

Thank you for the opportunity to voice my viewpoint on the proposed legislation regarding the ACMA powers being considered. The TRUTH is important. Without it, we have no standard by which to live our lives and we have no common language with which we communicate amongst the citizenry and our elected government. The truth is not always obvious. In science, it comes about through rigorous testing and through retesting with different inputs. The truth in science is always at risk of being challenged by new inputs or new data. Therefore, science, as it claims any truth, should always be proclaimed with an element of humility and with the understanding that what we perceive as true or likely true today, may be proven false tomorrow. But we do not outlaw challenges to science. We do not, or should not, make it difficult for new data to be discovered because we have a common cause in always seeking the truth.

The same can be said for public discourse. As we discuss our opinions, which now often happens on public social media platforms, we seek the truth in our thoughts and ideas. And those ideas should always be up for challenge because we have a common cause in seeking the truth. The realm of our thoughts and ideas are also prone to emotion and egoism. Because of that attachment, many people may find offense when their ideas are challenged. In fact, the challenges may be insensitive and outright hostile to our sense of truth and our sense of right and wrong. This is not a problem of ideas. Rather, it is a problem of our sensitivity to ideas. However, if our common cause is the truth, the onus should be on us to divorce ourselves from the dedication to our thoughts and ideas, not necessarily in our personal lives, but in the area of dialogue and debate. We should be able to rigorously defend our ideas and express our beliefs as much as someone else may rigorously fight for an opposing view. This is the nature thought and necessarily battle that must be allowed to arrive at the best possible outcomes that are hopefully aligned with the truth.

Today, we commonly hear the words misinformation and disinformation. But what is misinformation and disinformation if the information turns out to be true? These terms, it seems, are a weapon of language and labels meant to discredit and suppress ideas that seem to be in opposition to our current understanding of the truth. Let me put emphasis on the word "current". Our current understanding may be our misunderstanding in the very near future. No created person or created entity has a monopoly on the truth. Therefore, we should be humble in what we express to be true and what we think to be false. We should not be so lazy as to rely on the labels of misinformation and disinformation to prevent us from hearing challenging, opposing and even offensive views. The COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect illustration of where our elected authorities can go dreadfully wrong. In Australia and across the world, we accepted what we were told by pharmaceutical companies and agencies that were professionally and ideologically captured. Governments, mostly in good faith, relied on this information to communicate to its citizenry. In doing so, the government itself engaged in propagating information that was not true. It engaged in its own misinformation and disinformation. Information on the dangers of the virus to healthy, young people, the efficacy of the vaccine to stop viral spread, the efficacy of cloth masks and a host of other guidance has now turned out to be patently false. Information regarding the likely lab-leak theory was decried as false and racist, when now it is looking like that may prove to be true.

When the government, so sure of itself, without humility, creates policy based on such information, actively mobilizes its law enforcement capacity to enforce its felonious decrees and labels all information to the contrary as dangerous, it risks fomenting the distrust of the citizenry and hence the stability of the democracy. The government becomes culpable in ruining the lives and livelihoods of those people who are brave enough to express their opposing thoughts and opinions and act accordingly with those beliefs.

I ask you, what is more dangerous to democracy? a controversial opinion? An opinion that can be aired and responded to by others in the community, debated and fought against with the understanding that all people are naturally pointed to that which is true? Or a government that essentially shuts down the democracy by silencing those controversial opinions creating the suspicions of the populous about what the authorities are trying to hide?

The government by this action is playing with tyranny in the name of fighting for democracy.

It becomes guilty of that which it accuses, except more effectively so because it has the powers of the state.

ACMA may argue that it cannot direct posts to be removed. But make no mistake, by offering recommendations or creating guidelines that it expects platforms to follow, the government cannot wash its hands of the consequence. The government is, by proxy, directing websites, search engines and social media platforms to behave in ways that seek the same end. It will cause these platforms to self-censor. It allows the government and its agencies to collude with the tech industry in affecting what people can search, the information they have access to and the opinions they can hear. This is not freedom. This is not the role of government. The government should be protecting the rights of free speech. It should not be in the business of protecting our sensitivities, our egos and our sacred beliefs. Most platforms, much like television channels give you the option to turn to another channel or mute profiles and block accounts. We are all free to not look at something. We are free to disconnect as much as we would like to. If the government wants to put an age restriction on something, that is a different debate. But all media companies understand, that government guidance and recommendations that are tied to the authority to wage penalties and consider legislation that may have a negative or positive impact, these media companies understand the veiled threat of such guidance and recommendations. The result is an attack on free speech, free thought and free expression, the core elements of a free and democratic society in the constant search for the truth.

The Australian government and ACMA by extension should refrain from such authoritarian action that will undoubtedly sow discord among the populous. Allow people to be challenged, to be offended and empower them to take personal actions to lessen negativity. Suggest they put down their phones and engage with their community. Or better yet, encourage positive engagement. Perhaps ACMA and the people of Australia would be better served by communication outreach. Without special preference by medial companies, if you see something you think is false, ACMA should leave its own

comment linked to data and supporting information. Make ACMA an agency that does outreach and engages in the debate in the public square. If it does so in good faith, with good data and with the truth on its side, let the populous see it for themselves. Maybe ACMA can help restore faith in government, rather than be another instrument in the exercise of authoritarian power. In the marketplace of ideas and on a level playing field, let ACMA fight for its place and its viewpoint in clear view of the Australian people. Let the battle of ideas begin! And may the truth prevail!