Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions

Enquête publique sur l'ingérence étrangère dans les processus électoraux et les institutions démocratiques fédéraux

**Public Hearing** **Audience publique**

**Commissioner / Commissaire**
**The Honourable / L'honorable**
**Marie-Josée Hogue**

# VOLUME 22

**ENGLISH INTERPRETATION**

**Held at :**

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Bambrick Room
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K1A 0N4

Wednesday, September 25, 2024

**Tenue à:**

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Le mercredi 25 septembre 2024

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# Appearances / Comparutions

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| Commission Research Council / Conseil de la recherche de la commission | Geneviève Cartier<br>Nomi Claire Lazar<br>Lori Turnbull<br>Leah West |
| Commission Senior Policy Advisors / Conseillers principaux en politiques de la commission | Paul Cavalluzzo<br>Danielle Côté |

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| Ukrainian Canadian Congress | Donald Bayne<br>Jon Doody |
| Government of Canada | Gregory Tzemenakis<br>Barney Brucker |
| Office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections | Christina Maheux<br>Luc Boucher<br>Sébastien Lafrance<br>Nancy Miles<br>Sujit Nirman |
| Human Rights Coalition | David Matas<br>Sarah Teich |
| Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance | Mark Power<br>Guillaume Sirois |
| Michael Chan | John Chapman<br>Andy Chan |
| Han Dong | Mark Polley<br>Emily Young<br>Jeffrey Wang |
| Michael Chong | Gib van Ert<br>Fraser Harland |

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| The Pillar Society | Daniel Stanton |
| Democracy Watch | Wade Poziomka<br>Nick Papageorge |
| Canada's NDP | Lucy Watson |
| Conservative Party of Canada | Nando De Luca |
| Chinese Canadian Concern Group on The Chinese Communist Party's Human Rights Violations | Neil Chantler<br>David Wheaton |
| Erin O'Toole | Thomas W. Jarmyn<br>Preston Lim |
| Senator Yuen Pau Woo | Yuen Pau Woo |
| Sikh Coalition | Balpreet Singh<br>Prabjot Singh |
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Ottawa, Ontario

--- The hearing begins Wednesday, September 25, 2024 at 9:32 a.m.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Order, please.

This sitting of the Foreign Interference Commission is now in session. Commissioner Hogue is presiding.

The time is 9:32 a.m.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Mr. Krongold, you're the one beginning this morning?

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** The next witnesses are Professor Peter Loewen, Professor Taylor Owen and Professor Aengus Bridgman, all from the Media Ecosystem Observatory.

If I could ask that Professor Loewen please be sworn.

**THE REGISTRAR:** All right. Professor Loewen, just for the record, could you please state your full name and then spell your last name?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Peter John Loewen. L-o-e-w-e-n.

**--- PROF. PETER JOHN LOEWEN, Sworn:**

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And Professor Owen could please be affirmed.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Professor Owen, for the record, could you please state your full name and spell your last name?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Taylor Reid Owen, O-w-e-n.

**--- PROF. TAYLOR REID OWEN, Affirmed:**

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And Professor Bridgman can also be affirmed.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Professor Bridgman, could you please state your full name and then spell your last name for the record?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Aengus Bridgman, B-r-i-d-g-m-a-n.

**--- PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN, Affirmed:**

**THE REGISTRAR:** Thank you.

Counsel, you may proceed.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Thank you.

**--- EXAMINATION IN-CHIEF BY MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:**

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Just to start out, I'm going to address the interview summary that the three of you have provided to the Commission. So I'm going to pose a question and then ask each of you individually to answer it.

So first of all, do you recall being interviewed jointly by Commission counsel on August 21st, 2024?

Professor Loewen?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. Second, if we could call up WIT89.EN.

So this is the summary that was generated from your interview.

First I just wanted to address a correction. If we could go to page 5 of the PDF, paragraph 22.

That's right. So in the second half of that paragraph, it says, "Professor Owen indicated that the loss of an estimated 11 million views", I'll just leave it there.

I understand, Professor Owen, that you wanted to modify that, so it should read instead of "11 million views", "8 million views per day".

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah, that's correct.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. Subject to -- well, I'll ask first. Did each of you have a chance to review this document for accuracy?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And aside from the correction that we just made, do any of you have corrections, additions or deletions that you would like to make to the summary?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** No.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** No.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** No.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And do you adopt the contents of this witness summary as part of your evidence before the Commission?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. That's great.

And for the record, I can indicate that WIT89.FR is the French translation, and that should be made an exhibit as well, please.

**--- EXHIBIT No. WIT0000089.EN::**

Interview Summary: Media Ecosystem Observatory

**--- EXHIBIT No. WIT0000089.FR:**

Résumé de l'entrevue : Observatoire de l'écosystème médiatique (Aengus Bridgman, Peter Loewen et Taylor Owen)

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** All right. So just to very, very briefly speak to each of your backgrounds.

Professor Bridgman, I understand you're an assistant professor at the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University. Is that right?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And you are the Director of the Media Ecosystem Observatory.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And we're going to call that MEO; yeah?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Right.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And I understand your academic background is political science. Is that right?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, that's correct.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Professor Loewen, you

are one of the co-principal investigators at the MEO?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And you recently became the Harold Tanner Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And you were previously at UofT, I understand.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** University of Toronto, yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. University of Toronto. Right. We should specify. There are other UofTs, aren't there?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Not really, but.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And I understand at University of Toronto, you were the director of the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy and the Robert Vipond Distinguished Professor in Democracy, both in the Department of Political Science.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And last, Professor Owen, you are also a co-principal investigator at the MEO?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** All right. And you are the Beaverbrook Chair in Media Ethics and Communications, the Director of the Centre for Media Technology in Democracy and an associate professor at the Max Bell School of Public

Policy at McGill University.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Correct.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. So as all three of you will know, this Commission is about foreign interference in elections and democratic processes, but I think it would be helpful to contextualize generally and at a higher level some of the major trends that are going on in the information environment.

So Professor Loewen, perhaps we could start with you. What is the information environment or the information ecosystem?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Thanks very much for the question.

