

As a medical practitioner who has seen the devastating effect on patients' health from the suppression of medical opinion by government authorities during the Covid pandemic, I am opposed to the draft Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill. I believe it should be fully withdrawn. Well-intentioned or not, the effect of this amendment would be devastating for freedom of speech and for freedom of scientific and political debate in Australia. It would result in far greater harm to our society than any ostensible harm this Bill seeks to prevent.

The current draft Bill proposes to grant unprecedented powers to a Commonwealth Government authority (ACMA) and private digital platform companies (Big Tech) to police and suppress information posted on social media platforms. In our current digital age, social media platforms have become the public square in which ideas are debated, information is exchanged and scientific discourse takes place. This Bill is thus a manifest attack on freedom of speech.

Our western system of liberal democracy is founded on the principle that freedom of conscience, freedom of thought and freedom of expression are inalienable rights. The free exchange of ideas is essential to intellectual debate and scientific progress, which has created unprecedented material development, prosperity and human flourishing to our society.

In science, there is no such concept as 'truth', 'misinformation' or 'disinformation', only hypotheses that are tested and re-tested based on empirical observation and interpretation of all available evidence. Many groundbreaking scientific discoveries were historically made by individuals who questioned the dominant scientific 'truth' and orthodoxies of their day – from Galileo to Einstein and our own Dr Barry Marshall. The idea that any government, authority or private corporate interest can determine what constitutes 'truth', 'misinformation' or 'disinformation' – defined in this Bill as 'false, misleading or deceptive' information – is ludicrous. It can only mean that, if this Bill is enacted, ACMA and Big Tech can arbitrarily determine what constitutes permissible content. Such a centralised approach to controlling speech will accelerate the concentration of power to a global elite establishment by suppressing criticism and silencing opposition, all at the expense of ordinary people's freedom, sovereignty, progress and innovative potential.

One need look only at very recent history to understand the danger of this flawed concept. The 'twitter files' have shown that governments, intelligence agencies, corporate media and social media conspired to an unprecedented extent during the Covid pandemic to censor medical and scientific voices who argued that lockdowns would cause disproportionate harm to society, that cloth masks do not stop virus transmission, that the mRNA shots do not stop Covid transmission or infection, and that early treatment with Ivermectin – a cheap, TGA approved medication with well-established safety profile – is very effective in reducing Covid infection risk. Each of these statements has been validated by peer reviewed science and is now no longer censored. It would be no exaggeration to state that countless lives have been unnecessarily lost by the misguided policy response to the pandemic, which was allowed to occur due to suppression of free scientific debate.

If as a society we want to further our quest for the truth, we need access to more and better information in a free marketplace of ideas, not from a singular source that claims to have unique ownership of the truth. A necessary step might be to distinguish social media posts created by

humans from those created by bots or artificial intelligence, but otherwise there should be no reason to flag or restrict online speech.

The concept of 'harm' that this Bill is seeking to prevent is so broadly defined that it essentially means any disagreement with a social media post. The concept of 'serious harm' is not adequately defined and therefore meaningless. This lack of clarity can be easily exploited and weaponised for political purposes, which a cynical person might perhaps see as the real purpose behind this Bill.

When we already have established laws against defamation, incitement to violence and exploitative online content such as child pornography, it is not entirely clear why new legislation is needed for our protection against online speech. History shows that authoritarian regimes have always justified censorship under the guise of public safety, asserting that it is necessary to protect people from harm. It reveals a patronising contempt for the ability of individuals to use their own intelligence and judgement to accept, reject, ignore or act on any given information.

Benjamin Franklin, a founding father of the American Constitution, famously said: "Those who would give up essential Liberty to purchase a little temporary Safety deserve neither Liberty nor Safety". Unfortunately, Australia has no constitutional freedom of speech protection like America's First Amendment, but this Bill would clearly be in breach of its principles. Current US presidential candidate Robert F Kennedy Jr recently summarised the critical importance of free speech in a congressional hearing on state censorship, as follows:

*"The framers of our constitution knew that democracy was a very inefficient system, that it had all of these built in inefficiencies and difficulties, but they felt that the one thing that would give us an advantage over totalitarian systems was this capacity for the free flow of information and a complete lack of controlled debate, so that ideas that would eventually mature into policies would be annealed in a furnace of debate and then rise through the market place of ideas rather than being dictated from above. And that's what would give the energy, the vibrancy, the vigour to democracy. When they invented this democracy, we were the first one in the modern era in 1780. By 1865, five other nations had imitated us. Today, it's 190 nations based upon our system. We are supposed to be the exemplary democracy and the corner foundation stone of our system is freedom of speech. All of the other freedoms depend on it. If we lose that not only do we lose our democracy in this country but the entire world loses us as an example."*

There is a very real risk that we will lose our Australian democracy should this Bill come to pass. Anyone wishing to avoid global totalitarian control by an unelected, unaccountable 'censorship industrial complex' should vehemently oppose this proposed legislation.

Thank you.