

Warring Against Encryption: Australia Is Coming for Your Communications

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*On April 16, Australia's eSafety commissioner, **Julie Inman Grant**, issued with authoritarian glee legal notices to X Corp and Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, to remove material within 24 hours depicting what her office declared to be "gratuitous or offensive violence with a high degree of impact and detail". The relevant material featured a livestreamed video of a stabbing attack by a 16-year-old youth at Sydney's Assyrian Orthodox Christ the Good Shepherd Church the previous day. Two churchmen, **Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel and Rev. Isaac Royel**, were injured.*

Those at X, and its executive, **Elon Musk**, begged to differ, choosing to restrict general access to the graphic details of the video in Australia alone. Those outside Australia, and those with a virtual private network (VPN), would be able to access the video unimpeded. Ruffled and irritated by this, Grant rushed to the Australian Federal Court to secure an interim injunction requiring X to hide the posts from global users with a hygiene notice of warning pending final determination of the issue. While his feet and mind are rarely grounded, Musk was far from insensible in [calling](#) Grant a "censorship commissar" in "demanding *global* content bans". In court, the company will argue that Grant's office has no authority to dictate what the online platform posts for global users.

This war of grinding, nannyng censorship - which is what it is - was the prelude for other agents of information control and paranoia to join the fray. The Labour Albanese government, for instance, with support from the conservative opposition, have rounded on Musk, blurring issues of expression with matters of personality. "This is an egotist," [fumed](#) **Prime Minister Anthony Albanese**, "someone who's totally out of touch with the values that Australian families have, and this is causing great distress."

The values game, always suspicious and meretricious, is also being played by law enforcement authorities. It is precisely their newfound presence in this debate that should get members of the general public worried. You are to be lectured to, deemed immature and incapable of exercising your rights or abide by your obligations as citizens of Australian society.

We have the spluttering worries of Australian **Police Commissioner Reece Kershaw** in claiming that children (always handy to throw them in) and vulnerable groups (again, a convenient reference) are “being bewitched online by a cauldron of extremist poison on the open and dark web”. These muddled [words in his address](#) to the National Press Club in Canberra are shots across the bow. “The very nature of social media allows that extremist poison to spray across the globe almost instantaneously.”

Importantly, Kershaw’s April 24 address has all the worrying signs of a heavy assault, not just on the content to be consumed on the internet, but on the way communications are shared. And what better way to do so by using children as a policy crutch? “We used to warn our children about stranger danger, but now we need to teach our kids about the digital-world deceivers.” A matronly, slightly unhinged tone is unmistakable. “We need to constantly reinforce that people are not always who they claim to be online; and that also applies to images and information.” True, but the same goes for government officials and front-line politicians who make mendacity their stock and trade.

Another sign of gathering storm clouds against the free sharing of information on technology platforms is the appearance of Australia’s domestic espionage agency, ASIO. Alongside Kershaw at the National Press Club, the agency’s chief, **Mike Burgess**, is also full of grave words about the dangerous imperium of encrypted chatter. There are a number of Australians, [warns](#) Burgess, who are using chat platforms “to communicate with offshore extremists, sharing vile propaganda, posting tips about homemade weapons and discussing how to provoke a race war”.

The inevitable lament about obstacles and restrictions – the sorts of things to guard the general citizenry against encroachments of the police state – follows. “ASIO’s ability to investigate is seriously compromised. Obviously, we and our partners will do everything we can to prevent terrorism and sabotage, so we are expending significant resources to monitor the Australians involved.” You may count yourselves amongst them, dear reader.

Kershaw is likewise not a fan of the encrypted platform. In the timeless language of paternal policing, anything that enables messages to be communicated in a public sense must first receive the state’s approval. “We recognise the role that technologies like end-to-end encryption play in protecting personal data, privacy and cyber-security, but there is no absolute right to privacy.”

To make that very point, Burgess declares that “having lawful and targeted access to extremist communications” would make matters so much easier for the intelligence and security community. Naturally, it will be up to the government to designate what it deems to be extremist and appropriate, a task it is often ill-suited for. Once the encryption key is broken, all communications will be fair game.

When it comes to governments, authoritarian regimes do not have a monopoly on suspicion and the fixation on keeping populations in check. In an idyll of ignorance, peace can reign among the docile, the unquestioning, the cerebrally inactive. The Australian approach to

ensorship and control, stemming from its origins as a tortured penal outpost of the British Empire, is drearily lengthy. Its attitude to the Internet has been one of suspicion, concern, and complexes.

Government ministers in the antipodes see a world, not of mature participants searching for information, but inspired terrorists, active paedophiles and noisy extremists carousing in shadows and catching the unsuspecting. Such officialdom is represented by such figures as former Labor Communications Minister **Stephen Conroy**, who [thankfully failed](#) to introduce a mandatory internet filter when in office, or such nasty products of regulatory intrusion as the Commonwealth *Online Safety Act* of 2021, zealously overseen by Commissar Grant and the subject of Musk's ire.

The age of the internet and the world wide web is something to admire and loathe. Surveillance capitalism is very much of the loathsome, sinister variety. But ASIO, the Australian Federal Police, and the Australian government and other agencies do not give a fig about that. The tech giants have actually corroded privacy in commodifying data but many still retain stubborn residual reminders of liberty in the form of encrypted communications and platforms for discussion. To have access to these means of public endeavour remains the holy grail of law enforcement officers, government bureaucrats and fearful politicians the world over.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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