So it could be thought of as a couple of ways, but in the most sort of general sense you might think of it as the totality of the information that people are receiving through traditional and social media. In a democratic sense, it might be the information they're receiving about politics and about politicians and about public policy issues, and that includes information that's being produced by traditional media news outlets but also what people are saying about it, what they're sharing, what their own opinions are that they are sending out through the ecosystem.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. So not just things that are formally published, but also discussions amongst neighbours, maybe.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** It could be, yeah.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** All right. And Professor Owen or Professor Bridgman, do you have anything you want to add to that?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** No. I think that sums it up.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Maybe just sort of an operational definition sort of.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** We do work at the observatory and the research network does work that really looks primarily at sort of what is produced and is available online. So when we talk about the information ecosystem, we're talking about the relationships and the content that are observable in sort of the public eye.

So there's the sort of broader definition of the information ecosystem, but we have a very sort of precise operational definition that we use in sort of our day-to-day work.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** With public being the key there. There's a whole host of things in the information ecosystem that happen in private channels and private spaces that we don't study as part of our broader mandate to look at the public -- the information flowing through the public discourse in Canada.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. So let me ask you generally, and I know this is a very big question, but I'm going to ask you each to describe how the information environment, the big, big changes we've seen in the last 20

years are, in particular shifts from traditional media to the rise of social media.

Professor Owen, maybe we could start with you?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Sure. I teach a term-long class on that question, so I may try to sum it up in one minute.

But look, I think the most important thing about the current nature of our ecosystem is that it's rapidly evolving and constantly changing. That wasn't necessarily the case for a number of decades before the internet where the vast majority of information in our media ecosystem was produced -- the vast majority of the public information was produced by publishers and broadcasters that also controlled the dissemination mediums of that information. And we entrusted, rightly or wrongly, those institutions to be the filters for the reliability and credibility of information in our democracy.

And that stayed relatively static for decades.

Since the introduction of the internet into and onto this democratic media ecosystem, I think there's really been three big phases.

The initial internet empowered individual actors and nodes in that ecosystem, so all of a sudden, anybody could publish a website, for example. It wasn't just newspapers or broadcasters, the people who controlled the mediums through which information was disseminated that could

reach audience. Now anybody could.

So initially, individual nodes were created and individuals were empowered.

The next big shift was the emergence of social media, which didn't just empower individual nodes; it connected nodes together in new ways.

So it allowed for us to find people and be connected to people with similar views of the world, similar likes and dislikes, similar connections. And that empowered new forms of collective action on that ecosystem. People could band together and act together in collective ways. In ways that previously, again, were limited to organizations or institutions that could command and control people to do things, whether they be governments, corporations, hierarchical institutions of various types.

And that is the context in which the two studies we're going to talk about, the 2019 and '21 elections, that's the context in which those occurred, where most of the information we are consuming in these spaces was in part influenced by our social networks.

We're now in, sort of, a third moment of that. And I think it's rapidly evolving. But we've recentralized a lot of that dissemination to centralized algorithmic feeds, where content is not necessarily given to us based on our social networks, but rather on our behaviour inside these platforms. And our centralized feeds that we're receiving in platforms are the sum total, or algorithmically determined by our behaviour on the internet more broadly and

our behavior on platforms specifically, and that creates a new dynamic that we're just starting to understand the implications of.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And just to bring the point home, GE45, the next federal general election, whenever precisely that occurs, will be the first Canadian general election to occur in this third phase, the algorithmic filtering phase, I think you said?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** The algorithmic filtering for the public information, and also, I think critically, the rise of private groups and messaging in Canada as another dominant information sharing space.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. Can you expand on that last part a little bit?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** In parallel to those public feeds that we're now all receiving, whether they be on our Instagram feeds or TikTok feeds, varying sizes, and scales, and level of privacy groups are emerging as a major place where information generally is shared, but also political information. Some of these are semi-private, large telegram groups for example that anybody could join. Some are very private, like an iMessage group that is end-to-end encrypted.

So there's a varying degree of publicness to privateness of those groups, but substantial discourses are happening in them. And Canada is a little late in that transition, partly because we haven't adopted some of those platforms that are -- that are really used globally in a big

way. But they're beginning to really take hold here, I think.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Let me ask you about that, because we've heard a little evidence during this Commission about large group chats ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** --- happening on WeChat. Is that one of the platforms involved?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah, I mean WeChat and WhatsApp are the two biggest there. And the real question, and it's not one that I think there is a clear answer to, is when does a private group become a public space? And I don't think we necessarily have a handle on that.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And at present are -- we're getting a little ahead of ourselves -- but at present, are organizations like MEO monitoring these sort of semi-private in between spaces that you're speaking of?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah, Aengus should speak to that too, but yes. When things -- when there's large groups that are open to the public and they're discussing issues that are in the public domain in Canada, we engage, and we participate in those communities.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. I think we'll probably come back to that later.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** That's very helpful.

Professor Loewen, did you want to add anything to that very concise history from Professor Owen?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah, I appreciate Taylor's tutorial, it's quite helpful actually.

The thing I would add to is that the other element that's being introduced now, more than it would have been even in 2021, is the capacity to generate large amounts of content algorithmically and very, very quickly. So to just give a person an example, it's not difficult -- well, it's not difficult, but it is not impossible for someone to write a program or a series of algorithms which would just be constantly creating accounts on social media, creating content within that that it then disseminates, amplifies itself. Platforms will try to be ahead of this, but it's a constant race between creators and the platforms.

But there's the potential through generative AI to create more content and more accounts which look like people, than there ever would have been before. And then more generally, leaving aside the kind of nefarious case of people creating accounts that are not there, the capacity of content creation by otherwise legitimate actors and the ability to test it as it's being created is greater than ever before.

So that just means that the kind of, potentially in a sense inorganic nature of communication from political actors and the ability to algorithmically produce that, rather than having a person actually think and write it out, is greater now than it was, by orders of magnitude, than it was even two or three years ago.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. I want to return

to the topic of generative AI shortly. But before I forget, I also just wanted to ask briefly, in terms of sketching out the last couple decades, what can you tell us briefly about what's happened with what would have been the traditional kind of legacy media newspapers, radio, television?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** A somewhat unfortunate confluence of newspapers both losing their control over the dissemination of information in society and at the same time the new technologies that were -- that replaced their control over the mechanism. Also undercutting all three of their core revenue streams.

