

Re:Submission of "Have your say" re New ACMA powers to combat misinformation and disinformation

From: Arija Tale [REDACTED]
To: Information Integrity <information.integrity@infrastructure.gov.au>
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Attachments: Unnamed Attachment (68 bytes)

To whom it may concern.

I am responding to the opportunity to express my views on the draft bill - Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023) and whether it strikes a balance between tackling harmful online misinformation and disinformation while balancing freedom of speech, with the independent regulator ACMA being given new powers to do this.

After studying the information provided I have grave concerns about the issue of freedom of speech and expression, and the penalties that could be imposed for non-compliance or for providing online platforms as an avenue for authoritative debate and information sharing, and the potential for escalating censorship and the undermining and stifling of the underlying principles of freedom of expression and speech in our democracy. It is stated in the reasons for extending these powers that misinformation and disinformation pose a threat to the safety and well being of Australians as well as to our democracy, society and economy.

I am very concerned about the development of this notion and the direction this is leading with the expansion of powers to a so-called independent authority, for it looks to me like a slippery slope towards the censorship and stifling of debate and independent thought and expression, the erosion of the "scientific method" which welcomes vigorous discussion of ideas and the freedom to do so without the threat of punishment if they are not subservient to the status quo or the prevailing narrative.

I have a very basic concern about the conception of what is information, misinformation and disinformation. Who decides on behalf of everyone else, what is true and what is not??? Upon what evidence are such conclusions drawn??? Who takes it upon themselves to feel they have a monopoly on the truth and feel they have a right to impose this upon everyone else. Who decides what is harmful? Who thinks that they have more authority to draw more accurate conclusions based on information provided in the public arena than each individual citizen who is interested in the information provided on these online platforms. When information is openly available, and those who wish to share information either through interest or by those who have the authority and expertise to speak, it can be scrutinised and debated openly. It is a very lazy intellect that seeks to censor and suppress rather than use the opportunity to present an intelligent critique or counter argument and to expose incorrect statements by data and evidence that is available.

I am seeing more and more censorship in Australia and around the world, and in particular of the media and investigative journalism, that social media has become the only outlet for sharing information on some subjects that governments and political parties with vested interests would rather the people did not have access to. This oppressive trend can be seen in many places in the world where despotic governments use fear of punitive measures and even imprisonment to suppress any criticism of the regime or its politics or performance.

Disinformation is a very frequently used tool here and in oppressive regimes to orchestrate the narrative and opinions of the people. A relatively recent example I remember is the Tampa affair and the children overboard disinformation used to influence the outcome of an election. What about the coalition of the willing to accuse Iran of manufacturing weapons of mass destruction which were never found and the propaganda and sending armed forces into the middle east to disrupt the region. And more recently, there is so much information from qualified doctors and researchers that was attempted to be squashed and discredited during the recent disruption to our society, our lives and economy during the "pandemic" and the ongoing harm that many citizens are still experiencing at many levels.

I think all decent citizens would already agree on what is obviously harmful content - illegal hate speech based on religious and racial discrimination and abuse, child sex abuse and pornographic exploitation, terrorist content and incitement to violence. We already have strenuous legal capabilities to deal with these matters in the criminal law and there are state and federal authorities working 24/7 to track down the perpetrators and to prosecute accordingly. The eSafety Commissioner already has the power to require digital platform services to remove adult cyber abuse content. I feel the extension of powers in other realms is the open door to totalitarianism and an opportunistic censorship which could be exploited for political advancement by powerful and influential vested interests and this is not in the best interest of democracy or for the health and well being of Australian citizens.

The growth of a healthy progressive society and democracy allows and is dependent on vigorous and rigorous debate, without fear or favour, the sharing of information and testing the information to derive greater understanding of any issue of human concern so positive progress in any part of life can be made. This process would facilitate and deliver greater success in the economy, in environmental concerns, medicine and health. I feel the enforcement penalties contained in this bill, especially for individuals, will have the effect of stifling debate by invoking fear to participate in the healthy discourse that I have discussed above and are not in the interests of a healthy and thriving democracy. I find them to be extreme and draconian.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my views and give feedback in this, so far, democratic country of ours.

Yours sincerely, Arija Tale.. Post code [REDACTED], mobile number [REDACTED]

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