

To Whom it may Concern

Submission in response to a proposed legislation amendment giving the ACMA new powers to combat misinformation and disinformation.

It is with great concern that I have become aware of the Australian government's intention to amend legislation regarding the combatting of misinformation and disinformation in the media. I think most people will agree that certain forms of misinformation and disinformation are present to some extent everywhere in the world. It always has been and, perhaps, always will.

Free speech is an all-or-nothing concept; there are no gradations where it can be slightly limited. When governments start determining what can or cannot be expressed, regardless of its veracity, society loses its openness and freedom. The most effective way to combat misinformation or disinformation is through public debate, where ideas are openly discussed and the public decides what they believe to be true. In the digital age, the internet and its platforms have become the modern town square, a space that must remain unaffected by government influence. It should be left entirely to the people to use as they see fit, with very limited hindrance. The level of hinderance should also be decided by the people and not by the Government.

If the government starts dictating what can or cannot be discussed online, both publicly and privately, our democratic society will transform into an authoritarian regime. Furthermore, governments tend to increase their powers and rarely relinquish them. Therefore, we must tread cautiously and not allow any governing body, regardless of its intentions, to decide what topics are acceptable for discussion. This principle holds true for any genuine democracy.

Promotion of certain ideological agendas by governments and government agencies, private corporations, vested interest groups, and individuals is always present. As adults we should be able to think critically about information we are presented with on a daily basis and discern for ourselves whether it is worthy of our consideration. This can only be done if the information is made freely available from multiple sources.

Information is just information. It is neither good nor bad in and of itself, much like a knife, or a rifle. It is only when information is used by an individual, an organisation or, perhaps, a government or government agency to nudge, steer, coerce or otherwise interfere with public opinion that it becomes a problem.

There have been many cases in history where information has been misrepresented in order to have people behave in a certain way, often with disastrous results. It is only with the benefit of hindsight many years later that we see the corrupt objectives of the perpetrators.

Deciding that information is misinformation or disinformation for the sake of the common good/public safety (which has ominously Marxist/socialist overtones) and, supposedly, to help protect people from harm, where harm is not well defined is a potentially dangerous agenda for the government to pursue.

Representatives in the federal government have been elected to their positions by the people of the Commonwealth, are paid by those same people, and are expected to create legislation for the betterment of those people, not to their detriment. I foresee the strong possibility that, if this legislation is passed in its current form, it could be used nefariously to attempt to silence dissenting opinions of government policy, even more than is currently occurring. Much like we see currently happening in China and Russia.

The digital platforms used by people wanting to speak and write freely of their opinions on various topics are, by and large, operated by companies outside the Commonwealth. This brings into question the reach of Commonwealth legislation across national borders. Surely this behaviour will not be permitted by other countries' laws. Threats of penalties for non-compliance with the legislation by these companies would also seem fraught with potential international problems.

I believe that it is each person's individual choice to read, listen to or watch whatever they please without government interference. As consenting adults we are blessed with the ability to think critically. It is not the role of

government or a government agency to proscribe what information we may, or may not, be exposed to. The same goes for any opinions that we may wish to express (obviously, things like incitement to violence and similar well-described crimes should not be allowed - legislation already exists to deal with these instances).

Freedom of speech is paramount in a fully functioning democracy. The free exchange of ideas is what brought this country to where it is today (notwithstanding the constitutional problems of government overreach since 2020).

In summary, it is unnecessary to introduce more top-down authoritarian legislation telling us what we can and cannot say, hear, see or listen to. I propose that the old adage, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely”, be heeded and that this Bill be rejected in its entirety. It is important to note that the Government itself is excluded from the proposed laws and I would argue that, if the purpose of the Bill is to support democracy, the Bill needs to be reversed so that applies only to the Government and its bureaucracies. Our Governments and bureaucracies have become far too dictatorial as is currently being demonstrated in the VOICE debate and previously demonstrated during the ‘COVID’ period. Their powers to control debate should be reduced not expanded.

We should be educating and encouraging people to engage all points of view in order to let them make up their own minds about issues of the day. It is crucial to remember that words themselves are not acts of violence, and feeling offended is subjective. These factors should not serve as excuses to trample on the fundamental human right of freedom of speech.