Initially it was -- journalism for decades was reliant on a combination of classified advertising, display advertising, and subscriptions. All three were fundamentally undercut and almost entirely replaced by digital platforms. Classifieds first, Craigslist being the obvious one there. Far more efficient targeted digital advertising undercut the second. And just the abundance of free content undercut the subscription revenue.

So a confluence of losing control over the dissemination mechanism and losing almost all of the revenue stream has led to a decline of their ability to even produce information in the ecosystem, let alone get attention and audience for it.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And in terms of the sort of, traditional media, has the impact been the same sort of at national level media versus local level media?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** No. It's been different.

The broad trend is the same in terms of the decline in revenue and ability to reach audience is similar. Local has probably been hit a little bit worse. But honestly, it -- it's hard to categorize them like that, because a lot of national news organizations have also seen steep, steep declines.

So they -- the big organizations, particularly ones with diversified funding models, including foreign investment for example, or benevolent investment, have probably been able to weather the losses better than a small operation that is purely dependent on month to month revenue. But they're all facing the same challenge.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** If I could just kind of embellish a little bit, add to it a little bit, there is a bit of a scale challenge here, right? So if you think about it from the perspective of the ecosystem and how much information we need for healthy democracy, so you want a certain amount of reporting on national issues.

How many papers do you need to produce sufficiently amounts of -- sufficient amounts of coverage of national politics in order to keep national politicians to account? You know, we might say we don't have enough now, but you've got multiple national papers, and then you've got some regional papers which are reporting on national politics, such that, you know, the lawmakers are being watched by media.

That doesn't solve the problem of how you produce local news in North Bay or in Timmons, or in Kelowna.

And those areas which -- for which citizens need information about their local politics, about their provincial politics, are harder hit in the sense because their audiences are much more geographically constrained. So the economics become much, much more difficult for them when they -- they've similarly lost display or advertising, they've lost classified advertising, they've lost subscriptions.

So from a health perspective, the effects are differential in terms of the amount of information that we really need for our system to work as well as we might want it to work.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** So does that mean there would potentially be, like, less media scrutiny for example, the closer you get to the local level?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes, yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Professor Bridgman, I'm happy to invite you to make any comments on that question, or I was going to maybe turn to the Meta news ban.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, maybe just super quickly.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Please, yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** The one other thing that I think has shifted in the last two years in particular is the emergence of, like, the professional influencer in online spaces. So previously this role, like, direct monetization of production of sort of democratic content, so content concerning politics or public affairs, there is now structural incentives from platform to creator to provide

direct sort of financial transfer. So, like, there was the ability to monetize through advertising, like, on your podcast, for example. That was something in the past. But now through, for example, the TikTok Creator Fund, you actually get direct monetization as an influencer.

And so there has been this emergence of sort of a non-traditional media affiliated influencer, like, professional influencer group. Canada is a relatively small market that can't support a large number of these influencers, but there's a large number in the United States that are closely followed in Canada, and maybe we'll talk a little bit more about that later, but the emergence of that as a class of interests is new and there was -- this was true to a certain extent in 2019 and 2021, but GE45 will be under a different environment where there is that direct monetary transfer to these creators from platforms.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And again, maybe this is jumping out of order a little bit, but I know that the network that MEO is associated with recently identified an information incident related to Tenet Media in the States. And so that -- correct me if I'm summarizing this incorrectly. Essentially there was an indictment that was unsealed in the States that made allegations about Russian financing of certain online platforms in the States, although some folks had a connection to Canada. Is that -- does that tie in to the comments you're making about potential ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, that's an associated, slightly distinct, but associated issue again

where the dollar amounts in that indictment -- in that released indictment are impressive, in terms of the amount of money that these influencers can command for producing content. And so this is -- they have set up, to a certain extent, their own small sort of media organizations with staff, with editors, with folks that help write the scripts, and so that -- there's that professionalization of that entity class as well.

So certainly, yeah. And yeah, perhaps we can talk a little bit more about the Tenet Media, the unfolding, so the Research Network is currently going through sort of an incident response related to that and we're happy to talk about that later.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Can I just add one thing to what Aengus is saying? It's very, very important and just -- and it ties back to Taylor's comment about the economics of this in some sense, that because it's the cost of distributing content over Twitter, TikTok, certainly YouTube is essentially free. And you don't have to find the audience; it finds you there. It creates cases where people can have a home studio or some semi-professional setup, can create content, and then can find an audience where previously it was costly to set up a T.V. channel either locally or nationally, obviously, right? It was costly to set up a printing press. So in this case, the dissemination costs come down to close to zero for the producer, and that enables people to be able to produce content and to survive as specialized channels of -- providing specialized channels

of information.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** And the voice those individuals have, and the audience they've gained, is clearly of value beyond their commercial ability to monetize it with advertising. And that's one of the key things that comes out of that Tenet indictment, is that somebody thought that audience of some of those people was worth $100,000 a week. So that's a value that far exceeds their market value in their ability to monetize content with display ads, for example, on YouTube. So that is a factor in the ecosystem I think we now have to contend with.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I'm going to turn to the topic of mis- and disinformation. Perhaps, Professor Bridgman, can you give us a sense of how the MEO or how scholars identify, and define, and study mis- and disinformation?

**PROF AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, this is a very important question and -- so first, to sort of, at a high level, sort of talk about mis- and disinformation, typically misinformation is categorized or is classified as sort of just false or misleading information. It's a broad category. There's a lot of debate about when something is misinformation, when it's misinterpreted facts, whatever, but false and misleading information is misinformation.

Disinformation is sort of really with sort of intent to deceive. There's some intentionality behind it. And that's sort of where the literature has generally landed on these definitions.

And there's, you know, academics -- put many academics in a room and they're going to have all these different definitions of these things. But generally, that's sort of the idea.

Both of these topics have become kind of of increased public interest over the last 10 years, really starting with Brexit and the claims about the NHS back in 2015, and then going into the 2016 U.S. election. These issues, which had always sort of been an object of study in academic disciplines, in a variety of academic disciplines, really came to the fore as academics sort of started to be interested in using sort of their role and their research ability to help inform the mass population, the media, to help have a more accurate understanding of politics and of the political world.

So there was sort of this rise in what is misinformation studies. There's been, like, a number of academic journals that have been founded and there's this large study of this phenomena called misinformation.

