

# **Submission concerning Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023**

## **Personal introduction**

I am writing as a concerned, tax-paying member of the public to object to the proposed Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023. I have been a teacher in adult education for over 30 years and have been working in the tertiary sector for nearly twelve. I have a Master of Applied Linguistics from Macquarie University and a PhD in Medicine (Psychiatry) from the University of Adelaide. I support the activities of non-government organisations and volunteer community groups in raising public awareness of social justice issues.

## **Comments**

This seemingly benign Bill to allegedly protect an incredulous public from being given false information is an insidious example of the government censorship of open discussion, debate, and conversation by way of colluding with social media platforms to police, smear, and silence voices of dissent or difference. It is a disingenuous attempt by an elected government which seeks to arrogate by stealth an authoritarian role over Australian citizens despite its very existence being owed to democratic processes.

The proposed Bill begs the question of whether the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) or any fallible agency should be entrusted at all with the solemn responsibility of determining the accuracy of information. We have seen how the weaponization of the US media, for example, has been used to censor free speech. It is now public knowledge that the Biden administration pressured Facebook and Instagram to alter their content moderation policies to allow for the silencing and deplatforming of any person whose views did not align with government policy on specific issues. So-called “fact checks”, such as those provided by Facebook, have been exposed to be no more than “protected opinions”, often from journalists, that are granted legal indemnity.

What the current Bill before Parliament fails to acknowledge is the importance of debate and discussion towards developing an understanding that is inclusive of a growing range of divergent views, beliefs, and observations. Instead, it seeks to impose a sanitised, consensual position on a subject that bleaches all ideological difference and opposition from the permitted, authorised version. It represents a conformist agenda with the covert goal of subjugating the volatile traffic and commerce of public discourse to the anodyne level of compliant and docile uniformity dominated by a Cyclopean perspective in which any criticism or resistance is denounced as “hate speech” or any of the bureaucratic categories of (add your prefix) information.

This fraudulent Bill, from which the government is even exempted, is a Trojan horse for the deployment of technological surveillance capabilities to inculcate herd thinking in the population. Such monitoring and targeting of communications to manipulate mass behaviour by controlling what can be voiced, questioned, or criticised online is a form of censorship that is totalitarian in scale. Instead, the government should respect the prerogative of every Australian citizen to participate in public forums where views can be expressed, debated, and countered with evidence rather than underhandedly incentivising commercial corporations to bury free speech.

It was Nelson Mandela who stated, “Information is a basic human right and the fundamental foundation for the formation of democratic institutions”. And now we see those very institutions threaten to deprive their citizens of the social entitlement to disseminate information for others to challenge, learn from, investigate, or reject for themselves. If this deplorable Bill is passed, how soon

will it be before we find ourselves in a society where reference to the Hundred Years' War can be declared misinformation as it started in 1337 and ended in 1453? Or a report is denounced for referring to an aeroplane's black box when it is in fact orange? In an Orwellian society where bureaucracy can suffocate sources of information as it pleases, absurdities like these will come in due course to alert us to what we have failed to stand for.

In closing, I appreciate the opportunity to contribute a submission on this serious issue as the outcome of the deliberations concerning this Bill will have far-reaching and irreversible consequences on future generations of Australians.

Dr Keith Smith