

Objection to the “Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023”

The proposed Bill is an attack on free speech and should be scrapped.

Free and open public discussion leads to the truth. The proposed Bill is an attempt to selectively stifle public discussion by placing onerous requirements on digital platform services. It will add to the bureaucracy of the country, waste public funds, divert police from solving real crimes, and waste the resources of the judiciary. It will, if anything, make the community less safe and therefore worse off.

The proposed Bill will incur enormous compliance costs for the digital platform services. This may lead to services closing due to the costs or force services to charge users to recover costs which will decrease usage. Neither of these outcomes is of benefit to the public.

The supporting information provided on the government websites and in various documents fails to demonstrate how misinformation and disinformation pose a threat to safety, democracy, society, and the economy. It must also be noted that the definitions of misinformation, disinformation, and harm are opaque at best and certainly open to interpretation. So the proposed Bill must be scrapped.

There is mention of “a multitude of harms from disrupted public health responses to foreign interference in elections and the undermining of democratic institutions” in the fact sheet yet there is no evidence show the harms.

The only harm cited in the fact sheets that is supported by known actions is the damage to some 5G infrastructure. I see no evidence presented that those responsible for damage to the 5G infrastructure were motivated solely from posts on digital social media. But I note that for more than 40 years there have been concerns about high-voltage power transmission lines and concerns have been raised with mobile phones for more than 30 years, both examples well before the rise of digital social media.

Where real harm is done by citizens we already have laws in place. For example, bashing, murder and wilful destruction of property are all illegal. We do not need to fine and/or incarcerate people for text, images or videos on digital social media that some arbitrary body decides are harmful. If there is misinformation then it is best combated with the truth, not fines and imprisonment.

It is my view that digital social media has helped raise awareness of many topics and has led to the truth being made available to many. We know that governments control messaging and have the mainstream media in their back pockets, so we need alternative sources get information publicised. It may well be that some of this information is false and/or misleading, but so is the information pumped out by the establishment. This Bill seeks to silence and punish citizens whilst giving the professional media and governments a free pass.

Often it is only digital social media that provides information about the lies and mistruths propagated by the ‘professional media’, parliamentarians and government bureaucrats. Where is the Bill to hold these groups to account for the harms caused by their actions? In recent times COVID lockdowns caused harm including delayed childhood development, poor education outcomes, destroyed small businesses, loss of careers due to mandates and upheaval created by loss of sacked unvaccinated workers such as nurses, doctors, pilots, and school teachers, to name but a few.

There is a well-documented ‘replication crisis’ regarding many areas of science. We are presented results from climate modelling that fail with back-testing. However, we are told to follow the science and believe experts that support the government narratives. We should get injected with inadequately tested vaccines, wear a mask, social distance and turn off our heating and stop eating meat to save the planet. We need digital social media to highlight issues and provide alternative viewpoints, many of which would remain unknown due to one-sided media coverage.

We need to accept that this may enable the dissemination of false or misleading information, but we can rest assured that it will be quickly balanced with opposing views.

Digital social media has been important in getting out information about proven conspiracy theories such as:

- Lab leak of COVID-19
- The false framing of Trump being a Russian asset
- Biden's corrupt influence peddling
- The truth about Hunter Biden laptop
- The WHO attempts to seize excess power
- The dangers and lack of efficacy of vaccine
- The ineffectiveness of lockdowns

I am not suggesting that there is no misinformation on digital social media, but individuals need to do their own research. If governments are concerned about misinformation then they should provide detailed evidence that supports the truth and not attack those that push back. It is wrong to coerce the digital platform service providers, and anyone else, into silence with fines and imprisonment.

The governments' 'ACMA misinformation report Fact sheet 1: key research findings are short on facts but provide us with what we must consider to be misinformation. The fact sheet states: "There was considerable overlap and increasing convergence between narratives, with many posts sharing a mix of anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine, anti-5G and QAnon sentiment." So let's review these items.

1. We now know from the release of numerous reports that the lockdowns were ineffective. Also, we know that Sweden's no lockdown strategy has been shown to be correct. The real impact of the lockdowns were:
 - crushing impact on the economy, particularly small business,
 - ridiculous overspending by governments of borrowed money
 - harm to the development of children through school closures and remote learning
 - unnecessary separation of families from loved ones
 - financial burdens placed on people locked out of their state
2. The [REDACTED] vaccine used initially in Australia was pulled from the market in Australia and the UK because of side effects. The [REDACTED] vaccine was withdrawn from the market also because of side effects. [REDACTED] employees in Australia were administered special batches. So how can people expressing scepticism regarding the safety and efficacy of vaccines be seen as disinformation? My personal experience with the [REDACTED] vaccine is ongoing tinnitus and an aching injection site for more than a year. And I must also add that every person I know that received a vaccine also got COVID-19. We also are now experiencing unprecedented levels of all cause deaths which just happen to coincide with the introduction of COVID-19 vaccinations.
3. Regarding 5G the jury is still out. There have been concerns about EMR (electro-magnetic radiation) for decades, well preceding the advent of digital social media. Is there evidence that the damage to 5G infrastructure was caused by otherwise ignorant actors that read about the issue on social media? Also, there are ongoing studies that are so far inconclusive, but the fact that they are being done shows there is an ongoing legitimate concern with EMR, including 5G. It is good to have people voicing opinions on both sides of the argument.
4. I am not sure what is meant by QAnon but I guess it pertains to the 2020 US presidential election where there is still considerable doubt about the result. I note however that the 2016 election result was widely disputed by Democrats including Hillary Clinton. There is no doubt that there was election interference but I do not know whether it affected the result. We do know that a survey of Democrats showed that 19% would