Now, in -- a lot of that research has been based in the United States and the conversation about mis- and disinformation has become very politically polarized in the United States. So there's been this sort of political co-opting of those terms. Who gets to decide what is true? Who gets to decide what is false? Typically when academics study misinformation, what they're trying to do is identify objectively false information as cleanly as possibly, information that is very inconsistent with sort of leading

scientific findings or objective facts as reported by journalists, people on the ground, etcetera, and they're trying to measure sort of whether or not response to misinformation or disinformation is distinct from sort of true or factual information.

So there's this sort of -- there's this broad study of this phenomena. The observatory has done several projects looking at misinformation during elections. Those reports use sort of an operational definition, again sort of looking at inconsistent with mainstream scientific opinion at the moment of including that in a survey or of studying it in online spaces. And the best knowledge that we're sort of able to procure from reporting, from observing social media, from observing the conversation and trying to sort of understand what actually occurred.

And there's a degree of judgement there, but the trick is, is that misinformation, when we categorize something as misinformation, we have a very high degree of confidence that it's factually untrue information. And if it's not something that's factually untrue, we won't categorize it as misinformation. We'll say there's contention around this issue.

But in general, that's kind of how we approach it.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Great. Can I ask, Prof. Loewen, Prof. Owen, do you have anything to add to that comment?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I can add one thing,

which is often when you talk about mis- and disinformation -- so first, mis- and disinformation are not new. And that's really important. The internet did not create the problem of mis- and disinformation. The question is, is whether the nature of the infrastructure through which we now share information that is constantly evolving, as we talked about, does it -- how does it influence the amplification and spread and ultimate power of false information in our information ecosystem in a democratic society?

And that's a much more nuanced question than are bad actors spreading false information. It's how does information flow through our society and are there design elements of our infrastructure, or incentives within it, that either increase or decrease information that is false?

And when you study that in politics, it can be really tricky because, as we all know, politicians do not always tell the truth, and media get things wrong. So there's a lot of false information already in our ecosystem.

But it's a little clearer when you look at something like COVID, like we did -- we studied -- used some of these methods to study false information about COVID. And in some senses, the intent of the people spreading false information is inconsequential to the effect that it can have on a society.

And so we try -- and it has always been the position of the Observatory that in some limited cases, you can probably ascribe intent which allows you to flag something as disinformation, but in the vast majority of

cases, it is beyond our capacity outside observers to information flows in our democracy to ascribe intent.

What we're looking for is the flow of information, some things which we can say are clearly false at the time of their dissemination, that possibly are having a negative impact on our democratic society.

And in the case of COVID, that was pretty clearly the case. There was a lot of false information coming into the Canadian ecosystem that was leading people to have fundamental distrust of what was, at the time, considered a public health emergency/issue that required collective action.

The intent of that didn't matter to us. It was that that false information was flowing and we could see it was having an effect on the behaviour of Canadian citizens.

So a lot of attention is placed on this difference between mis- and disinformation and whether that crossed over into foreign interference, but from our perspective, it's studying how the information itself is designed and incentivized and then what that does to the flow of potentially harmful false information in our society.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And can there be information manipulation that is not of facts that are clearly mis- and disinformation, right?

So you could have a fact that is not, again, contentious, for example, or perhaps even truthful. Can there still be information manipulation around ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Absolutely. And actually, I think the first report -- your first report laid out the complexity of that nuance really well, that governments have always participated in all kinds of propaganda based on misleading information. All sorts of actors in society have every right to state false things, and that is a part of our information ecosystem.

The question on foreign interference or nefarious actors is how do you ascribe the maliciousness of that intent and, in some ways, that's a little outside of our capacity as observers of the ecosystem.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I would just add that what Taylor said is very, very helpful, and to just add two things to it.

One is that, you know, the majority of politics, obviously, happens in the domain of things which are not about facts. So political debates are about which Party has the best interests of the most Canadians at heart or something like that, right, or what the best course of action is. This is not the domain of facts. It's a political debate. It's about rhetoric and it's about argument.

And a lot of campaigns is about deciding what issues will be at the top of the agenda and how people should think about those issues, and so that's about persuasion. And that's always been the case in the ecosystem.

The one element that is different now than before is you know that sort of common saying, you know, you

can have your own opinions but you can't have your own facts, there's sort of a version of that which is about the current system, which is that people have their own distinct views of the world in which they don't necessarily engage in conversation with other people about what the whole conversation is about.

So another way of saying this is that they're viewing the world in a way that's completely different from someone who's viewing the world from a -- in a different part of the information ecosystem.

So that kind of isolation of people is a feature of this technologies -- of these technologies, and that makes it different than -- that makes our capacity to have an argument about what an election should be about and what issues we should talk about and what the positions of parties are on those issues more difficult than it was in the past.

The second thing to say is that it just I'd underline Taylor's point is that, you know, misinformation and disinformation has been with us throughout every political campaign we've ever had in Canada. It's just much harder for us -- it was much harder for us in the past to understand the extent of mis- and disinformation and to understand the media ecosystem.

We simply didn't have the tools we have now and people were having private conversations, to go back to your first question about the ecosystem, right, and it was happening at doorsteps, in church basements, across local

medial. The nationalization of our media and the public nature of these technologies means we can see it much better, warts and all, now than we ever could before.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I'm wondering if, in addition to visibility, does the current media ecosystem also make it easier for outside actors to manipulate what's going on in the information environment?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I can take a stab at this. Yeah.

This is a really good question because one of the things that's implied in the question is that we have a knowledge of how this used to be done, so like how this was done in sort of the Phase 1 and Phase 2 that Taylor or Professor Owen was talking about.

So let's say in the past you wanted to manipulate the information available to society. You would target a number of broadcast media or -- and try to maybe get staff on or leak stories or, you know, do something like that, and that would be your way into the information ecosystem, whereas now you might use other things, for example, the Tenet Media kind of influencers. That might be an approach you would try.

So we don't have like a historically rich understanding of the scope and scale of what has been going on, so that's kind of one kind of weaselly answer about, you know, that's tricky to know.

But if you are interested in manipulating population opinion at scale, you can reach millions of

Canadians through social media in a very short period of time with sort of a strategic operation. Like that is now possible, and that is facilitated through the infrastructure that we have available today.

