

Phillip Beazley ACMA submission

The Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023 appears to be a solution looking for a problem.

It directly contravenes Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights which states that, 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' This alone is sufficient for the bill to be torn up and for those who have taken part in its creation to spend time becoming better acquainted with the Declaration's contents. One may also reasonably ask what other articles will fall by the wayside as governments claim the need for greater control of those they represent.

The initial claim that 'misinformation and disinformation pose a threat to the safety and wellbeing of Australians, as well as our democracy, society and economy' is the language of the scaremonger. Information has been able to quickly travel the world for many decades and this has not led to any all-of-society dangers in Australia. Much more importantly, it has allowed us to engage in the discovery of new information, creative theories and alternate points of view as we are simultaneously made more aware of the mechanism of propaganda both here and abroad. The bill talks down to Australians and presumes that the vast majority of us cannot search freely for facts and opinions and decide for ourselves what we shall consume and therefore think. Our involvement in the democratic process requires us to remain open to and inquisitive about the world.

While the ACMA will be given new powers of surveillance and punishment, who decides what information is mis or disinformation? The decision making process in this bill proceeds straight into Orwellian territory. The premise of a democracy is the trust placed in a majority of voters making the best choice. This legislation runs completely counter to that premise and is open to corruption and overuse. Where is the policeman policing the policeman, and why should we even trust them?

The unfortunate joke in the legislation is the inherent claim that the government is always right and possesses knowledge and understanding of all matters including those things that it does not or cannot know. An important example of this inadequacy lies in the 'safe and effective' claims made by governments, bureaucracies and health experts as they are being debunked more and more every day not only via social media but in the mainstream press as new studies and updated health statistics show distressing increases in heart injuries, cardiovascular disease and double digit increases in excess deaths. Simultaneously we have also become aware of the already existing history of censorship by the major social media companies over the last three years. Censoring information which has now been proven to be accurate and if widely broadcast at the time, could have saved lives and the people's ongoing health. Bureaucracies inquire into matters according to how they are instructed by the government. Governments contain people with specific talents, blind spots, views and prejudices and the whole system, as large as it may be, will not always properly research all options and then honestly adopt the best solution. The trust that the people have in the government is equal to the preparedness of the government to listen to the people, whom they represent, who pay for them and who give them their power, and then evaluate their claims and concerns.

The government should completely shelve this bill and let the people of Australia consume

information from whichever source they see fit. Censorship has never been and never will be in the best interests of responsible and free thinking people. If the government considers that dangerous mis or disinformation is being promoted then it should provide the public with substantial and credible information that counters or balances it. This is the only method which shows sufficient respect to the constituents of this Australian democracy.