

I am very fearful of the Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation bill, open for public comment at present. Although I am a staunch supporter of government attempts to control hate speech, this bill is deficient - if not downright dangerous. Not only will it stymie critical and timely online debate in Australia, but it will be wholly ineffective against the worst kinds of harmful internet content.

As this bill hopes to protect us from a range of harms, including harm to the environment, our health, economy and democratic processes, who then decides what is disinformation about these varied topics? It is amusing to imagine the Australian Communications and Media Authority engaging batteries of meteorologists, climatologists, epidemiologists, economists, political scientists and other professionals. Day in, day out, our finest intellects in the employ of ACMA would pore over suspect social media posts and then debate vigorously amongst themselves before returning judgement. Unfortunately for us, it is unlikely that ACMA will bother calling upon any professionals, academics or intellectuals in their pursuit of disinformation. The ultimate arbiters of truth will be either the government itself or unelected bureaucrats.

Digital media content is to be censored under the bill if it is 'reasonably likely to cause or contribute to serious harm'. Again, without clear and unequivocal definitions, 'serious harm' will be entirely within the eye of the censor.

Social media companies have been with us for nearly twenty years. Only now has the Australian government decided that there is a need to censor social media posts. It would be a far more compelling case if we were provided with examples of social media disinformation or misinformation harming our economy, environment, health and so on. After two decades one would expect a plethora of concrete examples to justify this legislation. As for the inclusion that 'harm' extends even to environmental harm, we should be satisfied with at least one irrefutable example of a social media post causing environmental harm anywhere in the entire world at any time during the whole history of social media. There are none.

Recently, reports have arisen of our government censoring truthful social media posts during the Covid Pandemic, and it is well-known that senior scientists and governments around the world censored what is likely to be truthful accounts of the origins of COVID. Calls are becoming louder from democratic countries such as the United States to not only censor what is regarded as 'Climate Disinformation', but also to censor truthful information about the cost of renewables. The Wall Street Journal reported that the White House national climate advisor stated unequivocally that 'highlighting the costs of green energy' is 'dangerous'. She demanded that social media companies censor even truthful posts about the cost.

I strongly urge you to do what you can to quash this bill. I fear that it will seriously erode one of the crucial pillars of this great country - our democracy.