

Regarding the proposed new laws, announced in January 2023 by the Minister for Communications that the Australian Government would provide the independent regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), with new powers to combat online misinformation and disinformation.

I am deeply disturbed by this proposal for the following reasons:

For healthy functioning of a democratic state a free flow of information and opinion is absolutely essential, even if some of the opinions expressed are contrary to majority opinion and sensibilities or official government legislation or policy.

Our political system has always functioned on the basis that people can be critical of a government's agendas or policies. In this way corruption in government can be exposed, serious flaws in government practice can be subject to public discussion and the electorate can make fully informed decisions on what to support or oppose.

Much of the recent censorship we have seen on social media relates to medical and scientific issues. The Scientific Method requires a free dissemination of data and research finding, robust discussion about different hypotheses, and uncensored debate. Only through this process can Science be tested and advanced. For example, during the last 3 years, a great deal of medical and scientific evidence, and opinions that questioned or contradicted public health policy, was subject to censorship. One example of this is the claim that COVID-19 came from a laboratory leak. Initially this was vehemently denied and censored in places like facebook. However, much later it was acknowledged that it was very likely this occurred.

Claims and opinions need to stand on their own merit and it is not the place for government or its bureaucrats to decide what is true or not, or what people can view or not, in a secretive process that takes place behind closed doors.

Science and democracy operate by free dissemination of information and discussion and examination of evidence. Consensus, public

sensibility, populist views or government policy are not reliable indicators of truth.

The draft states: “The code and standard-making powers will not apply to authorised electoral and referendum content and other types of content such as professional news and satire”

Allowing legacy media and government an exemption to the code makes the assumption that the media or government has not or will not behave in such a way as to disseminate misinformation. This has been proven by history to be absolutely false. Allowing only the official government narrative to be disseminated, however misleading and inaccurate it is, while censoring alternative views, seriously undermines our democracy, and must not be allowed to take place. The reasons suggested for censorship are staggeringly broad.

What constitutes “Public Health” for example, is a scientific topic where there are many different perspectives and is subject to constant change as new evidence emerges and orthodox views are challenged and overturned. A “one size fits all” approach to health, defined by a simplistic government policy, is highly dangerous and guaranteed to cause harm to many people. The example given of “serious harm” is actually based on misleading information from government and media sources. “Misinformation that caused people to ingest or inject bleach products to treat a viral infection”. This implies a discrediting of Chlorine Dioxide, correctly administered, as an effective treatment for viral and bacterial infections, whereas there is scientific evidence in the literature to support its efficacy.

What constitutes “Harm to the Environment” is a matter that needs to be constantly debated. For example, a particular energy lobby may have influenced government policy in a deceptive or corrupt manner, and be benefitting financially while causing real environmental harm. If criticising this policy can be labelled as misinformation, the democratic process is compromised and corruption can go unchecked. The draft leaves open the possibility that correct, factual information could be censored because the government of the time decides that the spreading of true information could cause “harm”. This is not acceptable.

The proposed legislation has very vague references to “hate speech” or matters that might cause offence to some people. This could be a way of shutting down discussions that, in the best interests of society, should take place in the public sphere. An example of this might be that a trans activist may take offence at someone stating a biological fact that a female cannot become a male, even when cosmetic changes are made. Shutting down discussion in this way could result in vulnerable teenagers who experience gender dysphoria taking irreversible and unnecessary medical and surgical treatments while not addressing their underlying issues.

What is being suggested can only be described as an Orwellian dystopia with the ACMA becoming the Ministry of Truth. At all costs this must be rejected absolutely.

I can't believe that in my lifetime I'm compelled to make a submission opposing such horrific legislation.

**ONCE YOU START CENSORING, YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY TO DYSTOPIA
AND TOTALITARIANISM**