

Regarding the proposed Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023 (**The Bill**), I am writing to provide my feedback to highlight that **The Bill** will be negative for free speech and democracy in Australia.

Freedom of speech is fundamental to Australian democracy. There have been many examples in history of Governmental overreach through inappropriate silencing and censorship of citizens, which removes some of the vital checks and balances of a democracy. **The Bill** has the ability to shield Government from criticism and identification of misdoing or wrongdoing, by labelling the concerns of citizens as misinformation and having their views removed from social media, from podcasts, or from sharing with other internet users.

The Robodebt scandal in Australia, is an example of a Governmental injustice on the citizens of Australia, that took years for accountability to occur for the affected parties. Social media was an avenue that Australian citizens used to voice their concerns and highlight the misjustice and injustice of Robodebt, and how it severely impacted their lives. What if questions about the issues of Robodebt was considered misinformation? What would have happened to the mental health of the Australian citizens that took to social media to express their concerns, if they were silenced under a misinformation campaign to hide the Robodebt scandal? What could have happened if due to speaking about Robodebt, a person was banned from social media, when their mental health was low and they lost access to their network on social media to their friends and family. Could that person commit suicide?

I believe that **The Bill** will create the conditions for the ideals of fascism to thrive in Australia. The citizens of Australia require that they have a voice to express their concerns, to seek perspective, and to make informed decisions. The penalties applied by ACMA on social media companies and podcasts, fosters the conditions of censorship due to fears of financial penalty. There has been shown, particularly through the event of COVID-19, that censorship and the imposition of an "official narrative" can be weaponised to silence the Australian citizen from seeking to make informed decisions. Australian Senators such as Gerard Rennick, Alex Antic, Ralph Babet, Malcolm Roberts, and the ex-Senator Craig Kelly, all have fought to expose the lack of truth in the "official narrative" told by the Australian Government on COVID-19, and echoed by the official news organisations and the educational institutional universities, and State and Territory health departments and Premiers. The Australian citizen deserves the ability to seek all the sides to the story, all the facts available, to make informed decisions. The official narrative of "safe and effective" has been shown to be not as told. The official narrative of "stop the spread" has been shown to be not as told. The risks of adverse reactions from COVID vaccines, including myocarditis, was heavily censored by social medial platforms, on the strong encouragement of governments, and deemed as misinformation when the safety of the vaccines was questioned, and stories of injuries were shared on social media. The Australian Senators I have mentioned, have raised the concerns that Australian citizens have been silenced unfairly, unjustly, and that informed consent has been denied due to the silencing of people on social media.

In a Democratic society, people have a right and the duty to question the narrative posed by so called official or authoritative sources, as the challenging of one-sided narratives serves greatly in the combating of institutional and governmental overreach. The use of propaganda by government and institutions has been a common tactic to gain and maintain power in history, and no society is immune from the overreach from official, or authoritative, or governmental sources. A dictatorship is where a citizen cannot challenge the dictates of the ruling governmental dictatorship. Australia needs to be a well-functioning Democratic society, where its citizens do not feel that it is turning into a Dictatorship.

The Exposure Draft for the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023, indicates that excluded content for

misinformation purposes, covers content (not the full list of excluded parties):

- produced by professional news
- produced by or for, educational institutions accredited by the Commonwealth, or its State or Territories
- authorised by the Commonwealth or its State or Territories, or Local Governments

Exempting Government and educational institutions from **the Bill**, gives the impression of a forming Dictatorship in Australia.

Robodebt is an example of a government initiative that caused great injustice, suffering and pain to Australian citizens, and without the ability for citizens to raise their concerns about Robodebt, there may have been no justice for the affected persons of Robodebt decisions. If **the Bill** had been implemented at the time where persons were being unjustly attacked by Robodebt decisions, the Government would have said that there were no issues with Robodebt, and the affected persons would have been silenced on social media, on podcasts, and from sharing their stories online through messaging services. **The Bill** if implemented at this time, would have had the impression to affected persons, of the Government being a Dictatorship.

We do not want the citizens of Australia to see the Government as a Dictatorship. We do not want the citizens of Australia to lose confidence in Government by the implementation of a “Ministry of Truth, from George Orwell 1984 book” type of one-sided narrative system of information dissemination. The Wikipedia page ‘*List of political controversies in Australia*’ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_controversies_in_Australia) shows a list of some of the major political controversies in Australia. The decisions made by Government, and the information provided by Government, needs to be discussed and explored by the citizens of the Australian Democracy. The inability for citizens to provide views on Government decisions or Government disseminated information, with the views of citizens to be seen as misinformation with the threat of punishments and penalties, does not align with a well-functioning Democracy. It signals to the citizens of Australia, of a Government that seeks to act with an arrogance to advance its agendas without consultation with its citizens. **The Bill** will only increase the lack of confidence of citizens in the decisions made by its Government and its Educational institutions.

How is information deemed as misinformation? Is there transparency regarding the funding of any party that deems information as misinformation? Is there any conflict of interest created by the funding, such as the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) being funded to a very great extent by the Pharmaceutical Industry. Could the TGA provide information that favours the Pharmaceutical Industry, regarding a pharmaceutical medical product, drug or vaccine, and the citizens of Australia that may be affected by the safety of that product, drug, or vaccine, could be labelled as spreading misinformation if they question the safety of the product, drug or vaccine, or the narrative provided by the TGA regarding the product, drug or vaccine. Even though the pharmaceutical drug Thalidomide was a scandal and tragedy that occurred in 1960 and 1961, the Australian Government were informed of the danger of Thalidomide, however initially took no action. From the BBC news article “*Thalidomide scandal: How Australia's response has 'lagged behind'*” (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-47703344>), the article mentioned

- It's "inexcusable" that this could've been prevented, Ms McManus says: "Of 124 known Australian thalidomide survivors, between 20 and 30 were conceived in that timeframe **where the government knew about thalidomide's atrocities, but did nothing.**"

The citizens of Australia need to be able to share their stories and concerns of any pharmaceutical products, even if approved by the TGA or promoted by Commonwealth, State, or Territory health authorities. Even when a product is said to be “safe and effective”, the duty of care of a Government needs to ensure that its citizens have all the information

available to make a fully informed decision to consent to take a pharmaceutical product. The Government should not be the only source of information to consider on pharmaceutical products, as a one sided “ministry of truth” regarding pharmaceutical products, is another signal to the citizens of Australia that the Government is acting as a Dictatorship.

The Bill will increase the penalty style tactics of social media companies, such as Facebook and Instagram, to place temporary or permanent bans on users for what may be considered, but may not actually be misinformation. This will occur due to the financial penalties that ACMA will impose on social media companies if content is judged by ACMA as misinformation. A citizen of Australia may be raising information that is factual, however because it challenges Australian governmental decisions or disseminated information, it is deemed to be misinformation. The voice of the Australian citizen could be unjustly silenced. The impact of bans to users from social media companies can affect a user’s mental health due to exclusion from friends and family, as social media can be a medium that users maintain this social connection. The means of using social media for Australian citizens to seek justice and support, could be impacted by **The Bill**, if the identification of misinformation is mismanaged by the social media companies, by their high risk-based approach to remove content “just in case” ACMA will seek to impose financial penalties on the social media companies. **The Bill** has undertones of China’s social credit policies. Australia should not want its citizens to have concerns of implementation of social credit type persecution by silencing their voice.

I am opposed to the proposed Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023, due to the obvious potential for the bill to be used by ACMA to weaponize the silencing of voices that challenge the official narrative that seeks to support actions of government and institutions.

Kind Regards

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