



## Feedback on Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Draft

The proposed new ACMA powers raise serious concerns about the future health of our democracy. The obvious problem is that there is no exemplary arbiter of truth, so there can be no universally accepted understanding of what is mis/disinformation. The recent Covid pandemic illustrates why even official government sources of information are subject to undue influence from private, corporate and foreign government interests, and government would be better to prioritize ensuring that its own information is independent, reliable and trustworthy.

### CASE STUDY: Covid-19

With the benefit of hindsight that much of the information that was disseminated by official government and supra-national organizations was incorrect, therefore misinformation, and possibly disinformation.

This includes such claims as:

- SARS-CoV-2 is primarily transmitted by fomites rather than aerosols, therefore cloth masks and handwashing are useful.
- Vaccines will be effective at stopping transmission. “Get vaccinated to save Grandma”.
- Vaccines have no risks.
- Covid can kill children. Vaccines are necessary for children.
- 60% (then later 70%, 80%, 90%) population vaccinated/infected will lead to herd immunity.
- Short lockdowns will be effective - “Two weeks to flatten the curve”.
- SARS-CoV-2 can be transmitted even outdoors. “Close children’s playgrounds”
- The virus had a natural origin. “It came from...pangolins/raccoon dogs/bats/insert animal of the day”

All of these claims have been proven false or remain doubtful. In many other examples detailed analysis is still to be done. But all have been avidly promoted variously by Australian government/s, WHO, CEPI, NIH, GVN, [REDACTED] and vaccine manufacturers.

On the other hand what these bodies have often claimed to be “disinformation” is also still being evaluated, such as:

- Efficacy of Ivermectin (the largest RCT conducted by Oxford University has yet to report results, other studies have been mixed).
- An artificial lab-based origin of SARS-CoV-2 is considered likely by several US Intelligence Agencies, an independent study organized by Lancet, and the WHO has pointedly not ruled out any origin scenario, but in some media this has been described as a “conspiracy theory” and resulted in much censorship of social media.

While there is some clearly incorrect information about the pandemic such as:

- Viruses don't even exist, it was all a psyop.
- "Anti-5G"
- All vaccines are harmful.
- Many alternative therapies.

Most of these are fringe views, held by a very small minority, and unlikely to convince many. But we tolerate expression of many other fringe views (such as those of religions and cults), and non-adherents are free to expose and ridicule them. We consider they are mostly harmless to broader society.

The reason a few people subscribe to multiple baseless theories is a general lack of trust in official sources. It is important to understand why that perception might exist.

### Who is behind these claims and counter-claims?

In some cases, the people promoting points of view online that diverge from official sources aren't "expert" scientists, but often they are qualified medical practitioners, or similar. To *effectively* spread "misinformation" you must appear credible. But these people are usually intelligent, have access to data, and in a many cases *expert enough* to express a valid, if dissenting, opinion. This is not "misinformation", whether or not it is correct, and shouldn't be labeled so. It can instead be called a "minority view". If it is incorrect, its substance should be refuted, instead of the proponent being labeled ad hominem, a "crank". Respectful debate should be encouraged, science is not dogma, and officials should set the tone if they want the public to trust them.

There have been indisputably eminent experts who were labelled "cranks" e.g. Martin Kulldorf, Jay Bhattacharya, Sunetra Gupta, Anders Tegnell, John Ioannidis. And some of those involved in the artificial origins debate include Nobel prize winners like David Baltimore and Luc Montagnier. The attempts to deplatform, slander and censor these voices were on the grounds of disagreement with an official line - *not on the basis of their credentials or standing*.

On the "official" side, it is apparent that Australian governments (including bodies like TGA) were reliant on advice from foreign counterparts (e.g. FDA) and supra-national organizations (e.g. WHO, GVN, CEPI).

But there are legitimate concerns about the quality of advice and independence of all these bodies.

- There is concern about pharmaceutical industry capture of US regulators like FDA, with strong evidence of a "revolving door" for FDA employees into positions in industry. Our TGA relied almost entirely on FDA advice on vaccine safety and efficacy, doing no independent research.
- There are concerns about who controls supra-national entities like CEPI and GVN, which receive funding from investors with vaccine interests (notably ██████████), and also funding from some governments, but on an ad-hoc basis. While these bodies have no real official status it's clear that they've been deeply involved in the pandemic response and vaccine rollouts, engaging with governments at a high level – e.g. Australia's Jane Halton is both the chair of CEPI, and on the board of our National Covid-19 Coordination Commission. ██████████ ██████████ is also well represented within CEPI. ██████████ made a large and remarkably well-timed (late 2019) investment into ██████████, an mRNA vaccine start-up which became the basis for ██████████ vaccine. ██████████ later exited this investment for 1000% gain, with ██████████

declaring the vaccines hadn't lived up to expectations. But had these relationships influenced our national Covid strategy in the interim? Potential certainly exists.

- There are legitimate concerns about influence of the Chinese government over global bodies with official status like WHO. For example the WHO team selected to visit Wuhan to conduct an investigation into the origins were selected from a list by China, many members having conflicts of interest, prior relationships with Chinese institutions.

If the Australian government is being advised directly by these bodies in lieu of conducting its own analysis, it may unwittingly become part of product marketing or propaganda operations. No surprise then if its advice should be viewed by some as disinformation.

### What should be done?

The government should end all efforts to police online expression, other than extreme material that poses a genuine danger in the real world (e.g. terrorism, child abuse). Online expression tends to police itself, garbage eventually gets filtered out, cranks are rarely influential. It is freedom of expression, not censorship, that ensures that information that is most broadly disseminated is of the highest quality.

The government should instead try harder to ensure the information it provides is factual, independently verified, and design policies that are in the best interests of Australians. It should be transparent about sources of information and advice, where uncertainty exists, and where conflicts of interest may be present. If it does this, it will be seen as trustworthy and reliable, and alternative sources will relative lose their usefulness. But government will lose credibility if it is seen to be merely repackaging advice from foreign governments, corporations and supra-national bodies, many of which are (perhaps rightly) perceived as untrustworthy, or at least acting with an agenda that *doesn't prioritize the well-being of Australians*. This should be the only priority of our government.