

Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023

From: [REDACTED]
To: Information Integrity <information.integrity@infrastructure.gov.au>
Date: Sun, 20 Aug 2023 16:48:22 +1000
Attachments: Unnamed Attachment (68 bytes)

Dear Misinformation Bill Review,

I am a [REDACTED] teacher with over 35 years of teaching experience and seek to highlight the disastrous negative impact that this proposed bill would have, if passed. I wish to highlight the fundamental role of critical thinking and debate in Australian society; and critical thinking as a component of the Australian curriculum.

I strongly oppose the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023 because the attempt to curtail and control freedom of speech, thought and debate on digital platforms will deny Australian citizens the opportunity to freely engage in, and to develop their critical thinking skills. The introduction of this bill will imply that you and I, the people of Australia, cannot be trusted to disseminate information for ourselves, and this in turn inherently implies that our education system is failing to achieve its curriculum objectives. Critical thinking is embedded in our education institutions and higher order thinking skills are promoted through teaching practice and in the Australian curriculum.

I view the proposed bill as offensive and insulting to Australians, regardless of any perceived good intention which initiated the formulation of the bill. I object to the bill's assault on freedom of thought, speech and information and the authoritarian approach that this bill takes.

Such a punitive proposal is 'un-Australian'. You must certainly recognise that this bill is the antithesis of what we are promoting in our education system and, if passed, will surely lead to the 'dumbing down' of our society as a whole.

The University of New South Wales Critical Thinking Guide describes critical thinking as "the process of deliberate, systematic and logical thinking on any subject, while considering bias or assumptions that may affect your discussion." It adds that "Critical thinkers test what they are told and what they read"

Australians engage in critical thinking when they are exposed to various arguments, ideas and claims. People do not effectively develop critical thinking if alternative arguments, ideas and claims are 'sanitised' and removed from the field of discussion.

If various claims on digital media platforms are deemed to be concerning, offensive or even dangerous by government appointees (who themselves are naturally susceptible to bias), then the ideal response in an educated and democratic society would be to promote critical thinking strategies, rather than to enforce the removal of such information and to criminalise or penalise its existence.

An integral provision of our Australian democratic and parliamentary process is that proposed bills, such as this bill, must be thoroughly debated by you, our parliamentarians, in order for all aspects to be presented, examined and rigorously tested as to the validity of each argument. This involves critical thinking through careful analysis of all the information presented, regardless of whether arguments are credible, well-researched, outlandish or peculiar. Our parliamentary process provides that all Australians are welcome to contribute their views.

In like manner, the capacity for the general Australian population to engage in the process of healthy debate and critical thinking through digital media provides a platform for alternate views, robust debate and promotes analytical thinking skills. Indeed, a key characteristic of digital media platforms is that a wide range of views is able to be presented and responses to posts are invited, encouraged and debated in a public forum. There is no equivalent opportunity elsewhere where everyday mums and dads can be confronted with such a wide range of views, whether they be credible, misleading or even wildly bizarre.

We are increasingly being forced to engage in critical thinking and to examine information for ourselves. Where once we trusted everything we read in print, as a society we are now learning to judiciously disseminate information and engage more analytically. This is a good thing. Added to this, it is undoubtedly impossible to maintain ongoing, clearly defined and accurate understandings of what could be identified as false information. As we know, accuracy of information is constantly evolving as new and updated information comes to light. Any attempt to assess what constitutes 'misinformation' or 'disinformation' would require constantly shifting 'goalposts'. Freedom of all information must be permitted to be available.

A positive approach rather than a punitive approach has always been the Australian way. We educate our citizens through advertising campaigns, trusting our community to make good and wise choices. We support Australians to think systematically and logically. There are countless examples of societal issues addressed in such a way that the potential problem is not banned, but rather, the public is educated about the risks and encouraged to test their thinking. A few examples are gambling, smoking, drug use and matters around sexual health. We don't place a blanket ban on any of these activities because of the perceived dangers. The Australian way has been to work towards increasing awareness of risk through media and internet advertising and to provide assistance for people who require support.

