



A Digital Dark Age

Concerns about Misinformation and Disinformation

BY BOB DAY AO – federal director of the Australian Family Party, and a former senator for South Australia

*Step into my parlour, said the spider
to the fly,
'Tis the prettiest little parlour, that
ever you did spy,
Oh no, no! then said the fly, to ask me
is in vain,
For who goes up to your winding
stair,
Can ne'er come down again.*

Mary Howitt's old poem could well be describing another web, that ensnares us all – the world-wide-web, and the web of restriction the federal government is weaving in the guise of protecting against disinformation and misinformation.

Every aspect of our lives is connected to the world-wide-web – most notably our source of nearly all the information on which we base life's decisions. But the government's Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation bill, that is offered to make the web a better place, will only serve to tighten the filaments of spiderweb that threaten to strangle freedom of speech.

Not only have we all been caught in the web, and to quote Mary Howitt, we're 'ne'er coming down again', but we are about to be further ensnared.

This essay will explore the bill and set it against a background of recent government-sponsored fear-mongering and disinformation, especially concerning the Voice referendum, so-called climate change, and the statist responses to Covid 19.

1. The Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill

In January 2023, Communications Minister Michelle Rowland announced that the Albanese Government would introduce new laws to provide the media regulator – the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) – with 'new powers to combat online misinformation and disinformation'.

The proposed new bill, the *Communication Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill* (Ref 1), would:

- Enable ACMA to gather information from global tech companies and require them to keep certain records about matters regarding misinformation and disinformation and provide those records to ACMA.
- Enable ACMA to request industry to develop, vary and/or reg-

ister a code of practice covering measures to combat misinformation and disinformation on digital platforms, which ACMA could then register and enforce.

- Allow ACMA to create and enforce an industry standard, should a code of practice be deemed ineffective in combatting misinformation and disinformation on digital platforms
- Empower ACMA to regulate electoral and referendum content, but NOT the power to regulate political parties with regard to misleading and/or deceptive conduct.
- Empower the Minister to direct ACMA to conduct investigations into any matter regarding misinformation or disinformation and empower the Minister to set the terms of reference for any such investigation.

The Bill also provides for significant penalties for digital platforms or individuals that do not comply with the Bill and/or the new codes and standards the Bill creates. Penalties include:

- Imprisonment of up to 12 months for providing false or misleading information to ACMA.
- Non-attendance at an ACMA investigation hearing of up to

33 penalty units (\$9,000) for each day of non-attendance.

- Non-compliance with a registered code of up to 10,000 penalty units (\$2.75 million) or 2% of global turnover (whatever is greater).
- Non-compliance with an industry standard of up to 25,000 penalty units (\$6.88 million) or 5% of global turnover (whatever is greater).

Of course the government will not be subject to any of these new laws. It has exempted itself.

Ms Rowland said the government is committed to fining social media companies for allowing misinformation or disinformation to be broadcast on their platforms.

Misinformation is defined as *false information that is spread due to ignorance, or by error or mistake, without the intent to deceive*.

Disinformation is defined as *false information designed to deliberately mislead and influence public opinion or obscure the truth for malicious or deceptive purposes*.

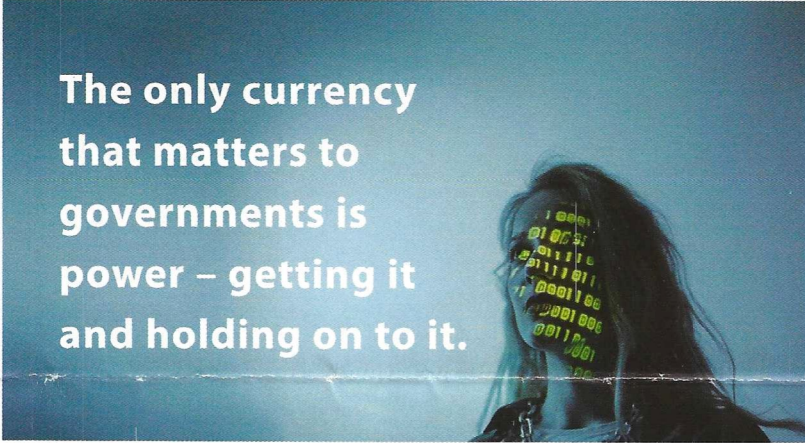
"In the face of seriously harmful content that sows division, undermines support for pillars of our democracy, or disrupts public health responses, doing nothing is not an option," the minister said. Harsh words indeed.

