

Religious organisations to gain more freedom under changes to misinformation bill

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Communications Minister Michelle Rowland has flagged major changes to the government's proposed misinformation laws, including adding religious protections to the speech regulations.

The rewrite of the proposed bill will delay its introduction to parliament until next year.

Ms Rowland said the government was “taking the time to work through” submissions to the draft bill and was considering “refinements”.

There would likely be changes within the bill of the definitions of misinformation and disinformation, the organisations that are exempted from the proposed laws and “clarification on religious freedom”.

But Ms Rowland said the government remained committed to introducing legislation that would fine social media companies for allowing false information to be broadcast on their platforms.

“The Albanese government is committed to holding powerful digital platforms to account for seriously harmful misinformation and disinformation on their services,” Ms Rowland said.

“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 proposal would empower the regulator to examine the systems and processes these tech giants already have in place, and develop standards should industry self-regulation measures prove insufficient in addressing the threat posed by misinformation and disinformation”

In its submission to the draft bill, 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 to decide what constitutes information, opinion and claims online.

The Law Council said the bill, which will give the Australian Communications and Media Authority the power to fine social media giants millions of dollars for misinformation and content it deems “harmful”, was “overly broad, uncertain, and may have serious unintended consequences”.

The draft bill was also criticised for including exemptions for content produced by governments.

Opposition communications spokesman David Coleman said the government had “begun walking back from one of its signature policies”.

“We are seeing the pack of cards of the misinformation bill starting to come down,” Mr Coleman said. “There has been a deep catalogue of criticisms of the bill from groups including the Human Rights Commission, civil liberties groups, leading lawyers, religious bodies and the media union.

“The Coalition has been demonstrating the many flaws with this bill and now the government has been forced into making changes.

“Today’s humiliating backdown on just the religious freedoms question barely scratches the surface of the many problems with Labor’s deeply flawed bill.

“It also doesn’t deal with the central problem of the bill which would see the opinions of everyday Australians censored.”

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