

My submission is as a private citizen. I agree with the points raised by and succinctly expressed by the Australian Citizen's Party:

The government's justification in its own fact sheet accompanying the exposure draft of the bill illustrates its inherent dangers.

Straight away, it's clear this bill goes much further than stopping vandalism of 5G towers, or live-streaming atrocities, into areas open to political debate, including the public health response to COVID-19, supposed foreign interference in elections, and "undermining" democracy.

The fact that the bill explicitly exempts any government communication, of any level of government, from being considered misinformation or disinformation, shows how Orwellian this law will be. While the bill's penalties won't apply to individuals, it will enforce a regime of suppression of any speech on social media that undermines government claims.

It would not just apply to protecting public health, as we have already witnessed in the mass-censorship of contrary analysis relating to COVID-19, including of qualified doctors and scientists. It would also apply to debates on foreign policy, such as whether Russia or China are "threats" to Australia, which the government claims to justify committing to arming NATO's proxy Ukraine against Russia, or promising to buy US and British submarines to deploy against China.

If these powers were in place in 2002, when the US, UK and Australian governments lied about Iraq having weapons of mass destruction, they could have been used to suppress public opposition to invasion and war.

Social media is rife with misinformation and disinformation; but the only way to combat it is to publicly refute it, not censorship.

Thinkers have struggled with the implications of free speech for centuries, and concluded that limiting speech is far more dangerous to society than the regrettable consequences of false claims.

That's why free speech is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights in the US Constitution: "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press".

And why it is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Australia helped to draft in 1948: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Social media is a double-edged sword: it can be a channel for the worst misinformation and disinformation, but so can governments, as we have witnessed; alternatively, it can also be the medium that exposes government and corporate lies that the corporate mainstream media won't, which restores power to the people.

Regulating truth on social media will not protect democracy, it will suppress it.

Sincerely,

Tony Mann,
W.A.