

18 August 2023.

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

SUBJECT:

Feedback on the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023.

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to express my deep concern and outrage regarding the draft bill titled "Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023." As an Australian citizen and a staunch supporter of free speech and democracy, I strongly believe that this bill is not only unnecessary but also highly detrimental to the fabric of our society.

One of the key flaws in this bill is its potential to persecute minorities, the very groups it claims to protect. Historically, minority communities have often been oppressed by prevailing political landscapes, and progress has only been achieved by challenging and debating accepted notions and norms. This bill's mandate for a single code to be applied across all digital platforms effectively eliminates any safe space for minorities to voice their opinions and engage in meaningful conversations. It threatens to silence or categorize their viewpoints as misinformation or disinformation without due consideration of diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, the bill portrays ordinary people as incapable of engaging in public discourse without causing harm. It presupposes that the viewpoints of the government and its accredited journalists or educators are inherently more valid and less harmful than those of ordinary citizens. This presumption undermines the principles of equality and democratic participation, disempowering the very foundation upon which our society is built.

The threats posed by this bill to both Digital Platform Providers and ordinary users are deeply concerning. The potential for highly negative or reputationally damaging records, as specified in section 18(3), puts undue pressure on these providers, potentially leading to financial loss or insolvency. The imposition placed on businesses to gather and format required information as mandated by the government, regardless of convenience, under section 14 exacerbates this burden. The prospect of civil penalties under designated infringement notice provisions, compounded on a day-to-day basis, as per section 15(3), only adds to the financial jeopardy faced by these providers.

Equally troubling is the threat to interfere with the lives and free expression of ordinary citizens. Being hauled before ACMA under section 19, as proposed by this bill, not only creates stress and distress but also wastes their valuable time. Moreover, in cases where

there is a personal relationship between the citizen and the alleged author of misinformation or disinformation, the bill effectively coerces ordinary people to betray their friends, families, or political allies. This betrayal is contrary to the Australian ethos of mateship and solidarity, eroding the very values we hold dear.

The expectation that citizens comply with such a bill is unrealistic and unjust. Personal values, faith, and individual beliefs may conflict with the requirements of the government, and placing individuals in a position where they must choose between obedience and their deeply held convictions is a severe infringement on personal freedoms.

In conclusion, I strongly urge you to reconsider the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023. It not only undermines the values of free speech and democracy but also poses a significant threat to minorities and the overall fabric of our society. Rather than implementing legislation that restricts the public dialogue, we should focus on promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and fostering an environment where diverse opinions can be respectfully debated and understood.

Thank you for considering my feedback. I trust that you will carefully assess the concerns raised by citizens like me before finalizing any legislation.

Yours sincerely,

Katrina Mathai.