have voted differently if they had known that Hunter Biden's laptop was real and not 'Russian misinformation'. As we know the laptop reported for years as a 'conspiracy theory' until recently where there is now widespread acknowledgement of its authenticity. As we know, this misinformation (the laptop is fake) was peddled by the professional media and the Democrats and the crimes it exposed so far not properly pursued by the FBI, IRS and DOJ.

So in summary, all 4 examples cited as misinformation are certainly mischaracterisations. For people and companies to be penalised for expressing concern in any of these examples is a step towards totalitarianism. This Bill is an attempt to end public debate by coercing citizens into silence. It is an attack on free speech. It will add to the bureaucracy of the country and be a waste of funds. It will also lead to a further erosion of confidence and must not be allowed to proceed.

The outrageous penalties in the proposed draft are clearly designed to frighten people into silence.

Regarding definitions, misinformation can be "Misinformation about a group of Australians inciting other persons to commit hate crimes against that group". And yet the ABC report that "Only 21 people have ever been convicted of a hate crime in Australia." They further report that "Victorian police flagged 4,257 incidents during a four-year period as being linked to prejudice.", which implies that thousands of people have been investigated by police over nothing.

Until such time that we see genuine harm that cannot be prosecuted under existing laws, there is no need for this new Bill. The government "Guidance note" states "The misinformation falsely claims that specific community groups in Australia are responsible for a range of social issues. The misinformation seeks to undermine social cohesion and foster hatred towards certain groups in Australian society" but provides no known cases.

There are numerous claims of harm but where is the hard evidence? The public is entitled to details such as names, dates, places, details of harm, etc before agreeing to this new Bill.

There are real examples of misinformation such as the "weapons of mass destruction". Were any of our bureaucrats that peddled this misinformation held to account? Certainly none that I am aware of. Instead this misinformation resulted in millions of dollars of taxpayer funds spent funding a war, death and misery for the citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan, and Australian soldiers killed, maimed or left suffering from the horrors of war.

We are constantly told about the threats of terror and yet see no evidence of its existence. However, we are inconvenienced when we travel and pay more to be protected from this never seen threat. It seems what we really need to fear is government misinformation.

We are told by the 'professional media' (that are exempt from these new regulations) about right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis at rallies, yet when I have marched I see concerned citizens peacefully congregating to listen to speakers. I do not agree with every word uttered by the speakers but I welcome the chance to hear them express their views.

It seems that the "A report to government on the adequacy of digital platforms' disinformation and news quality measures" is part of the justification for this Bill. However, the report uses a survey where agreeing that 'wearing a mask does not significantly reduce your risk of infection or spreading the virus' proves the person is a victim of misinformation. In the meantime, many studies have proven that mask wearing is an ineffective measure, proving the 'conspiracy theorists' correct. We know that N95 masks may provide some benefit **if worn correctly and changed frequently**.

There are many 'conspiracy theories' that have proven correct. We have ivermectin, that was once labelled by the media and others as "horse paste", now acknowledged by the FDA as effective in the treatment of COVID-19. We know that COVID-19 most likely did leak from a bio-lab in Wuhan. We know that COVID-19 vaccines are ineffective and dangerous, despite utterances to the contrary by Bill Gates, Fauci and numerous medical experts and scientists

that were either naïve or had serious conflicts of interest. But we do not know about this debunking from the 'professional media', the politicians and government officials who remain largely silent as facts emerge.

I am not suggesting that there is no misinformation on social media, but individuals need to do their own research. If governments are concerned about misinformation then they should provide detailed evidence and not anecdotes and platitudes such as 'trust the science' where such science is cherry-picked to support the government narrative. The collapse of support for government officials is justified.

Governments have not earned the trust of citizens with their broken election promises, unpunished corruption, wasteful spending and misinformation. I am more likely to support a Bill that will hold politicians and government officials to account with loss of pension benefits, meaningful fines and/or incarceration for proven misconduct. It is not enough for these people to resign in disgrace or resign due to health or family matters, rather than face real consequences. This is more likely to restore faith in our politicians and senior government bureaucrats.

Unfortunately the corruption of the police and the judiciary with political appointments has shown that we now have two tiers of justice. This is evidenced by the unprecedented level of resignations from Victoria Police in 2022.

The government should welcome 'conspiracy theories' emerging on social media as it gives them a good reason to present their views.

This Bill is another step on the road to totalitarianism. Proceeding with the Bill will further undermine the confidence in governments and the law.