

Submission regarding the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023

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I am a teacher, writer and education researcher. My research has involved me in debate about education, curriculum and teaching methods. Participation in this debate has convinced me of the need for strong free speech protections and so I am not in favour of governments or government agencies clamping down on supposed 'misinformation.'

Firstly, most of what we read in the media and on social media is rarely a statement of bald facts. Information is mixed with opinion. Debatable consequences are drawn from known facts. Reasonable inferences are made from questionable information. And information is often provisional and probabilistic. I trained as a scientist and one of the key aspects of my training was estimating the likely error level in any measurements I made. I sometimes think there is a misconception that science deals in certainties when it is always provisional.

For instance, in March 2020, the US Surgeon General, Dr. Jerome Adams, [cautioned the public](#) that face masks did not provide effective protection from COVID-19 and could even cause harm. According to CNN, he stated that, "Folks who don't know how to wear them properly tend to touch their faces a lot and actually can increase the spread of coronavirus."

It is hard to think of a more authoritative source than the US Surgeon General and yet just a few months later, my home state of Victoria was mandating mask wearing, even when alone and outdoors.

In March 2020, would an argument in favour of mask wearing have been 'misinformation?' Later in the pandemic, would an argument against mask wearing have been 'misinformation?'

COVID-19 provides many such examples. For instance, the hypothesis that the virus originated in a laboratory before escaping and infecting the public was initially viewed as a racist conspiracy theory. Now, it remains unproven but is considered a real possibility by the scientific community.

I suppose we might ask whether it matters if information that is eventually discovered to be true is initially labelled as 'misinformation' and suppressed. My view is that it matters greatly. Unfortunately, many otherwise sensible people have lost a grip on reality since the start of 2020. They believe in strange conspiracies involving the World Economic Forum and the like and they point as evidence to attempts to suppress what we now know to be correct information. People do not like to feel they are being manipulated and especially so by their government. It leads to a breakdown in trust and is an extant threat to liberal democracy.

Instead, the way to deal with misinformation is with better information. Rather than trying to be too clever and divine which speech tactics are likely to have which specific effects, government and government agencies should attempt to be as open and factual as possible. And this includes being open about uncertainties. We should not pretend to know what we don't know.

A track record of telling the truth provides great weight to a source and their argument. Yes, it is frustrating if people believe strange things about the climate or vaccines or any other important matter of public policy, but it is futile to think a liberal democracy can control such ideas by banning them or labelling them 'misinformation.'