And the effort to do so, the scope and scale -- and I think like the Kirkland Lake bot incident is a good example of this. The tools in a similar way to the -- just the equipment and the operational overhead required in the past would have been considerable. Now it's not. It is not considerable. It can be done. It can be done out of a basement. And that that ability is -- that is new. That is something that is very different.

And so we don't really have a good baseline understanding of what this used to be and we can't really compare it to what it is today, but we do know that now, if somebody wants to engage in sort of an influence operation, they can reach millions of Canadians very quickly. And that is very new.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** There's a second version of this, which is that the ability of an individual citizen without nefarious intent, just a person -- an everyday person, their ability to introduce into the information ecosystem information from outside the country is greater than ever before.

Just two examples. If I was wondering about the efficacy or safety of vaccines in the spring of 2021, I could visit an American website which would say that they are or they are not safe, and I could then share the information

from that website with any number of people in my network however I wished to, and it could then spread through that network or not, or if you are a Canadian who consumes Indian media, after the assassination of and reporting of the assassination of Nijjar in B.C., if you wanted to share information on what the Indian media was saying about this and reporting about it, it was readily available to you and you could share it as an interested citizen.

So that capacity didn't exist previously in the past. You could share your opinions, of course, in conversations with your friends and you could say, "I think this is what's happening", but what you couldn't do is say, "Here's this seemingly official source. I'm going to introduce it to everyone in my network".

So that capacity, this is not about foreign interference per se, but it's about foreign information, that capacity to bring it over the border, so to speak, and without making judgment on whether that's right or wrong, is easier than it ever has been before. And we showed that through some published papers around the introduction of information on vaccine information in Canada from the U.S., and certainly there's evidence that this happens with foreign media quite commonly.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think that's such an important point, and it's true of almost all aspects of the internet, that the very things that make it powerful and beneficial also present vulnerabilities. And often, the things you do to limit the vulnerabilities will diminish the

positive aspects of the internet as well.

And so that balance between those two is largely determined by the choices and design decisions that the platforms make and the policies and laws that governments impose on them.

And so I think a good example of that balance is what happened before the 2019 election, which I know we're going to talk about, which is a vulnerability in the ecosystem because of the design choices of the platforms at the time we learned about after the 2016 election that, for example, it was very easy for foreign actors to buy advertising without disclosing point of origin that was micro targeted at communities in the United States.

Now, we can debate the influence that had or not, and that's kind of beyond the bounds of this, but it was seen by governments as a vulnerability, and by the platforms as well.

So the Canadian government, in the *Elections Modernization Act*, limited the ability of foreign actors to buy anonymously ads in Canada and decreased the total amount, the cap, on digital ad spending because digital ads allowed you to reach way more people than print ads, right.

So that -- and the platforms started monitoring for that kind of foreign activity on their platform.

So both the platforms responded and governments responded to diminish the perceived vulnerability of that particularity of the platform design at that time.

Now, that's changed over time and that's a consistently evolving thing.

But to Peter's point, we have to be very careful with how we play with that balance because the very same thing that allows somebody to post a false piece of information from an Indian news source that might have been created by a state to affect the Canadian discourse is the very same thing that allows them to share news about the country where their family lives to their community in Canada. And you have to be really careful about limiting the ability for them to do that.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Can I ask this; how much do we know about how impactful online mis- and disinformation is, either individually or in the aggregate, on the Canadian population?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Peter should speak to this. Everybody should speak to this, I think, but this has been a very big debate for a very long time, about whether our consumption of any piece of media ultimately affects our behaviour.

And it is a very -- I'll let them both speak because they know about this than I do, but it's a very, very difficult thing to know, because our behaviour as a function of not just any one specific piece of content, but of the sum total of our experiences, beliefs, values, politics, and consumption of media as well.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Can I just throw in one other variable? In one of your reports, I think from

November of 2023, it indicates that Canadians are fairly inattentive to politics. And I'm just wondering, is that -- does that make things better or worse, in terms of the impact of mis- and disinformation?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** No, I mean this is -- the great robustness of democratic systems is that most people most of the time don't care about politics.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Would you like to expand?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I mean, I'm happy to. I mean, it's my job to explain. No, I mean it is, you know, most people are not talking about politics most of the time. Their exposure to it is incidental. It's conversational. They'd rather not talk about it than talk about it. It's hard to accept as a political scientist or as a person for those of you who are blessed to live in Ottawa, but it is the case that most citizens have things that they are more interested in.

So that's good and bad; right? It's good in the sense that the degree to which the information ecosystem is increasingly pushing people towards polarization and towards feeling affect of polarization, towards feeling negativity towards people who are politically different from them.

To the degree that that's a trend in the system, it's good if people aren't paying attention; right?

It's -- the vulnerability in it is then that any single piece of salacious or relevant information could

have outsized -- to the degree that it has any influence, could have an outsized weight in its influence, which is why you care about the integrity of the system.

But to go back to sort of one point for you, or one point in your question, which was how much of an effect do these things have, Taylor is right that it really is -- the answer really is that it depends. But what I would say is that because people don't pay attention to politics too much, because even though they don't pay attention, they have standing opinions, the way they're inclined to vote, or their understanding of what kind of voter they are, because of that, it is extremely difficult to persuade people with a single piece of information, with a single story, because they take that into their head, they may take some consideration from that story, those get admixed with everything else they know about politics and about the actors who are involved.

So for a single piece of information or a story to have a big impact, it really has to update their information to a huge degree. And even though people are inattentive, they have standing opinions and they have a number of considerations already in their head about something. So it really has to be high -- it really has to be high stakes.

You will occasionally get situations which are high stakes, and we'll talk about them, but if you think about what life was like in Canada in the early -- you know, in the winter of 2022 when we were at, you know, 18 months

into varying degrees of lockdowns, big debates over vaccines, everyone is talking about COVID all the time, well then you're in a situation where you've got quite high stakes, everyone knows the biggest issue on the table is how we're going to live our lives, given this public health emergency. And there you get into the situation where people are consuming enough information that potentially the things that are in the information ecosystem could really shape their behaviour and really have big effects.

But I think the general point is that we don't know, but the effects are probably small, to the degree that we do know that they're there.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So this is really a site of an enormous debate in the literature, and just I think it's worth highlighting this debate, which is on one hand you have sort of political behaviouralists who generally find null effects of specific mis- and disinformation incidents, and campaigns, and inquiries, and you've seen a large number of studies over the last five years that repeatedly show sort of null effects. So that's sort of on one side. Generally this stuff doesn't seem to move the needle on population level opinion.

