

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Submission on the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to express my deep concern and outrage regarding the proposed Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023. As an Australian citizen and a passionate advocate for free speech and democratic principles, I firmly believe that this bill is not only unnecessary but also poses a grave threat to our fundamental rights and values.

One of the most disheartening aspects of this bill is the assumption that ordinary people are incapable of engaging in public discourse without causing harm. By categorizing viewpoints held by ordinary individuals as misinformation or disinformation, the bill undermines the principles of free expression and discourages citizen participation in the public conversation. This leads to a sense of disillusionment and loss of faith in the democratic process.

Furthermore, the bill unfairly targets digital platform providers and ordinary users by subjecting them to severe threats and penalties. The threats posed to digital platform providers, including reputational damage, financial penalties, and business inefficiencies, can result in significant financial loss or even insolvency. This not only stifles innovation and entrepreneurship but also disproportionately impacts smaller businesses and startups.

Equally concerning is the threat of hauling ordinary citizens before regulatory bodies like ACMA for alleged dissemination of mis or disinformation. This is a clear case of punishment for having different opinion and the expression of that opinion, which is supposed to be protected by our constitution. Such an approach is reminiscent of oppressive regimes and is contrary to the spirit of mateship, a cherished Australian value.

Additionally, this legislation undermines the essential role of the media in a democratic society. Placing reporting standards on independent media organizations, journalists, and bloggers, while exempting government-approved publications, creates an unfair environment that stifles independent voices. By incentivizing favorable news coverage and perspectives aligned with the government's agenda, the bill compromises the impartiality and integrity of journalism.

Moreover, the bill's classification of citizens into two categories, with government-approved entities enjoying exemption from monitoring while others are targeted, is inherently discriminatory and problematic. It infringes upon our right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and expression, as enshrined in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and our own democratic values. The categorization of different faith worldviews as misinformation is not only intolerant, but it erodes the rich diversity of beliefs that makes Australia a multicultural and inclusive society.

The ACMA report itself raises many questions. For example, ACMA report claims that "Australian mobile carriers incur millions in unforeseen costs directly due to online misinformation". In the same section, report says "The largest cost category was the repair or replacement of damaged property as a result of arson or vandalism attacks at mobile sites". How comes it to be that arson or vandalism attacks by a particular person transform into "direct results of misinformation"?

In my opinion, the specific vandal is solely responsible for the damages they cause, and such action has nothing to do with "misinformation".

In conclusion, I strongly urge the Department to reconsider the proposed Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023. It is crucial to preserve the principles of free speech, democratic governance, and respect for diverse opinions that form the foundation of our society. I believe that instead of suppressing viewpoints and imposing threats and penalties, the focus should be on promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and fostering inclusive public dialogue.

Thank you for considering my submission. I trust that you will give due regard to the concerns expressed by many Australians who value our democratic ideal and the freedom to express our opinions.

Yours sincerely,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the sender.