



## **Federal Government's online safety crackdown**

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# NEWS

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**Highlight:** Tech companies are in the federal government's sights, with new laws being introduced to crack down on misinformation and disinformation online.

## **Body**

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**Rachel Mealey:** Tech companies are in the Federal Government's sights, with new laws being introduced to crack down on misinformation and disinformation online. It's part of a push to make the online environment safer, coming alongside new legislation to outlaw the malicious release of personal information, known as doxing. Alexandra Humphries reports.

**Alexandra Humphries:** Australians are becoming increasingly worried about misinformation and disinformation on social media. An issue highlighted in the wake of the Bondi stabbing tragedy, when disinformation about who was responsible for the attack circulated rapidly online. Today, the Government's unveiling plans to address those concerns.

**Michelle Rowland:** Having seen the impacts of misinformation in real life situations here in **Australia** and indeed around the world, I think as a Parliament we should recognise we need to do something.

**Alexandra Humphries:** Michelle Rowland is the Communications Minister.

**Michelle Rowland:** We know that some 75% of Australians are concerned about the harmful impacts of mis and disinformation. This really goes to not only protecting Australians but protecting our democratic way of life.

**Alexandra Humphries:** The Government wants **Australia**'s media watchdog, the Australian Communications and Media Authority, to be able to force digital platforms to keep records about incidents of misinformation that can then be turned over to authorities. Social media platforms, news aggregators and even podcasts will be affected. And if they break the law, they could face penalties of up to 5% of their global revenue. Terry Flew is a Professor of Digital Communication at the University of Sydney.

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**Terry Flew:** I think what will be important here is that there are clear definitions of what constitutes misinformation because if the ACMA is to be delegating that responsibility to platforms, they need very clear guidance that minimises the extent to which discretion applies around these matters.

**Alexandra Humphries:** Around 3,000 public submissions were made on the draft legislation. Many worried about impacts on free speech, including Australia's Human Rights Commission. The Federal Government's also introducing laws to criminalise doxing, or the malicious release of personal information. The new offence covers the publication of information like names, addresses and numbers with the intent of causing harm. Those convicted could face up to seven years in jail. The bill follows the publication of information from a WhatsApp group involving hundreds of Jewish Australians in February. Minister Anne Aly says the laws tackle a rising threat to public safety.

**Anne Aly:** It's become an issue that threatens the safety of Australian citizens. I don't think it's justifiable to ever release the personal information of a private citizen in order to incite or to give out information to encourage or so that people can utilise that information to attack them or threaten their safety and security.

**Alexandra Humphries:** Josh Roose is a Political Sociologist and Associate Professor of Politics at Deakin University. He's glad to see the Government moving to address online safety.

**Josh Roose:** I think we're certainly in a space with our online environment where an entire raft of legislation is needed to address not only misinformation, disinformation, but hate speech, doxing and I think this goes some way to at least starting that process.

**Rachel Mealey:** Political Sociologist Josh Roose ending that report from Alexandra Humphries.

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