

Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023

As an ordinary citizen with an interest in world affairs and politics in Australia, I am concerned by the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023's proposed segregation of all Australians into groups:

- Those with the power to question Government rulers, the media or institutions, and
- Those who will be silenced.

The Government will be deemed not to have spread misinformation, but if ordinary citizens question a ruling of theirs, that could be deemed misinformation.

Mainstream media will be exempt from the ruling but journals and magazines belonging to smaller organisations will not.

Academics will also be exempt but someone calling into question a notion of theirs can be deemed to spreading misinformation.

Throughout history certain groups have been able to control the narrative – the aristocracy, the rich, the powerful. However, throughout history the oppressed have needed an advocate to press their cause for inequitable, unjust, corrupt and unethical treatment. Think of slaves throughout centuries of history, factory workers during the Industrial Revolution, those held in internment camps during World War II and those mistreated by despots.

Without the voices of people like William Wilberforce how much longer would degradation and ill-treatment have continued? Yet in his day his message was considered “misinformation”, if not “disinformation”.

The vital element which was needed then and now was freedom of speech. It was considered so vital that after the Second World War the United Nations set up the Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Australia has signed the Declaration (1948) and Covenant (1966). Doesn't that commitment mean anything?

Article 19 UNDHR

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.

Article 19 ICCPR

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of

frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.

We face, in Australia, human trafficking of adults and children, abuse of children's rights to bodily integrity, modern slavery, violence, destructive policies, ill-thought-out Laws -- all of which (and many more) need debate to determine the best course of action. This Bill aims to stifle serious debate and democracy.

Another serious aspect is that control of speech, communication and expression will be outsourced to unelected bureaucrats. It will also be effectively handed over to the controllers of YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, etc. who will be forced to censor messages on behalf of our government or face hefty fines. The individual who posts misinformation or disinformation might be cancelled but will not be in financial trouble, but his digital service provider will. No doubt these digital platforms will err on the side of caution – and betray our privacy in the process.

Not only is this a dangerous Bill which would curb individual freedoms to a draconian degree, but the language used in it is vague, indecisive, and open to interpretation - indicating that future amendments to the Act (if passed) could increase its range and scope.

Please vote against this Bill and protect Freedom of Speech, Communication and Expression, as we promised to protect them in 1948.

Jane Munro

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