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Ferguson and Ressa Warn of Social Media Disinformation Threat

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Hannah Ferguson and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa are sounding the alarm on the growing threat of disinformation on social media, warning it undermines not only public trust but also the fundamental human right to access truthful information. The two advocates say unchecked digital falsehoods can destabilize democracies, incite violence, and erode protections for civil liberties.

Ferguson, founder of Cheek Media Co., launched her platform in 2020 to engage young Australians in political discourse. By 2025, her platform amassed over 290,000 followers and 4 million views in the lead-up to the federal election, according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). She argues that disinformation distorts civic

understanding, making it harder for voters, particularly young people, to make informed decisions about their rights, government accountability, and public safety.

Maria Ressa, co-founder of Philippine-based news site Rappler, emphasized that false information has been used by authoritarian regimes to target journalists, suppress dissent, and manipulate public opinion. Speaking to ABC, she cited a 2018 Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) study that found lies spread six times faster than facts on social platforms, a risk she says has only grown with reduced moderation efforts. Ressa warned that “lies laced with fear and hate” can incite real-world violence, referencing a 2024 riot in England sparked by fabricated claims about a stabbing.

Both women link the spread of falsehoods to weakened policy responses. Ferguson criticized the failed Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill 2024 for lacking clear enforcement mechanisms and for failing to address algorithmic bias. She argued that without robust protections, Australians are left vulnerable to manipulated content that can disproportionately affect marginalized groups, undermine electoral integrity, and erode digital safety for youth.

Australia’s under-16 YouTube and social media ban, set to take effect in December 2025, also raises concerns. Ferguson noted that such blanket restrictions may hinder young people’s right to freedom of expression and access to information, without effectively addressing the root causes of online harm.

Ressa, who has faced politically motivated charges in the Philippines, underscored the need for global reform. She and Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov have released a 10-point plan advocating platform redesign and data controls to curb disinformation. “When social media is designed to reward outrage, truth becomes collateral damage,” she told ABC’s *Compass*.

Ferguson continues to use her platform and podcast, *Big Small Talk*, to promote civic literacy and media responsibility. Together, she and Ressa emphasize that protecting democratic integrity is inseparable from protecting the right to accurate information, an essential pillar of human rights in the digital age.