

In February 1633, a devout Catholic was summoned to Rome by the Pope to appear before the inquisitor and be charged.

On 22 June the sentence was delivered:

1. The defendant was found "vehemently suspect of heresy" namely of having held the opinions that the Sun lies motionless at the centre of the universe, that the Earth is not at its centre and moves, and that one may hold and defend an opinion as probable after it has been declared contrary to Holy Scripture. He was required to "abjure, curse and detest" those opinions.
2. He was sentenced to formal imprisonment at the pleasure of the Inquisition, which was commuted to house arrest, under which he remained for the rest of his life.
3. His book was banned; and he was later forbidden from publishing any existing or future work.

In September 1854, an obstetrician approached town officials with the results of his private research, although skeptical the town officials followed his advice. However, the authorities knew that his reasoning was fundamentally wrong and therefore dismissed his crackpot ideas.

It was not until 1866 and many years after his death that the authorities decided that he may in fact have been correct.

The above stories, although occurring centuries apart, tell an all too familiar story; that the prevailing authorities are all too quick to believe themselves to be infallible while anyone who voices a dissenting view is roundly declared to be a peddler of lies, heresies and to use modern parlance – misinformation and disinformation.

Of course, we now know that Galileo was correct, and the Pope (and his advice from God) was wrong. We also know that the once widely accepted "Miasma" theory was entirely wrong and that Dr John Snow was correct in pointing to contaminated water as the source of cholera.

Unfortunately, the above incidents are by no means isolated and the track record of Australian governments being infallible is poor – the cane toad being but one of many examples!

If it is the government's position that it is now sufficiently wise and enlightened that it would never repeat such egregious errors, then I would counsel it to consider that it cannot guarantee that the constituents of a future government or the board charged to manage the proposed "Combating Misinformation and Disinformation Bill" would be similarly blessed. It is noteworthy that the Pope was surrounded by the most educated men of his time, and even with the apparent divine guidance of God, was unable to deduce that in fact Galileo was correct in his views.

What tests does the government intend to embody in the legislation to determine what is true and what is "misinformation" (false information) or "disinformation" (deliberately false information)?

How will 'potential' be weighed, and what is the threshold test for "serious harm"?

Frankly, the proposed legislation would be more at home in Orwell's totalitarian state than in a modern free democratic nation and anyone approving this legislation should give serious consideration as to the potential consequences for themselves and their families should they ever find themselves on the wrong side of any future governments approved 'Truth'.