

To whom it may concern,

**RE: Exposure draft of the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023.**

The assertion that this bill is based on, ie “Misinformation and disinformation pose a threat to the safety and wellbeing of Australians, as well as to our democracy, society and economy.”, is an unfounded statement.

Misinformation and disinformation are terms that have gained notoriety over the last few years since the covid pandemic and despite hysterical claims that people voicing different opinions online is a catastrophe, the vast majority of Australians did exactly what the government asked of them over the last few years. This is a pretty big indication that increased censorship and ‘monitoring’ is not required.

Dissenting opinions are required in order to advance society and build trust. If one can’t fully explore both sides of an issue, how can one formulate a considered response? If this enforceable ‘code of practice’ has parameters that indicate any deviation from government sanctioned information is to be removed, blacklisted, grey listed or otherwise impeded, then Australia risks being on the ‘forefront’ of fascism by creating ‘harmful online misinformation and disinformation’ that can’t be properly challenged, rather than being celebrated for ‘tackling’ it.

Do you remember when Thalidomide was safe and effective? When smoking was recommended by doctors to help keep birth weights smaller? What about those ‘weapons of mass destruction’? How about lead in paint and petrol? That is just a few examples off the top of my head of medical, industrial and government errors.

Contentious issues tend only to be addressed when enough people become concerned on an issue and that sparks funding, investigation or politically motivates closer scrutiny of that issue. Having bureaucrats decide what is and is not to be heard on the public square that is today’s social and online media, will prevent that from happening. Many issues are not as clear cut good / bad, right or wrong as my above examples. Many have shades of grey; pros and cons to actions. A free society lets citizens discuss issues and make up their own minds.

This bill feels very patronising. It seems to assume that Australians are really stupid and can’t make informed decisions. I disagree and beg you to please throw out this terrible piece of legislation and have some faith in our people.

The role of government is to update and maintain public infrastructure and assets (both built and natural), & to represent Australia overseas, etc but lately it seems that it feels its main role is control everyone for group ‘safety’. It is not possible to keep everyone safe from every thing in the world and is beyond the scope of a properly functioning representative government.

However, if I can’t convince you to throw the lot out, then please at least consider these **amendments:-**

Amending the **exclusions** in section 2- Professional news outlets, accredited educational institutions and government organisations need to be held to the highest level of scrutiny for accuracy as they are supposed to be trusted sources of information. They need to be included so please **delete (b) (c) (d) and (e)**. *It is literally their job to get things right and*

*they have many resources to accomplish this. **It is not right to hold ordinary citizens to a higher standard than the authorities.***

Under the section **harm definitions** please **add medical conditions into point (a)** as too many people that have genuine and serious medical situations have been the target of online hatred.

Under the examples in the guidelines to the bill on harms, people **peacefully protesting** an issue or advertising of a protest **need to be explicitly excluded from the 'disruption of public order'** clause to maintain democratic process.

Also, either add definitions to section 2 or **amend clause 7(1)(a)** to explicitly define 'false, misleading and deceptive' and to make it clear that it refers to demonstrably false information and not just information that is politically inconvenient.

Ingenuity is fostered through rigorous debate and sharing all sorts of ideas, please don't hamstring our great country. Truly great innovation and public 'safety' is not likely to be progressed within the bureaucratic echo chamber of ACMA sanctioned truth.

Sincerely,

JV Forest