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## New 'Disinformation' Laws Are A Frightening Grab By Federal Bureaucrats For Control Of Our Online Speech

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**The idea federal bureaucrats should be given sweeping internet censorship powers to stifle the opinions of mainstream Australians is as bizarre as it is terrifying.**

When the US Department of Homeland Security announced the creation of a new entity called the "Disinformation Governance Board", Republicans went into overdrive.

"You cannot have a Ministry of Truth in this country," said Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, pinpointing the murkiness of a national security body tasked with "standardising and streamlining efforts to respond to disinformation".

Missouri Senator Josh Hawley said the move showed Homeland Security's top priority was "policing Americans' speech".

Attorney-Generals in 20 states signed onto a letter demanding that President Biden shut the body down, dubbing it "McCarthyite speech policing with the secrecy of the English Star Chamber".

It was an appropriate response to an egregious case of government overreach.

In an era when the vague notion of "disinformation" is used not to dispute false facts but to police "incorrect" opinions, arming the federal bureaucracy to police it is a dangerous proposal.

So it is disappointing that here in Australia, an almost identical proposal has been made by a Liberal government. And worse still, few in Australia have even noticed, let alone spoken out against it.

Australia's own "Misinformation and Disinformation Action Group" was announced by Communications Minister Paul Fletcher in March.

It is part of a broader legal overhaul, which will give the Australian Communications and Media Authority the power to force online platforms to remove any content that ACMA deems to be "misinformation" or "disinformation".

This, critically, makes Paul Fletcher's package even more Orwellian than the one proposed in the US.



While the American Disinformation Governance Board has only a loose (albeit opaque) mandate to “monitor” disinformation, ACMA has express and wide-ranging censorship powers.

Worse still, the definition of “disinformation” canvassed by Fletcher and the Coalition is extremely broad.

Under the proposed laws, ACMA can censor content if it subjectively believes that such material poses “harm” to a number of “public goods” – ranging from public health, to the “protection of marginalised groups” and, bizarrely, to “the environment”.

That means that, for example, a Facebook post disagreeing with Australia’s bipartisan “net zero” carbon emissions pledge could be targeted by ACMA on the basis that such a politically-inconvenient opinion could cause “harm” to “the environment”.

Minister for Communications Paul Fletcher. The proposed law

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Minister for Communications Paul Fletcher. The proposed laws would allow ACMA to censor content if it subjectively believes that such material poses “harm” (Photo by Sam Mooy/Getty Images)

If this sounds far-fetched, consider another example of potential “disinformation” – one given by ACMA itself. In its report calling for these new powers, ACMA cited “anti-lockdown” conversations as an example of a “misinformation narrative”.

“COVID-19 conspiracy theories have proven to be particularly pervasive,” wrote ACMA, in its report released in March. “This includes... anti-authoritarian groups who see lockdowns as an attack on the freedoms of the individual”.

Notwithstanding the fact that lockdowns did, by definition and design, severely restrict individual freedom, it is telling that ACMA considers anti-lockdown content an example of “disinformation”.

Because lockdowns were almost universally adopted by public health bureaucrats throughout Australia (and much of the western world), the effectiveness of them became the official truth.

It now seems that disrupting the government’s preferred narrative is not just the wrong opinion, but also a “conspiracy theory” – the kind of which, according to ACMA, “undermines public health efforts [and] causes harm to democratic institutions”.

The notion the federal bureaucracy should be given sweeping internet censorship powers – designed to stifle the opinion of mainstream Australians – to protect democratic institutions, is as bizarre as it is terrifying.

With the likes of Labor senator Kristina Keneally bemoaning the proliferation of “online extremism” for some time now, this alarming internet censorship regime is certain to find its way onto the



political agenda regardless of who forms the next government.

It is up to ordinary Australians now to speak up – while they still can – and reject this frightening grab for control of our online speech.

Because as the coronavirus saga taught us, we should not give up our freedoms lightly to an overbearing bureaucracy promising to keep us safe. God knows what the bureaucracy is capable of when it attempts to “protect” us from free thought.

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