

Submission by Keith Gould On

Draft Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023

There are two fundamental tenets for a society to be free -

- Freedom of religion
- Freedom of speech

Should either of these be restricted or curtailed then we are not 'a free nation'.

With respect to Freedom of Religion, we have come a long way since the Dark Ages and the Catholic Inquisitions. We can nowadays freely worship in whatever faith we may choose, or not worship in any religious faith whatsoever if that is our desire. However, our Freedom of Speech, our liberty to openly express our views especially when they run counter to the accepted orthodoxy, is regularly under threat.

Whether it was Voltaire or Evelyn Beatrice Hall who is credited with the statement "I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it", the principle behind the quote is as valid today as it ever was.

When Nicolaus Copernicus developed his theories about the movement of planets around the sun rather than around the earth, his scientific publications were banned in the interests of protecting the public from misinformation. We know now of course that Copernicus was absolutely correct. The censorship of his publications hindered the science of astronomy for many decades. Half a century after Copernicus, Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake for repeating Copernican theory. After that, Galileo Galilei was silenced and confined to house arrest for similarly repeating what we now know is scientific fact. History has many such examples of the folly of authorities in the suppression of freedom of speech.

One could argue that the Bible, the Quran, and the Book of Mormon contain contradictory elements. If indeed any are deemed absolutely true, then by corollary the others must be deemed to contain misinformation. Moreover, modern science points to falsehoods and misinformation in all of them. Yet we do not ban them, nor should we.

The solution to perceived misinformation/disinformation is not in censorship; it is in presenting the counter-arguments so that there can be intelligent discussion and debate. No matter how wrong an expressed view may be perceived, nobody, no body or agency, no ruling authority should be permitted to censor it lest our claim to be a free people is sacrificed. The issue is not what is true and what is false; it is who should decide what is true and what is false. In a free society it must be the individual.

This is a plea not to treat the populace as immature, ignorant imbeciles in need of paternalistic protection. Instead, let them have information, provide them with data, present alternative hypotheses, and encourage them to think for themselves. Let individuals make their own decision about what is right and what is wrong, and let them openly express the reasons for their decisions. Only in this way will there be continued scientific and social advancement.

Should the Draft Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023 be passed into law, this will be tantamount to turning our direction backwards toward the Dark Ages. Instead let us continue on a forward path of intelligent progress.