On the other side, you have an enormous literature primarily of ethnographic studies, but a variety of methods that show in specific communities at specific moments, radicalization has occurred in online spaces, and documents that very well for specific users, for specific communities over time.

So these two perspectives have sort of been being duked out on sort of academic Twitter over the last five years in sort of -- in a very vigorous way.

The reconciliation of these two perspectives that has started to emerge recently, and you sort of start to see it in academic papers is what academics call the long tails, which is just a way of saying that on the margins of the population. So not amongst sort of you think of like a typical standard deviation. It's not that middle chunk where this stuff seems to be consequential. It's on the ends of the population where online spaces and mis- and disinformation are consumed and come to impact behaviour.

And so if we look at sort of effect sizes amongst individuals who are the most online, who spend the most time in these communities, and you can talk about kind of what brings them there and why they're in those spaces, but those individuals, it's enormously impactful, and they are the ones that end up being very militant and very involved in politics.

And so if you're a political observer and you're observing sort of online spaces and trying to understand kind of content that's being produced, what's really important to note is that that content is being produced, consumed, and shared by one, two percent of Canadians, and that those Canadians are chronically online or extremely online and are spending an enormous amount of time producing content and discussing things. And they are incredibly subject to the algorithmic influence of platforms

and to sort of information on those spaces generally.

And so online radicalization is absolutely a phenomena, and it absolutely does occur. The fact that it can't be detected at a population level is, to a certain extent, this product of this inattentiveness that we're talking about here, where, yeah, people aren't generally spending three/four hours in online spaces chatting about, you know, politics that matter to them. But there is a non-trivial percentage of the population that is, and they are the ones that are very energetic and drive political discourse in the country. And so in that way, it's very consequential.

On the inattentiveness point, I think it's a really important one and touches on one of the themes that -- you know, we might talk about the generative AI problem, which is it is now very easy to produce a credible audio clip of any politician. It's easy to do. You just have to go find a speech by them, you ingest it into a machine learning algorithm, and it will -- they will say whatever you want to say.

So you can produce that content virtually for free at this point in time.

Now, if you are inattentive to politics, and Professor Loewen talked about sort of, like, your baseline understanding. You have, like, some conception. Everyone has some conception of the political world. You kind of have some vague idea of, like, who the political players are.

But imagine you see -- you're completely

inattentive to politics and there's this audio clip of -- that accuses the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition of saying this thing which is wildly outlandish to any close observer of politics, but to you, who maybe has heard their voice a couple times, don't really know their positions, you're inattentive to politics, you actually can't effectively discern about whether or not that's disinformation, whether or not that's inconsistent with what that person would actually say.

So in a circumstance like that, where you have a population that's very inattentive, there is this amplified concern, particularly about sort of the deep fake or the artificially generated content, because you're in an information -- a low information space and you're given this new piece of information, it reaches you, and you can't sort of contradict it. You go, "Oh, well, I don't know, but that sounds like their voice. I guess it's okay." And so that's -- when people talk about the concern about this stuff, in many ways, it's about sort of that inattentive population that isn't going to fact check this sort of with their internal model of the world and are going to accept it at face value and are going to see somebody say something horrible that might influence their vote.

So that's sort of my two cents on the inattentiveness question.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I just had a data point on the inattentiveness, and it refers to your correction at the beginning.

We studied, with some degree of detail over the last year, and we might talk about this separately, the effects of Facebook banning the circulation of Canadian news on Instagram and Facebook, or Meta banning it. And three things are interesting there.

One, that's led to a loss of eight million views of journalism in Canada per day. Right? So that's been taken out of the ecosystem, which for those who either produce that journalism or work inside the political system would seem like a grave change to the ecosystem. However, the majority of people both did not notice that being taken away, and still say they get their news on Facebook and Instagram.

So how people are defining news is very different, in many cases I would suspect, than how journalists and people who participate in policy discourses would define it.

And that's fine, but I think we need to acknowledge that. That can be defined as inattentive; it also can be defined as defining information about our democracy and our society in different ways. And I think that's clearly what's going on to some degree on these platforms.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And I think the report you're referring to in our database at COM513. I'm not going to spend too much more time on it, maybe we could just briefly call it up so we can have it in evidence.

**--- EXHIBIT NO. COM0000513:**

Old News, New Reality: A Year of
Meta's News Ban in Canada

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Just very briefly, what's sort of the net effect on the amount of reliable information, say, that folks have access to? What's the net effect of the Meta news ban?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Sorry, the dog ---

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** It's a pug.

**(LAUGHTER)**

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Sorry that was my mistake.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** (indiscernible) pug gets me every time.

Sorry; could you repeat the question?

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I'm sorry, I got distracted by the dog.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** That's going to form part of the evidence, but we need to take that down anyway.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** No, but actually, what's the net effect? What's the net effect.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. So there's, like, multiple layers to this effect. The first one is on media outlets themselves and their ability to earn revenue and reach their audience. So this report documents sort of, like, a real disconnecting of Canadian news outlets, particularly local news outlets, from kind of the socially

connected web. So that's enormously consequential. And local outlets around Canada have been sounding the alarm about this over the last year. Many have shut down. There isn't a good documentation exactly of which ones have economically suffered to the point of now having to close their doors. But I have spoken to many local news outlets that that has occurred to. So that's sort of -- that's a loss for those communities and for the ability to hold -- to inform the population in those communities.

In terms of overall kind of Canadians and their understanding of politics, what we kind of document, to a certain extent, in this report is one of the ways the inattentiveness to politics manifests is through this attitude that's called a "News will find me" attitude. The basic attitude is, "I don't need to ever seek out political information because if something important happens, it will come to me." And so you just sort of say, "Well, I don't need to -- I don't need to read the paper, I don't ever need to go to a news website because my social feed will deliver that news to me." And for many Canadians, their social feeds are primarily Facebook and Instagram. Those are the primary platforms. And Canadians generally don't know that news has been turned off on those platforms.

And so they're on those platforms under the perception that news will find them. But news will not find them because news is not on those platforms, like, "The News". Now, political information might still find them, and does, and we document in the report to a certain extent the

ways in which, particularly journalistic content, is still shared on Meta platforms. But the news with the ability to get more and detailed information to not have sort of an editorial voice over the content or telling you how to think, or, like, a reaction video type thing, that has been diminished.

