

Australian Labor government pushes social media censorship

Oscar Grenfell**12 July 2023**

The Australian Labor government is carrying out a crackdown on social media aimed at limiting the ability to discuss social and political issues free from state interference and censorship.

Late last month, Labor unveiled draft legislation that would greatly increase the regulation of content on social media. Under the bill, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), a federal regulatory body, will be granted sweeping powers to demand that social media corporations remove material deemed to be “misinformation or disinformation.”

Failure by the companies to delete material after instruction from the ACMA could result in massive fines of up to \$2.75 million or 2 percent of global turnover, whichever is the larger.

The bill will thus create two interrelated streams of censorship. The social media corporations will have a direct financial interest in limiting controversial material that could come to the attention of the ACMA on their platforms. Meanwhile, the ACMA will be provided with significant powers and resources to trawl through social media postings and determine whether they can remain viewable or must be excised from the internet.

As with similar anti-democratic measures being carried out internationally, this is a clear attack on oppositional views, especially of a left-wing or socialist character.

Labor is pursuing its crackdown under conditions of mounting social and political opposition. There is growing anger among workers and youth over a rapidly deepening social crisis. The steepest increases to the cost-of-living in decades are being accompanied by real wage cuts, on top of decades of attacks on workers’ living and social conditions.

In a number of countries, these global processes have already produced major social upheavals, such as in France and Sri Lanka. Social media has played an important role in a number of these struggles, providing

ordinary people with a means of communicating and organising, outside the control of the corporatised trade unions and other official institutions.

At the same time, the censorship is directed against anti-war sentiment. Australia, under Labor, is on the frontlines of advanced US preparations for war against China. It is also an active supporter of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, underscored by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s attendance at a war planning NATO summit in Lithuania this week.

This militarist program, promoted by the corporate media and all the parliamentary parties, will provoke increasing opposition as workers and youth become more aware of its disastrous implications. As in the 20th century, the program of war is incompatible with democratic rights and requires major attacks on civil liberties. This is borne out by the draft legislation itself.

“Misinformation” is defined in extraordinarily vague terms. According to the legislation, it is material that is “false, misleading or deceptive,” whose “content is provided on the digital service to one or more end-users in Australia” and is “reasonably likely to cause or contribute to serious harm.”

“Disinformation” is defined in almost identical terms, but includes the proviso that “the person disseminating, or causing the dissemination of, the content intends that the content deceive another person.” Thus it is a more serious offense than “misinformation” which also involves spreading information deemed to be false, but doing so unintentionally and without any aim of misleading others.

The sweeping character of the legislation is underscored by its definition of “harm.”

Among other things, the proposed laws declare “harm” to be any purportedly incorrect information that could cause a “disruption of public order or society in Australia,” that could do “harm to the integrity of Australian democratic processes or of Commonwealth,

State, Territory or local government institutions,” and cause “economic or financial harm to Australians, the Australian economy or a sector of the Australian economy.”

These amount to what are essentially sedition offenses. The state, its institutions, the capitalist social order and specific corporate sectors are to be protected from information that threatens their interests with the blunt instrument of censorship.

It is entirely conceivable, for instance, that those who expose the lies and pretexts for Australia’s role in the US war drive against China, for instance, will be accused of causing “harm” to the military and “public order.”

In addition, the government and all government bodies are explicitly exempted from the “misinformation” and “disinformation” regulations. So is so-called “professional news content,” i.e., that produced by the corporate media, the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation and their international equivalents. These are the very entities pushing “disinformation” in the form of an endless stream of pro-war propaganda.

A “guidance note” accompanying the draft legislation includes an eclectic series of examples of potential “misinformation” and “disinformation.”

“Misinformation undermining the impartiality of an Australian electoral management body ahead of an election or a referendum,” one example states. The wording is vague. But the implication is clear. Criticism and exposure of government institutions can be declared illegitimate.

In a cynical attempt to dress up the legislation, it is being framed as an attempt to protect the population from such things as false medical information. One example in the “guidance note” refers to “misinformation that caused people to ingest or inject bleach products to treat a viral infection”—an obvious reference to the Trump inspired far-right.

Governments, however, played the central role in spreading deliberately false information about the COVID-19 pandemic. Driven by the demands of business, they resorted to misinformation and outright lies to justify their homicidal “let it rip” policy with dire public health consequences.

When the economy was being “reopened” in December 2021, the federal government’s Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly declared that the rapid spread of the Omicron variant throughout the population would be a “Christmas present” to him. This was linked to disinformation claiming that Omicron was mild, and its transmission

would result in heightened immunity. As a direct consequence of these falsifications, more than 20,000 Australians died of COVID last year, and many more became seriously ill.

Government spokespeople have denied or downplayed the airborne transmission of the virus, falsely claimed that children are not severely impacted and incorrectly asserted that COVID is unlikely to be spread in schools.

The lies about the pandemic to subordinate health and lives to profit interests parallel the pro-war propaganda that is being churned out by the governments and the media. The aggressive US-led confrontation with China, for instance, aimed at ensuring American global hegemony, is fraudulently presented as a defence of “stability” and the post-World War II “international rules-based order” in which Washington set the rules.

These falsifications recall one of the greatest pieces of disinformation this century. In 2003, governments in the US, Britain and Australia claimed that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. This lie was used to justify an illegal war for oil and geo-strategic dominance that claimed up to a million lives.

Censorship of social media, while sometimes presented as a crackdown on right-wing misinformation, is inevitably targeted at the left and socialists, and ultimately at the oppositional sentiments that are emerging among workers and young people amid an enormous social crisis, an unending pandemic and the growing danger of a world war.

In 2017, in close consultation with the US government, Google developed new algorithms aimed at suppressing access to alternative news sites and directing traffic to “authoritative sources,” i.e., those that toed the line of the American state.

As a consequence, search referrals from Google to the *World Socialist Web Site* declined by almost 70 percent. Similar falls were registered across a number of other anti-war and left-wing sites, including Julian Assange’s publication, WikiLeaks.

Now the Australian government is preparing to make deeper inroads into basic democratic rights and take the censorship of social media another step further.



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