

19th August 2023

Regarding the Draft Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023:

History has shown what is considered 'true' and 'misinformation' or 'disinformation' changes over time. To attempt to regulate 'truth' or 'misinformation' is therefore presumptuous.

For example, authorities in the 17th century ordered the great scientist Galileo Galilei placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life and his book banned for stating that the earth revolved around the sun instead of vice-versa. What is believed now by the vast majority of scientists was thought at the time to be misinformation and nearly cost Galileo his life.

For over 1,000 years, from Aristotle to Pasteur, scientific 'truth' was that flies are born from steak and mice from rubbish by 'spontaneous generation'. If 'misinformation' was prohibited back then, the public would still believe flies spontaneously generate from steak and food safety would suffer – causing much harm.

Authorities and scientists, no matter how well educated, or how well the 'science is settled', will make similar mistakes today. In its current form, it appears the Bill will allow, and likely encourage, such mistakes to be protected from healthy debate. The Bill must be amended to prevent censorship by digital platforms and instead encourage truth-telling to shed light on misinformation and disinformation. Rather than a balance of free speech against protection of the public it must instead be the protection of the public by ensuring freedom of speech.

The underpinning principle that ideas should be free to be debated and tested for as long and as often as desired by any party is true for all areas of public life, not just science and academia.

Misinformation and disinformation must not be combatted through censorship by digital platforms but through the additional provision of information (truth) to allow people to make an informed judgement. To limit speech in any way is to descend into a dictatorship where a small group of people decide what others should be allowed to believe.

As soon as the slightest restriction is placed on speech, it is no longer free. I therefore do not support the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023 in its current form. The Bill states it intends to prevent harm to the Australian public; however, this will not be achieved by limiting free speech. Instead, through limiting freedom of speech, this Bill will likely cause widespread psychological and physical harm. It should be redrafted to prevent digital platforms from censoring or downgrading any posts that do not contain nudity or obscenities.

The Truth will set you free, not censorship.

Anonymous