And so it's hard to know the net result of this. We don't have -- you know, again, sort of this -- the limits, potentially, of sort of political behaviour approaches. Like, we can't say there's been a 3 percent drop in political knowledge and awareness in Canada as a result of this, this ban. But we do know that Canadians are reading less news, getting less news, and news is less likely to find Canadians, and that is a problem if we sort of say, as a democracy, it is important to have an informed population. And that's like a commitment that we have. As a population, we want to have people who are reasonably informed so that they are able to cast their votes for -- in their own interests, then this is bad. I can't give a percentage, but this is not -- this is not an upward trend here for that commitment.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I just want to turn briefly to generative AI. I know that's difficult to do.

Maybe can call up CAN37690.

**--- EXHIBIT No. CAN037690 00001:**

Site Threat Assessment of Foreign Interference Threats to Canadian Democratic Institutions - 2024

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** This is a SITE TF update from February of 2024. I'm advised there are no pugs anywhere in this report, so we're safe for now.

Could we turn up PDF page 4, it's paragraph 11. Yeah. And if we can just go up a little bit? That's perfect.

And you can see here there's a discussion from SITE TF, so that's the task force that looks at threats to elections, talking about:

> "Technological advancements in generative AI will enhance foreign interference efforts, since it aims to control narratives, shape pubic opinion and/or discredit factual information."

It talks about, and I'm just going to paraphrase here, the creation of synthetic content such as deepfake videos or imagery, generation of fabricated digital representations that provide false news content. And then it talks about:

> "'smart' propaganda platforms that leverage generative AI and big data analytics can be used to improve the ability of foreign state actors to identify and counter undesirable online sentiments during an election cycle and optimize amplification of counter-narratives to make them the

accepted 'truth'."

And then goes on to say that SITE assesses that influence campaigns leveraging this generative AI technology:

"...have the potential to be highly effective and can be a major tool of Fl in upcoming elections..."

Again, we've touched on it a little bit; we may come back to it again with Kirkland Lake. And I know it's an enormous topic, but I just wanted to put that to you and get some brief reactions.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I'm happy to jump in.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Sure.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Go ahead, Aengus.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Okay. So there's a lot of sort of different things going on in here. The toolkit for doing FI at scale has shifted. So generative AI is a game changer in that sense. So like the notion of, like, a troll or bot farm in the past would have been you would have a group of users generating content or engaging in sort of coordinated action on a social media platform to achieve some sort of strategic objective. That was a fairly manual resource-intensive process. You needed to have individuals sort of operating each of the devices or the accounts. The content would need to be created, essentially by hand. Just like the ability to generate large volumes of text or video or audio content was not possible. And so that has shifted.

And so, yeah, in the Kirkland Lake kind of we document this to a certain extent, but sort of anyone with a few dollars can now kind of generate at-scale messages designed to influence politics. That's now very easy to do and so that's one of the things that this is sort of highlighting, that's a shift.

In terms of the audio and video content, the ability for actors to use this content and use their existing network and leverage that is -- that is sort of a change, but that still requires some influence or some known entity or some actor to -- who has a following, who has a presence on these platforms and has a reputation to use that content. And what we've seen so far, and it doesn't mean that it won't get worse, is these tools already being used, particularly on X to generate videos and images that are essentially just a new version of a meme, in that they are still distinctly doctored. It's still easy to sort of tell that they are untrue, but they are used in sort of an ironic, almost mocking way. And it's almost the use has been to mock this sort of paragraph, in the sense of like you're very concerned about this. Look, I'm going to make a funny video that's mocking this action. And that's sort of been an interesting thing to observe over the last six months, is the emergence of that.

The one other thing I just -- I think it's worth saying is the unique character of X, the current character of X today, the social media platform X with relation to this content, which is that each platform has its

defence mechanism against bots and generative AI content, and each platform has made different commitments to removing the content, to trying to remove bots, to trying to remove sort of this type of activity. And X is sort of unique at this moment in time in that this sort of effort is most facilitated on that platform; it is relatively straightforward to procure a large number of bot accounts to generate fake messages and to post them on that platform, to amplify them, to engage with existing networks. And that's -- - that's something that's quite new. And sort of see here generative AI as an enabler and there are a set of enablers, and generative AI is one of them that makes this easier to do at scale, much faster as well, and that's sort of -- that's different than in the past, and GE45 will be different because of that.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** If I could add just a couple of things, and this ties back to the inattentive point. If we could take all of this to be true, that you can create high quality content that may actually have disinforming propagandic elements to it, where you are using deepfakes to have a leading politician in Canada say something that's not true, etcetera, etcetera. Let's assume that all of this capacity described here is true.

It still comes up against the problem that people aren't that interested in consuming political content, right? And actually, even in the context of X, there's only so many posts you can read in a day, right? So there's a scale problem here in the capacity of this information to get

in front of people.

So that's kind of fortunately a limiting factor, though it doesn't at all take away from the deep concern we should have about the fact that foreign actors can appear to be local, appear to be native to Canada and then can get involved in our -- get involved in our politics is the first point.

The second one is, and Aengus has said this very politely, I mean, X has decided to take all guardrails off of -- as much as possible off of its space in the notion of curating a free speech space. That's an interesting approach to it and it's the approach that they are using.

The commercial incentives for these platforms to create space that people do want to spend time on, that they are interested in, hopefully mitigates the idea of information being flooded by foreign accounts because it's just not fun to spend time on TikTok, or X, or Facebook, if it's full of dis-ingenuine content that's not something that you're interested in, right?

So it's only to say that, you know, there's platform incentives there to have some limits on this, and then there's the human incentives that we don't actually want to talk about politics all of the time.

But I'll just -- if I could make one more point briefly. What this -- we may talk about it more, but what this outlines is an important point about the economics of these technologies. We've decided in Canada that we will regulate speech during elections. We want to limit it

principally to political parties and to third parties, so we limit how much they can spend.

And we limit it to people, right? And we say that, you know, only people can spend this much money in procuring advertising, etcetera, etcetera. And we limit how much they can talk by how much they can spend, right? So we say who can -- who's allowed to talk, essentially parties and registered third parties. And then how much can they talk, we regulate it through money.

