

Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill 2023

Submission by Nina Nyback (11 August 2023)

I don't agree with this bill, and would request that the bill be scrapped entirely.

I am concerned that this bill will remove a basic human right, the right to free speech. I realise that it is easy to create deep-fakes, and pretend to be a different person or different body in today's online world, but that should motivate a step up on cybersecurity issues, and not to infringe on free speech. Science has grown and developed by scientists putting out hypotheses and theories, and in later years, these have been proven to be incorrect, or to need adjustments. How will we be able to develop as humanity if we are not allowed to learn and make mistakes.

Even dictionaries change over time, and words are removed as they are not used in the current society. Would these removed words be considered disinformation or misinformation, or would they have to stay in a dictionary?

A bill like this could cause debate and discussion to be completely one-sided, and that may not be correct.

A bill where the government (or whoever decides what is or is not misinformation and disinformation) decides what is truth sounds like a communistic idea, and should not be entertained in a democracy.

I am a teacher, and it is important to teach young people about critical thinking and about stating one's viewpoint in a debate. I am concerned that this bill will create a culture whereby younger people will be afraid to voice their thoughts or opinions & will make it much harder to teach people how to refute arguments and how to back up an argument with facts, since there will be only one narrative allowed, which implies only one way of thinking allowed. Even if accredited education providers are outside of the scope, it would be difficult to teach debate and have someone play 'devil's advocate' or argue the opposite point if this would not be allowed outside the classroom. As a teacher, I believe it is better to help a person toward maturity where they can take responsibility for their own opinions and discuss with others what their different opinions and assessments are, rather than to keep treating them like toddlers and remove any potential mis- and dis-information from them.

A huge concern is with the few who will hold the power of deciding whether something is information, disinformation or misinformation. Who will determine whether they have researched enough to ensure that they have the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Who will be their fact-checkers?

Instead of this bill, I would like to propose that it be scrapped in favour of efforts to make cybersecurity safer rather than to prevent people from saying things that may or may not be 100% accurate.

I find it interesting that serious harm is defined as harm that undermines the integrity of an Australian democratic process. I would have thought to have a so-called 'thought-police' that would prevent people from engaging in healthy and open debate to be a threat to the

Australian democratic process. How can we discuss issues if we are not allowed to discuss issues as someone has already decided what the final word on said issue is??

As a Computer Scientist (I teach IT), the onus of this bill will be placed on the digital platform providers, but that is not clear in terms of individuals who write blog posts, or individuals who make comments on other individual blogposts, and this would be incredibly difficult to manage and maintain. The bill will force digital platform providers to have 'systems and measures in place'. If this is too difficult or not cost effective for platforms, they may have to disallow Australians from using their platforms! That is like saying no Australians may write to their local newspaper about an issue that they are questioning! It reminds me of the Chinese people being locked out of Google searches... And China is not a democracy...

The bill does not define "professional news". If a person has their own news website or contributes to a website that is not deemed 'professional news', they may fall under this bill, which could be seen as discriminatory.

What about minutes of meetings where differing points of views were discussed, and this is an accurate reflection of the meeting, and said minutes are published on a website, or distributed via social media platforms. Either freedom of speech is allowed, or its not.

I am not sure how "intent to deceive" would be proven. What if the person who is distributing the news is utterly convinced about the truth of the news? If we allow people to hold different religious views, such that they are utterly convinced about the truths of these views, could that be considered disinformation if they post on social media about their beliefs, and others make comments or agree with them on their views, or even disagree with them on their views?

It seems as if this bill is a knee-jerk reaction to what happened during the pandemic with regards the uptake of the vaccine. "...multitude of harms from disrupted public health responses...". Given that it was a very unique situation, I hardly think that freedom of speech needs to be curbed as a result. Democratic institutions are meant to be institutions that serve the public. If the public are made aware of all the sides to each story, and all their questions are answered sufficiently, then there is no need to quell certain information. In a society where freedom of speech is encouraged, all policies should be able to be questioned, and when clear scientific facts are presented, usually that answers any arguments. I think it is counterproductive to introduce this bill as it will increase distrust in our democratic institutions, as it will appear to create a strong-handed approach to anyone who has an opposite opinion that the one said to be the only correct one.

On CV treatments, the example in the bill mentions 'misinformation that caused people to ingest or inject bleach products to treat a viral infection'. It was interesting to look back and see that the product Ivermectin was not allowed to be used, although it has had a decades long safety record, but was banned from use. Is it surprising that desperate people tried bleach? I am not saying that was correct by any means, but potentially disinformation is a ripple effect from other restrictive measures taken by regulatory bodies. We don't need more constraints, we need more common sense & that takes people becoming mature &

having skills to assess information provided, so that they have a better idea of what could be information, disinformation or misinformation. Given a bit of time, truth usually surfaces.

Since we have methods for addressing bullying and abuse or trolling, I feel that this issue is sufficiently covered, and this bill would cause more harm than good. Please retract this bill.

There are obvious issues around privacy of information and the potential for people to be targeted because of their views e.g. asking a question about a specific point declared as truth or a specific treatment that is recommended or mandated. Questions should never be feared, as an honest and truthful answer should be an obvious one for a specific truth or recommended treatment.

In conclusion, I am concerned about a piece of information that may be truth today because someone or a small committee of people have decided that it is truth, and any alternative opinion is not allowed to be discussed on large digital platforms. What if that truth turns out to be not 100% the truth anymore? What is the process for going back on this, and re-establishing the new truth? This bill will make it extremely difficult for adjustments to acceptable information to be made. Case in point all the information (official, meaning truth) that came out about the CV vaccines, that they will stop someone from getting the virus, and furthermore that they will stop transmission. The truth about this has clearly changed. This bill will create vast more opportunities for this sort of shift in truth, with the accompanying mess of managing it. Debate before action is a much better method to come to a robust conclusion of truth, but this bill will stifle it.

It smacks of the nanny system. Teach people to think objectively and with scrutiny rather than give them regurgitated bits of information as their only truth.

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