In response, the Law Council of Australia warned the proposal could have a *'chilling effect on freedom of expression'* by allowing social media giants and the communications watchdog (ACMA) to decide what constitutes information, opinion and claims online (Ref 2).

And in case anyone was thinking this is solely a Labor Party contrivance, before the 2022 election, the Morrison government pledged to, *'... introduce stronger laws to combat harmful disinformation and misinformation online by giving the media regulator stronger information-gathering and enforcement powers'* (Ref 3).

To cap it all off, waiting in the wings

is *'mal-information'*, defined as *'truth which is used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country'* and *'information that stems from the truth, but is often portrayed in a way that misleads and/or causes potential harm.'*



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2. Why governments relish such powers

Despite a claim that the bill is designed to protect the community from error, the bill is really a power grab by government. The only currency that matters to governments is power – getting it and holding on to it.

Attaining power these days involves denigrating and silencing one's political opponents in any way possible, by censoring them, branding what they say as misinformation, disinformation or mal-information.

Censorship is the easy and cowardly response by political bullies who cannot find rational arguments to oppose what they think are bad ideas. As has been observed, *'When ideas are bad, censorship will always be more attractive than debate.'*

The politics of fear

The federal government's Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill is offered to help the community, but not only does it contain the hidden agenda of control, but it relies upon unfounded fear, both in Australia and across the world.

Consider the nonsensical position held by the World Economic Forum. That body says international 'misinformation and disinformation' have risen to number one on the list of top 10 risks facing humanity [reference: the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Risks

Report 2024 (Ref 4).

Addressing the recent WEF conference, European Union President Ursula von der Leyen said: *'Like in all democracies, our freedom comes with risks. There will always be those who try to exploit our openness, both from inside and out. There will always be attempts to put us off track – for example, with 'misinformation and disinformation.'* We are effectively being told we are at risk of harm, unless the government can allay our fears by protecting us from what it thinks we should see and hear!

The impact of fear has long been a powerful political motivator, as it makes people accept things they otherwise would never tolerate.

As noted during the 16th Century by Niccolo Machiavelli in *The Prince* (a book that would influence political strategy and tactics for the next 500 years), fear is crucial to the control of the masses. *'The best course of action for a ruler to take is to instil fear in the people'*, Machiavelli said.

He wanted people not only to fear what might happen, but especially to 'fear the worst'.

By saying misinformation and disinformation pose a threat to *'the safety and wellbeing of Australians'* and *'to our democracy, society and economy'*, Minister Rowland is engaging in the politics of fear.

In truth, the antidote to fear is knowledge based on information, facts and figures. But governments wanting to sideline inconvenient truth can only resort to fear, and the exercise of power to prevent people thinking for themselves.

But this web of constriction gets worse.

Along with the *Misinformation and Disinformation Bill*, Minister Rowland has announced a review of the *Online Safety Act*, saying the government is committed to introducing a revised version of its *'internet censorship laws'* (Ref 5).

The announcement prompted a swift

rebuke from the Institute of Public Affairs (the IPA):

"It is completely disingenuous for the Minister to seek to conflate the protection of Australians from predators online with the federal government's plan to empower bureaucrats in Canberra (ACMA) with the right to determine what is truth, and to censor mainstream opinion through its 'misinformation' bill," said the IPA's John Storey.

"The federal government is cravenly using heightened concerns about current tensions in parts of our community, and the fears of parents and others about harmful online content, as a trojan horse to push forward laws that will in practice impose political censorship," he said.

