

Freedom of speech is fundamental to our democracy, and this new bill the government is proposing is a blatant attack on our free speech and goes well beyond any reasonable measure.

According to the draft bill, misinformation is defined as unintentionally false, misleading or deceptive content. It also defines disinformation as misinformation intentionally disseminated to cause serious harm, but no definition of “serious harm,” is provided despite it being the relevant trigger for action in the prohibition section. How can we have a definition that is so vague with so many consequences attached?

Most worrying for me are the claims that government and university academics authorised information **could not** be counted as misinformation under the bill, but if you criticise the Government or Academic, that **can** be misinformation. So how is it that Government somehow knows the ‘truth’. We are taught to always question and we learn from questioning and debating. Within government and Universities there will be different view points and there should be, but this legislation is going to choose a side and expect us to believe their truth, thus stifle debate and the ability to learn. ‘Truth’ changes as we learn, debate and question. This bill will have the result of individuals not being able to believe anything or to think anything without getting into trouble and being punished.

Using COVID-19 as an example of how this bill is dangerous, we could look at the recent claim (different view point backed by science) that COVID-19 vaccines don’t prevent infection and transmission of the virus. This would be labelled as ‘misinformation’ under the proposed bill as it would be reasoned, ‘such claims could lead to vaccine hesitancy, putting lives at risk of serious harm’. The awkward fact is that the so-called ‘misinformation’ was true. The claim that vaccines stop infection and transmission by government was itself misinformation but government would not be held accountable, whilst those who share this viewpoint would be fined for misinformation. It could (and did) lead to vaccinated people who thought it was impossible to be infected taking less precautions for their own health and the health of others — in other words, leading to harm to themselves and others.

The best solution to misinformation is free and open debate, supported by a fair media. This new bill is vague and concerning as it inevitably would stifle political debate and not allow differing viewpoints to be heard. It is through debate and ongoing critique that once held beliefs are often changed. We are being told to take the viewpoint of government and this is a huge overreach of free speech and a huge step backwards in democracy.