A few years ago, a friend sent me links to some websites that contained alarming information. As they were received from a trusted friend, I initially trusted that they were credible and forwarded them to two other friends. However, I found myself reflecting on the information and examining some flaws in what it contained. I came to realise that I had inadvertently shared what may have been misinformation. As a consequence, I contacted the original sender and the people to whom I had sent the information. I admitted my fault in sharing these links and alerted them to the flaws. They each responded with agreement about the discovery, and through that experience, we all learnt to apply our critical thinking strategies more effectively before sharing information. We learnt this, not through being denied access to faulty information, but through being alerted to how to identify invalid information.

I have since improved my ability to do my own research, to more critically examine information that is shared via social media, and to discriminate between credible information that can be validated and misinformation. This process has been enormously valuable to me. You cannot teach others to think critically without allowing them to undergo a process of examination of information, both that which is credible and that which may be misleading.

As a teacher, I am keenly aware that a key goal in education is to promote higher order thinking and learning capabilities in accordance with government education directives and initiatives. The intended result is to shape a highly capable community of Australian citizens, who are fully able to participate effectively in society. If our education system is functioning effectively, then critical thinking is already being taught in Australian schools, and it is through being able to critically examine information, that our students will be protected from misinformation and from being misled.

A current initiative in teaching is to utilise High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) in order to promote student learning. The seventh HIT strategy is 'Questioning'. As detailed on the Education Victoria website, "Questioning opens up opportunities for students to discuss, argue, and express opinions and alternative points of view. It engages students, stimulates interest and curiosity in learning, and can create links to students' lives." Teachers throughout Victoria are trained to assist students to think critically, not as a stand-alone skill, but embedded throughout the curriculum and teaching practice. The answer to combatting misinformation in any format is through robust education.

The NSW Education website describes the importance of critical thinking in the Australian curriculum and goes on to refer to a paper written by Peter Ellerton, who is the founding director of the University of Queensland Critical Thinking Project. Ellerton's paper, 'On critical thinking and collaborative inquiry' highlights the importance of teaching critical thinking. Ellerton quotes Lipman who explains that "the classroom cannot simply be seen as a medium for the smooth transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. Classrooms in which things are 'settled and clear' imply an absence of doubt, hence an absence of inquiry, hence an absence of opportunities to engage in reflective thinking, and hence an absence of opportunities to improve thinking."

It is understood by educational experts that you cannot improve a person's ability to think merely by sanitising information. There remains a strong need to retain all opportunities to raise doubts and to question the integrity of information for yourself. This is applicable whether in the classroom or in everyday life situations. In Victoria's 'Critical and Creative Thinking' curriculum a Year 9-10 capability is to "Critically examine their own and others thinking processes and discuss factors that influence thinking, including cognitive biases". An elaboration provides the example of "discussing examples of common cognitive biases and how to mitigate for these, such as confirmation bias, for example in the context of identifying sources when undertaking research; framing bias, for example in the context of advertising; clustering illusion, for example in the context of evaluation of gambling decisions". Our Australian curriculum is well-endowed with learning goals for analytical thinking, so do we trust that our education system is teaching what it states? If so, then there is absolutely no need to excessively monitor information shared on digital online platforms.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my views on this bill and for acting responsibly in your duties to protect and uphold the freedoms we hold dear in our country.

I have also requested that my submission remain anonymous if published, and that none of my personal details be shared.

1. Critical Thinking Guide | UNSW Current Students, 18 March 2022.
2. High impact teaching strategies (HITS) (education.vic.gov.au)
3. Occasional Paper Series On critical thinking and collaborative inquiry (nsw.gov.au)
4. Lipman, M. (2003) Thinking in Education. 2nd edition. Cambridge University Press.
5. Critical and Creative Thinking - Curriculum - Victorian Curriculum (vcaa.vic.edu.au)

