

To whom it may concern.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the process regarding the proposed mis/disinformation bill.

I strongly oppose the government interfering with our communication in any way and see it as a dangerous and fundamental erosion of freedom of speech.

Firstly, in complex and novel situations we do not know where the truth may lie and we need all avenues of knowledge open to us. Since the "ACMA misinformation report Fact sheet 1: key research findings" focuses on Covid, I will use the medical arena as an example. Covid was a completely novel situation. Therefore, we had a limited understanding. As a community, there was no accepted protocol for how to treat the disease and its community impact. Therefore, we need exposure to all information so we can chart our course through the unmapped terrain. This includes ideas and opinions that might be wrong, for, in the midst of our limited understanding, we do not know where the truth is and therefore, by definition, *must* be open to all ideas. We must let these ideas battle freely and trust the truth will out. Eliminating all competing voices leaves us at the mercy of only a few select voices that are subject to their own incentive structures that may or may not align with ours. For example, I imagine we want third party opinions verifying the claims of the companies that manufacture the drugs used to treat Covid? In the same way that we want third party companies verifying the safety claims made by car manufacturers or any other medicine. Human nature is such that we all lean towards our own incentive. For example, the smoking industry resisted claims that smoking tobacco was carcinogenic for years. Not because the industry is full of evil people, but because these individuals were inclined to protect their own interests. The company responsible for thalidomide, Grunenthal, continued to market their drug *after* it had been proven to be harmful. If there were a repression of divergent and uncomfortable voices in this situation how many more children and mothers would have suffered profound grief? It was the open expression of ideas and debate that allowed us to secure the health and wellbeing of citizens in both these cases. I am *not* saying Covid vaccines shares similarities with tobacco or thalidomide. I *am* saying, that when a new product comes out, we do not know fully its long and short term consequences. This is true of covid vaccines, and will be true for any future pandemic responses. To protect ourselves against the limitations of our own understandings, we must allow all ideas air time. My understanding is that, had the proposed powers been in existence, much conversation around alternative treatments and vaccine risks would have been removed. This is anti-scientific. In complex situations, there are experts on both sides. Science relies on diverse actors challenging competing narratives until an understanding emerges that can withstand the criticism of all. Tampering with this process cuts science off at the knees, and risks a skewed understanding of an issue where real humans may be forced to pay the price for ideological convenience.

The second reason I am against increasing powers is more general and relates to our democratic institutions. Very simply, I believe governments should not interfere with speech, except in extreme situations (e.g. slander). The reason for this is because it eliminates a crucial check in government power. If the government can reduce the scrutiny it might face, it removes the front-line defence citizens have against government corruption. To compare Australia to Stalin's Russia or Un's North Korea is, obviously, extreme in many ways. However, it is worth noting that one of the reasons individuals in these nations were and are subjected to horror and tyranny was because of their inability to express themselves freely and criticise the government and controversial. What the government must realise is that they are instituting powers for today, and for decades to come. We do not know what Australian government may look like in 50 years time. And although it is extremely unlikely it will descend to tyranny, if it were to do so, this would be the first step. It seems far too

easy for governments to use the proposed legislation in an unethical manner and, even if the current administration might not, what about the next, or the governments thereafter? Allowing governments to dictate narratives to our media companies is an obvious and worrying canary in the coal mine for the health of our free speech. As a citizen and teacher of history, I implore you not to interfere with the free expression of Australians.

While it is true that erroneous information presents a challenge to nations and individuals, this is nothing new. Communities have always had to contend with competing ideas. Often, it is our openness to new ideas that generate new knowledge and understandings. It was our openness to the uncomfortable truth of thalidomide that allowed us to cease its use; it was the British Government's inability to quash new ideas that led to democracy, and, as an academic, it is my openness to new ideas that leads me and my students to new knowledge. We do not know where the next new piece of useful but controversial knowledge might come from. At all times, but especially in times of crisis (war, pandemic etc.) we need a free flow of information. This includes the freedom of individuals to be wrong. Because if we allow individuals to only espouse the accepted narrative, we will never find the answer to novel dilemmas and we tie our hands to potential solutions to challenging problems.

Finally, as soon as we talk of 'balancing' free speech, we are limiting free speech. By doing so, we attack the best and most peaceful tool at our disposal to ensure a peaceful, just and open society for our children. Please, do not increase the powers of government to influence the information and conversation in the modern public square.

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