



Australia's Broken Disinformation Response: Is there a Quick Fix

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The Problem

Australia's institutional response to disinformation is not underfunded or understaffed. Instead, it is dysfunctional from the absence of planning and design. This dysfunction is not accidental. Fragmentation serves the interests of those who benefit from an unregulated information environment, most obviously the platform corporations whose advertising revenue depends on the frictionless spread of content, however harmful. Responsibility is being distributed across the Australian Communications and Media Authority, the Department of Home Affairs, electoral institutions, ASIO, the eSafety Commissioner and related entities (such as police forces). These agencies operate within their own mandate utilising their own methods with independent relationships with digital platforms and with inadequate communication or coordination between them.

Testifying before the Royal Commission into the December 2025 Bondi Beach terrorist attack on 25 May 2026, ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess stated that antisemitic behaviours and violent aspects had been "left unchecked" and consequently "normalised," leaving Jewish Australians "on the receiving end." This statement is striking for the failure to attribute responsibility to any agency. No single agency in Australia's current framework holds unambiguous responsibility to detect, counter, and prosecute a trend of this kind. ASIO can monitor and advise but cannot arrest. The Australian Federal Police can investigate but does not direct the broader counter-disinformation effort. The result, as the Burgess testimony implicitly confirms, is that a sustained and escalating campaign of hatred was able to normalise over years without a coordinated institutional response capable of stopping it.

When accountability is shared across many agencies it is held by none of them. Parliament cannot identify a single point of failure. Agencies point to each other when challenged. Urgent problems get stuck while departments argue about jurisdiction. The 2023 Communications Legislation Amendment Bill, which would have given ACMA real regulatory powers over digital platforms, is a textbook example. It was shelved after industry backlash. That backlash came from some of the largest corporations on earth. They lobbied, the government retreated, and the problem stayed unsolved. In a space where disinformation can reshape public opinion within hours, that kind of delay is a strategic failure.

The fragmentation also hands leverage to the platforms. Meta, Google and TikTok know that a government speaking through five different agencies is a government that cannot hold the line. The voluntary Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation proved this. Each company negotiated separately, made different commitments and faced no unified

enforcement. These corporations generate revenue from engagement, and outrage drives engagement better than accuracy does. A fractured regulatory environment is not a problem for them. It is a competitive advantage.

An Actionable, Day One Solution

The fix is not another agency. It is consolidating what already exists into a single coordinating body with a clear mandate. The platform oversight work at ACMA, the foreign interference and hate speech monitoring at Home Affairs and ASIO, and the electoral integrity functions at the Australian Electoral Commission should report to one lead, with one set of powers and one public reporting obligation. Australia already has a model for this. The Australian Electoral Commission is a statutory, independent body with a narrow mandate and broad public trust. A coordinating body for disinformation could be built on the same logic.

The clearest recent example comes from Wales. In March 2026, the Senedd passed the Member Accountability and Elections Bill, making it a criminal offence for candidates to lie during election campaigns. No new institution was created. No new bureaucracy was funded. The Senedd simply gave a defined mandate and clear legal authority to address a specific category of information harm. It is the first legislature in the world to do this, and it did it by deciding that disinformation is not just a platform problem or a foreign threat. It is something powerful people do deliberately, to win, and the law should treat it that way. Australia could make the same decision tomorrow. The infrastructure already exists. The cost is reallocation, not construction. What is missing is the political will to consolidate it.

Urgency

Artificial intelligence has made this more urgent. Synthetic media, automated accounts and AI-generated content can saturate the information environment faster than any fragmented institutional response can track. A government still debating which agency is responsible while a coordinated disinformation campaign spreads across every major platform in hours is not a government that can protect its public. The AI systems doing this were built by the same corporations whose lobbying killed the 2023 Bill. The state's inability to regulate the information environment and its inability to regulate the technology industry are not two separate problems. They are the same problem at different scales. The people and infrastructure needed for reform already exist inside the Australian government. The cost is marginal. The obstacle to reform is political will. Who controls this proposed new body and what criteria we use to evaluate it against are political questions, not technical ones.