

Submission for the Attention of the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Regarding the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2024

My name is Lynda Sedley, and I am writing on behalf of the Institute of Environment and Nutritional Epigenetics. I am a health professional with experience in managing health-related misinformation for community engagement and educational resources. This submission outlines my perspective, which is in favour of rejecting the proposed amendment on the following grounds.

In science, scientists often disagree; this is not considered a conflict of ideas but rather an opportunity for deeper exploration and better understanding. Differences in opinions are vital in scientific research as they drive innovation, encourage critical thinking, and lead to the discovery of new ideas and methods. Progress often arises from disagreements and debates that challenge existing theories or assumptions.

However, history has shown that scientific information derived from research can be biased toward the pharmaceutical industry for governmental benefit. If this amendment is passed, we can anticipate that all health-related scientific information will be biased in favour of financial gain for specific organisations and industries. While I am in favour of combatting misinformation, I am strongly opposed to information biases, which I believe will be further influenced if the amendment is passed.

For example, health information communicated to the public following screening by ACMA is often general in nature and does not consider metabolic uniqueness and ethnic variations, which are known to play a critical role in health management. Sadly, the health information currently translated to the Australian public is insufficient. Australian children are experiencing increasing rates of neurological and mental health conditions, and one in three children have poor reading literacy. Statistics suggest that poor literacy is often a result of neurological or mental health issues. These children fall behind in school, stay behind, and often resort to crime. This is supported by data showing that 9 out of 10 children in detention have a neurological or mental health condition.

Many Australians, particularly children from low socioeconomic communities, are lacking essential dietary elements required for neurological development and mental stability. Furthermore, dietary deficiencies can result in seeking these elements from alternative sources, leading to addiction. Thus, I believe the increasing levels of intellectual impairments and youth crime in Australia are linked to health information biases. Whether intentional or not, this ultimately places an increasing economic strain on Australia and requires urgent action.

An example is the promotion of red meat as an unhealthy dietary choice compared to grains. Animal protein is a primary source of the brain-essential element nitrogen, along with hormones, cytokines, and neurotransmitters that support healthy emotional regulation and immunity. Just over 250 years ago, this was the primary food source for our beloved Indigenous Australians, but today, many are financially forced to live on staples like white bread, which leads to poor neurological health and metabolic disease. Despite some populations evolving to derive sufficient sustenance from grains, Indigenous Australians have not, and over-consumption of these so-called healthy foods can be detrimental to their health.

Today, there are numerous campaigns recommending increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, almost as a panacea, which may be doing more harm than good. Substituting animal protein for plants in developing brains increases the incidence of allergies, reduces hormonal regulation and immunity, and limits nitrogen availability for tissue growth—most importantly, brain matter.

Another example of Australian health misinformation is the fortification of foodstuffs with vitamins and minerals. Health authorities recommend folate during pregnancy as an epigenetic regulator to prevent neural tube birth defects. We now understand that while folate intake during pregnancy prevents neural tube defects, it also modifies gene expression in other cells, potentially leading to alternative neurological conditions. Without unbiased health information, the public cannot make informed decisions for their baby's health.

For these reasons and many others, especially since the COVID-19 epidemic, many Australians already believe that the health information we currently receive is untrustworthy. Many have turned away from radio and television in favour of social media and blogs, where they can seek information that suits their needs. Adding another level of governance to information on social media is likely to contribute to even greater aversion. Moreover, restricting freedom of speech is likely to result in secrecy and the development of private communications that may escalate rapidly without public awareness.

Section 1:16 of the amendment describes excluded dissemination as professional news content, and content that is scientific, artistic, or religious. These categories are often the sources of misinformation, and these exemptions will therefore be subject to abuse.

Freedom of choice is not enabled in the media, the news is filled with true stories of disaster and distress, which I believe is traumatising, particularly to developing brains. In contrast, social media is self-directed, encourages critical thinking, and promotes productive discussion, which stimulates intellectual capacity.

I believe discussing the validity of current information should be prioritised. This could be achieved by:

- Appointing community representatives, like a voice, to health authorities to provide unbiased opinions and ensure no single group or industry has a disproportionate influence.
- Engaging a panel of independent citizens to provide feedback on industry policies and practices, with the purpose of balancing commercial interests with public concerns.
- Encouraging open and transparent debates to ensure all viewpoints are heard and considered.
- Increasing public awareness of the rising levels of misinformation and biases in health, politics, religion, science, and between countries, while educating the next generation on how to conduct independent research and develop critical evaluation skills.
- Lastly, enforcing stringent whistleblower protection plans so that consumers can regain faith in research and policy-making bodies.

In conclusion, I strongly reject an amendment to this bill for the following reasons:

It is my view that the public perceives ACMA as already being renowned for the distribution of misinformation. Therefore, any screening process related to combatting misinformation is likely to be considered biased, which may be detrimental for some populations, especially regarding health.

Due to differences in educational standards and information availability, misinformation is only a matter of opinion, which is likely to contribute to greater confusion, mistrust of government, and aversion to authority. I believe there is still much to learn about the world we live in and, in regard to health recommendations discussed herein, history has proven that we, as humans, do make mistakes. Therefore, it is important that people can make their own informed choices based on all the information available to them. Information should be treated as per the scientific rule: there is no absolute fact—knowledge is tentative and open to revision. My experience using artificial intelligence suggests that even the most advanced computers are still unable to distinguish fact from fallacy, and with that, I advise caution in posing limitations on thoughts, expressions, opinions, and discussions.

Thank you for considering my submission. I look forward to the results.

Sincerely,

Lynda Sedley (Signature omitted for privacy reasons)

The Institute of Environment and Nutritional Epigenetics