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From: [REDACTED]
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To: Minister.Rowland.MO
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Subject
Submission on the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023

Message
Rev. Steve Evans

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
17/08/23

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

Subject: Submission on the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to express my deep concerns and strong opposition to the proposed Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023. As an Australian citizen who values freedom of speech and understands the significance of the internet in promoting democratic principles, I am outraged by the implications of this bill.

Firstly, the existence of this bill demonstrates a lack of respect for the freedom of speech of Australian citizens. By creating two classes of citizens, where certain individuals and institutions have the power to spread information, regardless of its accuracy, while restricting regular citizens' ability to share their knowledge and opinions, the bill undermines the democratic ideals our nation upholds.

The internet has been a monumental democratic invention that has given a voice to regular people. However, this law poses a significant risk to regular citizens who rely on the internet as a means of expression and information sharing. The excessive fines imposed on digital services will lead to a chilling effect on free speech, surpassing even the most restrictive digital platforms seen today. Moreover, the broad scope of the bill, which applies across the entire industry without any mechanisms for relief, further exacerbates the potential harm to freedom of expression.

Accurately judging the veracity of information in the digital age is an impossible task. Scientific knowledge constantly evolves, and what was once considered widely accepted fact may later be proven false. The bill's focus on addressing misinformation fails to consider this inherent fluidity of knowledge. For instance, the list of examples included in this submission clearly demonstrates that even expert consensus can be subject to change. Enforcing an industry code or mandatory code would likely result in the removal of content that was once considered accurate but later deemed

misleading or deceptive. This not only restricts freedom of speech but also stifles open and honest discussions necessary for the pursuit of truth.

Even experts appointed to be stewards of truth, such as Dr. Nick Coatsworth, have raised serious concerns about the scope and application of this bill. His scathing rebuke on Twitter not only reflects the potential pitfalls of implementing such legislation but also questions the government's claim to champion truth while potentially resorting to censorship.

Furthermore, the bill's focus on large platforms like Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter overlooks the unintentional consequences for thousands of smaller community websites that embrace social features. These websites, often run by individuals or small companies, may unknowingly incur significant fines simply because they were unaware of the industry codes and their compliance requirements. This disproportionate impact on smaller platforms imposes an unjustifiable restriction on freedom of speech and enterprise.

The bill's broad applicability extends beyond Australian borders and puts the internet's global nature at risk. This raises vital questions regarding enforcement and the potential legal consequences for website owners worldwide. For instance, the bill's impact on Mastodon servers, which are hosted by individuals and organizations globally, raises concerns about the need to comply with Australian industry codes. Is the government proposing to impose these codes on all Mastodon servers, even those outside Australian jurisdiction? Such a move would limit access to information and hinder citizens' ability to make informed decisions, striking at the very heart of democracy.

Australia's commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly articles 18 and 19, guarantees the freedom of thought, conscience, expression, and opinion. The proposed bill's categorization of specific political party viewpoints as misinformation, and subsequent removal from digital platforms, threatens the rights enshrined in these international agreements. Additionally, the bill's potential labeling of fundamental faith worldviews as misinformation displays a concerning level of intolerance and disregards the diversity of beliefs held by Australian citizens.

In conclusion, I strongly urge the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts to reconsider the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023. Its provisions infringe upon the freedom of speech, disproportionately affect regular citizens, and disregard the ever-evolving nature of knowledge. I firmly believe that preserving the internet as a democratic space requires a more nuanced and balanced approach that upholds the principles of free expression and open dialogue.

Thank you for considering my views. I trust that you will take them into account during your deliberations on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Rev. Steve Evans

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