

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to the proposed Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023. While I understand the importance of addressing the spread of misinformation and disinformation on digital platforms, I firmly believe that the measures outlined in this bill pose a significant threat to the fundamental principles of free speech and democracy in Australia.

The provisions in the bill that grant the government the power to gather information from digital platform providers and require them to keep certain records infringe upon the privacy rights of individuals and introduce a level of government surveillance that raises legitimate concerns. Additionally, the government's ability to request the development of a code of practice and enforce an industry standard encroaches on the autonomy of digital platforms and risks stifling innovation and competition in the online space.

At the heart of my opposition lies the belief that this bill undermines the essence of free speech, a cornerstone of any democratic society. The Australian Constitution only recognizes an implied right to freedom of speech, and by targeting the platforms citizens use to express their views and share information, the government is indirectly limiting citizens' ability to exercise this right freely. This move could set a dangerous precedent for future encroachments on free expression in other domains, eroding the very fabric of our democratic values.

Christopher Hitchens, the renowned British-American author and intellectual, once argued passionately for the necessity of freedom of speech, *'The only thing that should be upheld at all costs and without qualification is the right of free expression, because if that goes, then so do all other claims of right as well'*.

Democracy cannot exist where freedom of speech is curtailed. The ability to openly express ideas, critique authority, and engage in robust debates are vital elements that nourish a healthy democracy. By giving the government the power to censor and control information on digital platforms, we risk jeopardizing the diversity of opinions and perspectives that are essential for informed decision-making and the advancement of society.

Furthermore, granting the government or a committee the role of an arbiter of truth is a deeply troubling prospect. It concentrates enormous power in the hands of a few, enabling them to define what constitutes misinformation and disinformation. Such subjective determination is inherently prone to biases and may lead to the silencing of dissenting voices, hindering necessary criticism of government policies and actions.

Instead of relying on heavy-handed regulation that may unintentionally suppress free expression, I urge the government to invest in public education and media literacy initiatives. By promoting critical thinking and empowering citizens to discern reliable information, we can combat misinformation and disinformation at their root, without sacrificing our cherished principles of free speech.

In conclusion, I implore you to reconsider the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023. While I acknowledge the importance of addressing the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation, the proposed measures threaten the bedrock of our democracy—freedom of speech. Let us work together to find alternative solutions that uphold our democratic values while fostering a more informed and responsible digital society.

Thank you for considering my concerns. I hope that you will give this matter the careful consideration it deserves.