Fear, power and 'climate change'

If we want to see what ideological forces will be harnessed by the misinformation and disinformation bill, we need look no further than the scaremongering related to so-called climate change.

South Australia's chief public health officer Professor Nicola Spurrier recently warned that the nation is facing a state of "permacrisis" as climate change fuels 'back-to-back natural disasters and the emergence of new diseases' (Ref 6).

In her biennial report on the state of public health, Prof. Spurrier calls climate change 'the most significant global threat to human health'.

The report says this will lead to exacerbation of chronic diseases such as heart, lung and kidney disease; damaged food crops; increased risk of food poisoning and water contamination; injuries from flooding and bushfires; and even an increase in snake bites after floods.

Mercifully, she spared us plagues of locusts and frogs and the River Murray turning to blood.

Machiavelli would be proud.

The Voice to Parliament Referendum

Further concerns about the ethos undergirding the misinformation and disinformation bill may be discerned as we consider the fallout from the 2023 failed Voice referendum. When the *Yes* side didn't win the *Voice* Referendum, they immediately blamed, you guessed it – misinformation. *Yes* campaign director Dean Parkin, said the result was due to 'the single largest misinformation

campaign that this country has ever seen'.

Yes campaign spokesperson Thomas Mayo blamed the 'disgusting *No* campaign, a campaign that has been dishonest, that has lied to the Australian people'.

Teal MP Zali Steggell even introduced a private members' bill with the title *Stop the Lies*.

She said the *Voice* debate was 'heavy with misleading and deceptive facts'.

Got that? 'Misleading and deceptive facts', the very definition of mal-information. In fact it is government and its institutions that are the real purveyors of error, as may be noted from the following:

Toddlers and pre-schoolers in childcare centres across Australia are being taught that Australia was stolen from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

More than 7,000 schools and daycare centres now have formal 'acknowledgements of country' in place, which includes children singing or reciting that the land on which they sit belongs to Indigenous people.

As NSW Libertarian Party MP John Ruddick has noted, children are being indoctrinated to feel ashamed of their country.

When next the federal government tries to push divisive Indigenous constitutional change upon the people, it will gladly harness the misinformation and disinformation legislation as the ideal mechanism to silence dissent.

3. Governments and third-party collaborators

Whenever there is money to be made through business dealings with governments, there we see the opportunity for third-party collaborators to execute the wishes of government. Opportunities to do business with governments enable special access and privileges. Cosy relationships between businesspeople and governments are as old as regulation itself.

What can give these relationships real potency however is what's been called the 'Baptists and the Bootleggers' phenomenon. The term stems from the 1920s Prohibition days, when members of the US government received bribes from Bootleggers – criminals and

businesspeople eager to maintain the scarcity (and resulting high price) of their product (alcohol). These same Members of Congress then justified maintaining the prohibition by publicly adopting the moral cause of the Baptists!

The same applies in the advancement of the misinformation and disinformation bill, to control technology that is necessary for communications. A moral cause – 'threats to the safety and wellbeing of Australians', and financial rewards to those assisting governments in their pursuit of power are combining in the highest traditions of the bootlegger.

Tech entrepreneur and former Google insider Tristan Harris says we are in the midst of a 'great social upheaval'. Technology, he says, is being used to attack the very foundation of what we trust. 'We are entering a Digital Dark Age'.

4. Governments – the world's worst peddlers of false information

In a truly astounding claim of unbridled statism (Ref 7), fuelled by the confusion that surrounded Covid 19, Jacinda Ardern as New Zealand Prime Minister said, "We will continue to be your single source of truth. Unless you hear it from us, it is not the truth".

When Covid hit in 2020, people had no reason to doubt what they were being told by their political leaders. The pandemic, however, very quickly exposed the incompetence of many in the medical and scientific establishment, with politicians and public sector bureaucrats making up rules as they went along, and ramping up censorship.

Inquiries about whether the virus came from a lab leak, or anything negative about masks or vaccines, soon became misinformation or disinformation and were immediately censored.

