

Comments on the **Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation** Bill

Firstly we will comment on the statement that the Bill will enable government to “monitor efforts and require digital platforms to do more, placing Australia at the forefront in **tackling harmful online misinformation** and disinformation, while **balancing freedom of speech**”.

With all due respect it is not possible to restrict the freedom of information and ideas without completely negating “freedom of speech”. The oxford dictionary defines freedom as “The state of being able to act without hindrance or restraint; liberty of action”. The Bill is inconsistent with fundamental freedoms of speech and communication under international human rights instruments like the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The phrase “harmful online information” also raises concerns. The definition of harm is subjective and will be dependent on the judgment of anonymous bureaucrats. The Bill includes a vague and ideological definition of “harm” which risks it being weaponised to shut down legitimate speech on pressing social issues.

People everywhere have a right to a broad exposure to information and opinions in order to make informed choices. These choices will be based on their values. Unity of values is not something that can be enforced and an attempt to do so will cause more harm than good as is evidenced historically in many countries where oppressive rule began with restricting the freedom of speech and attempting to enforce a common value system. It is of concern that the Bill does not provide a sufficient standard of accountability and oversight for the misuse of censorship powers.

With regards “**online safety**”, the people of Australia are all making safety choices daily as we interact with our neighbours and the wider community. We are regularly exposed to a plethora of ideas with which we do not necessarily concur, but it is still possible to befriend and interact with our fellow citizens on a peaceful and respectful level. If however, we find a difference in values to be unsafe, we are free to terminate a conversation or leave a meeting that we find harmful. In the same way, we are free to terminate online discussions if they are presenting information contrary to our values by blocking or deleting the conversation. Public health and safety with regards information can only be the responsibility of the individual.

By attempting to implement the monitoring and restricting of information, the government of Australia shows very little trust in its citizens to act responsibly as individuals. At the same time the Bill puts too much trust in unelected bureaucrats, giving them power to silence speech in the public square without transparency or accountability.

In conclusion, it is not possible to have a truly democratic rule in Australia with such a Bill as this being passed as is evidenced by the following definition of Democratic Values from the Australian Parliament House website (aph.gov.au):

Definition of Democratic Values as stated on the Australian Parliament House website:

- Respect for individuals and their right to make their own choices.
- Tolerance of differences and opposing ideas.
- Equity—valuing all people and supporting them to reach their full potential.
- Each person has freedom of speech, association, movement and freedom of belief.
- Justice—treating everyone fairly, in society and in court.