

In a healthy democracy, preserving media diversity is paramount to ensure that a multitude of voices can be heard and assessed by the public. Independent journalism and alternative media play a crucial role in questioning the status quo, providing different perspectives, and holding those in power accountable.

The pervasive influence of mainstream foreign media, such as NewsCorp Australia's parent company, presents a formidable challenge to smaller political parties and emerging voices rooted in social media platforms. Consider the impact on the climate change movement if Greta Thunberg's voice had been moderated by those wielding significant power. Similarly, contemplate the potential ramifications for global support towards Ukraine if tweets expressing solidarity were subject to the discretion of those who possess such authority.

The raw research data obtained for the University by the global advertising company "We Are Social," assisted ACMA in forming its stance. The research involved a minimal sample size of only 2,659 adults and a mere twelve focus groups with just 60 participants. The fact that an advertising consultancy company, "We Are Social," conducted the research for Canberra University only further necessitates careful consideration of potential biases that may have influenced the original government report. Canberra University researchers did not disclose whether they had any conflict of interest when designing, researching or publishing the ACMA report. Parliamentarians should naturally be asking questions about whether it was ambivalent or designed to align with a predetermined agenda set by the ACMA Disinformation Task Force.

This leads to the critical question: who should be able to determine what is considered misleading or false? The challenge lies in navigating the complexities of truth in an era where information flows through various online and offline channels and can be hidden by state actors in unpublished reports that the public cannot access and evaluate.

According to the Canberra University study, the questionnaire on misinformation revealed that approximately 60% of Australians were aware of the significant risk reduction in infection and transmission associated with wearing masks". The question then arises: is this information accurate or misleading? In Australia, mask mandates have been implemented in various healthcare and correctional settings, indicating the recognised importance of masks. However, a thorough meta-analysis conducted by Cochrane, which underwent peer review, suggests no conclusive evidence of an apparent reduction in respiratory viral infection when using medical/surgical masks. Furthermore, the analysis found no discernible differences between medical/surgical masks and N95/P2 respirators among healthcare workers in routine care to mitigate respiratory viral infection. Whose version of truth should we prioritise for suppression? Should it be a government-narrated truth based upon opaque decisions made by "experts" or a peer-reviewed meta-analysis by a prestigious and respected institute?

Ultimately, when it comes down to it, if you are instructed to wear a mask, whether or not you personally agree with it or not, compliance is necessary if it is legislated. Denial of access without a face mask should be the focus of the regulation rather than controlling information and impeding an individual's ability to critically evaluate publicly available shared information. In its current form, the proposed ACMA legislation should only be endorsed by Parliament if there are significant improvements to address freedom of expression.

Based on the report provided to the government, ACMA, through this proposed bill, has been granted reserve powers to register industry codes, ensure compliance with these codes, and establish standards for digital platforms' activities. We are entering what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard called a simulacra. The simulacrum is a state where reality and its representations become blurred to the point where it becomes challenging to distinguish between what is real and what is merely a simulation or a model of reality. In this state, the boundaries between the original and the copy, truth and fiction, begin to dissolve, and the simulated versions of reality often take precedence over the actual reality itself. Does Australia need a reality where suppression through bureaucratic regulation dampens public discourse?

An issue persists here in Australia, where certain media entities, [REDACTED], maintain the ability to disseminate content without sufficient accountability through their digital platforms. ACMA's report to the government states that the proposed code does not require platforms to apply counter-misinformation measures to professional news content.

The presence of harmful and misleading narratives disguised as news articles can overwhelm individuals [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The absence of significant financial penalties for professional news media outlets posting opinions online exacerbates public opinion distortion. These media outlets blatantly promote centre-right perspectives without consequence. Achieving balance and fairness requires establishing equitable penalties for both social media platforms and traditional news media, allowing emerging voices to compete with established media sources. It is essential to address this issue with a comprehensive approach rather than expecting differential treatment between different forms of media.

A thriving democracy thrives on the robust competition of diverse ideas, and therefore, a complete and consistent approach is necessary to preserve the democratic values we hold dear. This legislation, as proposed, gives mainstream media a free pass in the social media space.

The proposed legislation in Australia raises concerns regarding media diversity, transparency, and freedom of expression. The dominance of mainstream media, influenced by powerful entities, threatens the voices of smaller political parties and emerging voices rooted in social media. The determination of what constitutes misinformation and the suppression of certain information poses challenges in navigating the complexities of truth in a digital era. It is essential to establish a comprehensive approach that ensures transparency, fairness, and equitable penalties for all forms

of media. Preserving a thriving democracy requires a media landscape that encourages diverse perspectives, critical evaluation of information, and a healthy competition of ideas. The code should either remain voluntary or encompass the inclusion of mainstream media posting online under its direct jurisdiction, applying equivalent penalties for the dissemination of misinformation or disinformation.