Scientific evidence has proved the governments were wrong on lockdowns, wrong on border closures, wrong on school closures and wrong on masking.

Poor people were hurt the most.

Anyone, including qualified medical professionals who said Covid vaccines were causing serious side-effects leading to large numbers of deaths, were silenced and threatened.

Academics who had been studying lockdowns were also blacklisted. Dr Jay Bhattacharya, a professor of medicine at Stanford University, was one of them. "Censorship of scientific discussion led to policies like school closures," he said. "A generation of children were hurt."

At the behest of governments, social media platforms removed any and all content which questioned the safety or efficacy of the vaccines.

In April 2021, the Coalition government had Instagram remove a post which claimed that 'Covid-19 vaccine does not prevent Covid-19 infection or Covid-19 transmission', a statement that clearly was accurate.

We now know the Covid-19 vaccines were neither safe nor effective. They did not prevent infection or transmission and have been linked to blood clots, heart conditions and other 'died suddenly' events.

A peer-reviewed study (Ref 8) published in January 2024, found that more deaths were caused by the mRNA vaccines than were saved by it.

As Thomas Sowell once said, "It is difficult to imagine a more dangerous way of making decisions than by putting those decisions into the hands of people who pay no price for being wrong."

Climate Change and Renewable Energy

Probably no other area of public debate has been more manipulated than climate change.

What started as 'the greenhouse effect', soon became 'global warming' which morphed into the now all-encompassing 'climate change'.

To up the ante even more, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres stated recently, 'The era of global warming has ended; the era of global boiling has arrived' (Ref 9).

Global boiling obviously hasn't yet reached the poles, as Arctic ice is currently at its greatest extent in more than 20 years (Ref 10).

Renowned quantum physics scholar Dr John Clauser, who received the Nobel Prize in Physics has stated, 'I do not believe there is a climate crisis' (Ref 11).

More bootleggers, in the form of

renewable energy merchants, have leapt on to the climate change bandwagon with unbridled zeal and are raking in billions of dollars gaming the system, raising energy prices, impoverishing consumers, destroying jobs, and fleecing taxpayers.

In a recent renewable energy report, Australia's Energy Infrastructure Commissioner Andrew Dyer slammed the critics of so-called renewable energy and he unwittingly revealed why governments relish powers like the ones being proposed.

Dyer said, "Opposition is often driven by 'misinformation'."

What we saw in the Energy Commissioner's comment was that dead give-away, as he attacked the proponents of a view different to his own, not with science but with the rhetorical flourish: "often driven by 'misinformation'".

It's bad enough that a government instrumentality would resort to rhetorical attack. But in a tightening of the web of control, if the misinformation and disinformation bill becomes law, the government can simply label something as 'misinformation' or 'disinformation' and proceed to shut down any voice of dissent. *Presto!* Any opposing views are eliminated.

5. Misinformation and Religious Freedom

A final point about the dangers of the misinformation and disinformation bill is the view that religious exemptions in the legislation would bring comfort to people of faith who are concerned that the proclamation of the gospel would become entangled in the web of restriction. Any 'religious exemptions' in the Bill will not make life any less hazardous for faith-based organisations.

The Australian Law Reform Commission has already recommended the removal of the right for Christian schools to hire staff who share their values.

And Christians will most certainly not be able to criticize the trans movement or 'gender affirming' practices.

Closing Remarks

The Bible says, 'You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.' (John 8:32)

The world, however, says truth is subjective – 'my truth, your truth, their truth ...'

There is one institution, however that has stood against all this for thousands of years – the family. The family can do a lot to help combat the lawlessness of this digital jungle and its predators. The family is the ideal place to start building relationships, learning who to trust, who not to trust, who to communicate with, and who not to communicate with.

The answer is certainly not more legislation!

Society has three levels of protection against harm. Level one is a person's own conscience; level two is the family to keep its members in check; and level three is the police. More focus on level two, the family, might be our only hope for the future.

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