

I object to the exposure draft of the Australian government's Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023, which will threaten the very essence of our democratic rights, if enacted.

I acknowledge the reasons behind why the bill was drafted in the first place but I do not believe that the bill, in practice, will achieve what it has set out to do. I am concerned that the bill's response to keeping 'Australians safe' from misinformation and disinformation is insufficiently sensitive to and protective of, freedom of expression and other privacy interests.

Firstly, the bill gives extraordinary powers to ACMA which may lead to digital companies censoring legitimately held views of Australian people to avoid hefty fines! I do not feel that it is right to give so much power to ACMA, especially when the bill is problematic on its own and terms like 'misinformation' and 'disinformation', open to different interpretations and therefore more likely to be abused by the authorities. Furthermore, this overreach of power will continually instil systematic fear in both the digital companies and the people to freely express or publish their views which is the lifeblood of any democratic society!

I also believe that the bill will create a way for governments to directly or indirectly punish or discriminate against those who speak out against them and therefore disadvantage government critics in comparison to government supporters. It will create mistrust of government and therefore lead to a very disruptive society.

While the government is trying to prevent 'false' information from spreading and hurting average Australians, would it not be more rational to fight this information with information and attempt to persuade rather than silence the voices of our people, the media etc.? It is the freedom of speech and the freedom of expression that differentiates us from other dictatorial governments in the world and is the lifeblood of our democracy so why disrupt something that works well? In a healthy democratic society, people should be encouraged to debate and say things without fear, censorship or penalties! It is what makes us stand out from other authoritarian governments and gives the people of this country a 'voice' to express their opinion, right or wrong! Therefore I feel that it is not at all clear that the bill is required, considering there are many other ways and means to control online misinformation without having to resort to undemocratic ways of dealing with this issue.

Furthermore, the terms 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' are loosely defined. A doctor's report may be defined as 'misinformation' and censored because it does not satisfy certain interest groups or opinions of a group of government officials. A journalist may be labelled as the perpetrator of disinformation because an opinion was expressed that clashed with what the government wanted us to believe at the time. And where does this stop? Or does it? The bill, if enacted, will have a chilling effect on our freedoms of speech and expression and nothing more than harm our people and society. It will not be in the interest of any Australian, nor will it keep Australians 'safe' in any way. On the contrary, these loose definitions of what is considered 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' will leave everything open to interpretation and therefore open to abuse by authorities who may be able to use this to their own advantage. This is not right and it does not serve the interests of our people, nor does it keep Australians safe!

This bill, if enacted, will unnecessarily give overreaching powers to ACMA, restrict people's freedom of speech and freedom of expression and give digital companies more right to censor information, information they fear will result in hefty fines! In fact, this bill has no place in our democratic society as it's a recipe for chaos, mistrust in our government and ACMA, and a very dangerous route to keeping Australians safe. Any information that is false,

deceptive or misleading should be fought with robust debate to better educate and inform our society rather than take away the right of people to freely express their opinions. As Albert Einstein once said, even 'laws alone cannot secure freedom of expression; in order that every man may present his views without penalty there must be a spirit of tolerance in the entire population.'