstra announces 550 job cuts but downplays link to AI adoption.

CWU president Shane Murphy is widely cited in media coverage with criticism of Telstra, saying "this is the worst way to introduce new technology into a dynamic industry".

Tech
Telstra clarifies 550 job cuts 'not a result of our adoption of AI'
By Race O'Neill | July 09, 2025 | 7 minute read   SHARE THIS ARTICLE

Australia's leading telecommunications company, Telstra, has confirmed the extent of its job cuts, with a proposed 550 staff across the organisation set to face redundancy.

August 2025
Telstra acknowledges role of AI in recent job cuts, announces major reskilling academy to support employees transitioning into AI-roles.

Replacing real people with AI will render the company as just another logo on a bit of technology.

CWU nation president Shane Murphy
July 2025

"Together in unity and purpose: A message from incoming National Secretary Shane Murphy".
The Communications Workers Union (CWU).

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Social Media discussions had predominantly negative sentiment.

Public Anxiety and Cynicism: Australian social discussions are highly emotional when discussing AI adoption in workplaces. There is a strong belief that AI will lead to job losses and mass unemployment, coupled with cynicism towards major corporations like CBA and Telstra.

Doubt in the technology: There is widespread skepticism about AI's ability to effectively replace nuanced human roles, especially in customer service. Frustrated users report negative experiences with AI chatbots. Some channels accused companies of 'AI-washing' to disguise offshored jobs.

Growing Calls for Regulation: Users widely called on the Australian government to implement strict regulations on AI to ensure the technology doesn't 'run wild'.

Unions as New Advocates: Unions are gaining more share of the conversation within sectors that historically have much lower rates of union memberships. These organisations increasingly represent wider range of Australian employees and are gaining more visibility in discussions on job cuts.

64%

36%

■ Positive mentions   ■ Negative mentions
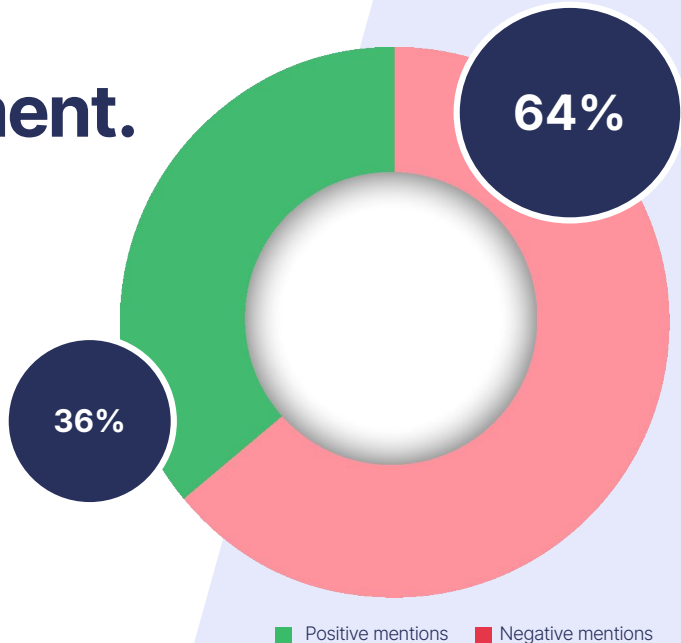
Share of positively framed versus negatively framed mentions covering Artificial Intelligence across 2.5k publicly available Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, X and YouTube posts*

Date range: 1 January to 31 August, 2025
*Note results only include mentions published by Australian accounts.

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01 A consistent narrative is non-negotiable.

The learnings

As demonstrated in the **Telstra** case study, in an era of heightened transparency, media will pick up on mixed messaging. The message to shareholders was that AI would result in efficiency and cut costs, while employees were reassured that AI implementation would have no impact on the workforce.

The inconsistency was detected by media, and leveraged by the CWU to generate sustained unfavourable coverage.

While **CBA** copped expected pushback against its AI-related job cuts, the bank has consistently flagged that workforces are likely to change amid AI transformation over the previous 12 months. This potentially helped to minimise further unfavourable reporting and allegations of 'deception' from detractors.

02 Treat unions as stakeholders.

The learnings

In the battle for brand reputation, unions are not just a third party; they are a central player with a powerful voice. These voices are even more powerful on social channels.

Union narratives have grown and diversified over the past 12 months thanks to increasing adoption of AI and the impacts on the workforce. Media coverage of unions increasingly focuses on activity in white collar sectors and professional services.

Their perspective must be anticipated and managed as carefully as that of an investor. Proactive and collaborative engagement with relevant unions is essential to preemptively neutralise conflict and avoid a public war of words.

03 The 'why' behind job cuts matters.

If efficiency is the goal, the narrative must focus on reinvesting in new skills, retraining the workforce, and creating higher-value roles, rather than simply on reducing headcount.

Where executives have emphasised efforts made to upskill or reskill its workforce, negative sentiment tends to be more contained. CBA received highly positive coverage of the Seattle Tech Hub, with media framing the initiative as supporting the workforce while the bank embarks on its AI transformation journey.

Without a positive vision for the future of its workforce, a company can be seen as prioritising profit over people which feeds cynical and anxious narratives on social media channels.

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The information on this report was sourced from Medianet's media monitoring platform and other third-party sources such as industry reports and media coverage.

This data was analysed by Medianet's media analysis arm, Medianet Insights.

Medianet Insights provide expert and actionable media analysis for some of Australia's top organisations to uncover the deeper meaning of their media coverage. Our team of expert analysts thoroughly interpret your media data to give you understanding and context of the impact of your media mentions through award-winning weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual bespoke reports.

Learn more about Medianet Insights here.

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