

Statement on the proposed ACMA powers to combat misinformation and disinformation

The proposed ACMA powers aimed at countering "misinformation" and "disinformation" raise a number of significant concerns.

Most individuals would concur that "misinformation" (information that is contradicted by facts) and "disinformation" (the intentional spread of misinformation to further an agenda) are problematic or dangerous in principle, and I understand the attraction to try and "keep them in check". However, I'm afraid that there may be equally problematic and dangerous side effects of any such endeavour.

At the core of this matter lies a fundamental question: Who gets to decide what qualifies as "misinformation"?

Certain assertions, like the assertion that "the Earth is flat," can be readily disproven with an abundance of supporting evidence. However, the accuracy of numerous other claims remains less clear-cut.

Fields such as health and climate science, among others, continually evolve through fresh experiments and studies. Robust discussions occur among field experts, often yielding widely differing perspectives from the same data. In reality, many contentious issues cannot be definitively labeled as "settled," even within the scientific community.

Indeed, the truth behind complex matters often can *only* be established through rigorous academic and public debate.

This brings up a critical issue with classifying views as "misinformation," where a viewpoint might hold legitimate scientific merit but is rejected due to its unpopularity.

There are several famous cases of this through history;

1. Ignaz Semmelweis, who advocated for the importance of handwashing by doctors to prevent the spread of infections in hospitals. His ideas were met with skepticism by

the medical community and were initially rejected. It took many years for the medical establishment to acknowledge the validity of his claims, during which he was labelled as a crank and unfortunately passed away in a mental institution. The misinformation of the day.

2. Rachel Carson, an American marine biologist who documented how common pesticide were accumulating in ecosystems and causing disruptions to the food chain, leading to declines in bird populations and other wildlife. She faced strong opposition from the chemical industry and other groups with vested interests. Carson's work was criticized as alarmist and her credibility was attacked. Another "conspiracy theory" of the day.
3. Physician John Snow, who during the 19th century proposed that contaminated water was responsible for the spread of cholera, contrary to the prevailing miasma theory that attributed diseases to "bad air." His findings were initially met with skepticism, as he challenged the "settled science" of the day.

There are other famous cases where conflicts of interest in particular hampered the spread of knowledge, namely that of smoking of Tobacco and also Lead in paint and gasoline. In both cases government bodies were slow to act on the emerging health risks due to effective industry lobbying.

There is also the inherent risk that bodies which police misinformation will never act against their own interests, such as when affiliated bodies spread disinformation to further their own agendas. Who watches the watchmen?

Such biases are systemic and should be addressed with careful checks and balances, such as political independence, and diverse incentive structures.

The concept of "red teaming", where part of a project team takes an adversarial role to the other (the "blue team") and challenges their thinking in order to make it stronger, and also the overall project more likely to succeed, is instructive here.

Furthermore, people from diverse backgrounds and political and social views can further enrich the conversation with their own perspectives, and provide additional equipoise.

At the end of the day, my primary concern is that some of the "harmful" beliefs of their time, if properly debated instead of stifled, could have contributed greatly to saving lives and improving outcomes, and may still do so in future crises.

In summary, even considering that discord among viewpoints can lead to harm, entrusting one entity with policing internet information or overseeing acceptable information standards for organizations is equally perilous. The harms of misinformation are undeniable, yet a more nuanced solution is required, as the lines of misinformation are not as easy to draw as they first appear, and the carte blanche suppression of alternative views can lead to yet greater harms

Remember the adage that “sunlight is the best disinfectant” but consider that sunlight still allows new plants to grow, which makes for a healthier garden in the long run.