

SUBMISSION RE THE PROPOSED MISINFORMATION & DISINFORMATION BILL

I am writing to express my concerns with this proposed bill.

In my professional background I served for almost 15 years as an Army Intelligence Officer. In this role I became very aware of the dangers of misinformation and disinformation on the civilian populace who we were working to protect. These impacts can be and often were disastrous. There is no doubt in my mind that this proposed bill is addressing real concerns.

However, in my professional role in intelligence I also realised how we also used information to shape perceptions, something we referred to as the shaping of the battlefield through information. This is also called propaganda. We used it with what we believed to be good motives but the fact is that what we promulgated as truth was not always truth but was shaped by what we believed to be the higher goal.

This is my main concern with this bill. That is seeking to do the very same thing with our democracy.

In democracy truth is often in the eye of the beholder. The democratic process works when it is healthy to expose view points to robust examination and to, hopefully, arrive at a final decision that is as good as it can be for all citizens. However, in recent years our society has changed in this manner. Robust debate is now frequently shut down or cancelled. This is done in the interests of political correctness. Alternate viewpoints that are believed to be outmoded are now frequently shut down by political gatekeepers on the grounds that these views (when compared with the more enlightened views which are now espoused) are based on misinformation or disinformation and do not serve the higher goal

This bill deeply concerns me because it places unelected bodies (ACMA) as the arbiters on what is misinformation and what is disinformation. This overreach can easily then be used to 'shape' the climate of what is acceptable resulting in the shutting down of legitimate divergent views on social issues because they are deemed to be misinformation or disinformation. To do this in military conflict is one thing, but this is a dangerous road for a democracy to take.

Take for example issues in our society where there is legitimate disagreement: the Pandemic response, The Voice, Climate Change, Women's Rights etc. This bill all too easily will permit the subtle and perhaps direct controlling of the accepted ideological narrative and political messaging on these complex issues. This will weaken our democracy by reducing the debate needed to produce good decisions for civil society. In its essence this is an undermining of free speech that may in time make us vulnerable to totalitarian tendencies of government from both the left and the right. True, this bill will not in itself be enough to do that, but it is one step in that direction.

So while I can genuinely see why this Bill is being proposed, I believe that it is nonetheless a dangerous approach to take for all of us in Australia, whatever our politics might be.

I therefore urge that this proposed bill be abandoned. What it may achieve in a positive sense is not matched by the long term harm it could cause to freedom in our wonderful country.

I am happy for this submission to be made public,

respectfully,

Major Andrew Grills
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