Generative AI has the potential of really upsetting both of those things. Because the cost of producing the content is so low, you can't restrict it through monetary limits. And because it may not actually be people creating this content, but algorithms which have been created by people somewhere farther down the chain, it becomes harder to regulate.

So there's a regulatory gap in our capacity to limit conversations in politics to the principle actors in the way that our Courts have decided is appropriate for Canada, and you know, political parties have largely reconciled themselves to. That's broken by this -- by this capacity. Whether it's being used by foreign actors or being used by domestic actors.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Not to extend this too more, but if I could just add one more thing to this.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Please.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I mean this is a fascinating -- like, this is a really important topic, I

think. And like, I think all of these discussions it's a combination of the technological capacity of the moment, the design and incentive of the platforms in which speech happens, and the public policy response to govern that speech. It's always a combination of those three things.

And with Gen AI, as we found in the *Kirkland* case, which we might talk about, the technological capacity is two elements that Peter mentioned, the ability to create accounts, automated accounts that look like people easily and cheaply; and the ability to have them create their own content using generative AI without human input. Those two things have scaled the capacity to deceive, right? We don't know if they're people and they are talking for themselves.

The technology design piece is important because some platforms have decided to allow for the -- those agents, those bots to behave in an unmitigated way, X in particular. It's much more difficult to do it on some other platforms because they have different design incentives and policies themselves.

On the policy side, we haven't done anything yet to mitigate this harm. The *Online Harms Act* in Canada -- proposed *Online Harms Act* mandates the identification of generative AI content and automated accounts. So should that come into policy, that would then be a policy mitigation to the combination of the platform design and the technological capacity. So those things always work together and it's -- we have to see them as three pieces of this, I think.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. I have one sort

of, final question before we move into a more nuts and bolts aspect of the discussion.

One of the things the MEO has also noted is that there's been a great deal more attention given to foreign interference lately, and I think this Commission is maybe part of that. Do you think that -- what are the impacts of more public attention on the question of foreign interference in terms of how mis- and disinformation or information events might be interpreted?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think we should be rightfully concerned about the -- the presence of foreign interference in our democracy. Every democracy should. I think it's important that for people who are involved in the debate like we are, in some sense, that we set the levels correctly so that people understand the scope of the problem and the nature of it, and that it doesn't become something which explains every ill. We've got enough domestic problems with our democracy in some sense that we need to worry about as well.

So I do worry about us making sure that the discussion of it is properly -- in the end, properly characterizes the nature and the extent of the threat and doesn't keep us from paying attention to some really serious domestic problems with the way our media ecosystem is structured.

And also, just the problems that citizens have in engaging with politics on a daily basis. We're pretty imperfect, and we have the capacity to believe things

and say things that aren't true, irrespective of whether foreign entities are involved or not.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** The mandate of this Commission is very different than the scope of what we're studying, in that foreign interference obviously has many other vectors than digital ones that could prey on potential vulnerabilities in our ecosystem.

When we set up this project in part we were doing so to push back against the over-indexing, or the almost fetishization post-2016 in the U.S. of the power of foreign interference to surgically shape our democracy and our information ecosystem.

Part of why we wanted to push back against that is because the information ecosystem, as we've been talking about, is a far more complex and still very unknown thing, and we felt we weren't paying enough attention to the design and incentives and nature of that digital ecosystem in Canada, and that that is a precondition for understanding the vulnerability of foreign interference within it.

So I think our job is to understand the information ecosystem as a totality and then try through that to both point out vulnerabilities that could lead to enhance foreign interference and push back against it, right?

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** So I want to turn to another topic. We have about five minutes before the break. Maybe we can just very briefly -- maybe I can ask you to very briefly describe -- we've been talking a lot about MEO, what is MEO? Where does it come from? And what are the kind of

big ideas or big goals behind it that differentiate it from similar organizations? Professor Owen or Professor Loewen, you might be the most logical to start.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Want me to start?

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Professor Owen?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I mean, I kind of -- that builds just on what I said, I think, which is our -- we recognized after 2016, the U.S. election when, as Aengus mentioned, as Professor Bridgman mentioned, there was a real recognition that there were vulnerabilities in our information ecosystem.

Much of how we understood the Canadian digital ecosystem was derived from research in other jurisdictions and that we are basing then policy on what had happened in the U.S, or the U.K., or -- and studies that were happening in other countries, and there wasn't a big enough domestic capacity to study the idiosyncrasies of the Canadian ecosystem as a distinct entity.

And so, we began the project with that intent, which is how can we bring together the various disciplines that help us understand the ecosystem? In this case, large scale social media analysis of the study of the flow of information through the ecosystem, and behavioural research and survey work to understand the potential effects of exposure to that information and could we bring these two academic methodologies and communities together to try and understand the idiosyncrasies of the Canadian ecosystem.

We began doing that in the 2019 election,

then took 2021 election through COVID, and that has now evolved to a national network that we'll talk about further, I'm sure, that tries to bring together a wide range of Canadian academic -- academics, civil society groups and, ultimately, approaches to understanding the ecosystem together to create this picture of the Canadian ecosystem as a whole distinct from the American ecosystem, the British ecosystem, the -- where previously much of our knowledge of the digital system had come.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Just to add to -- on the mechanics side, what it's always really been has been two principal sites of research at universities. Taylor runs a research shop and centre at McGill and I've -- up until this summer, was running one at the University of Toronto. We had our own research groups who then worked together collaboratively.

Aengus has been very much the bridge between those two places.

And then, increasingly, there's been a group of -- we might say ecosystem of researchers across Canada involved in these questions, and Taylor largely is at the head of steering that group of people towards research projects and towards things that they're working on and acting sort of as the centre of the node in organizing that larger academic community.

But lest people think these are huge operations scurrying away behind, you know, fogged glass or something in different places, they're really -- they're

research labs operating out of far too small space at the University of Toronto and McGill University largely run by academics with graduate students.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Can I just super quickly? I know we're ---

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** There have been -- sort of since 2019, there have been a wave of observatories around the world, so there's the Stanford Internet Observatory, the European Digital Media Observatories and sort of its hub and spoke network. There's a couple others in the United States. There's the Oxford Internet Institute. And all of these observatories sort of acknowledge and recognize this need for independent -- outside of government, outside of industry independent observatory function where there is collection at scale of public interest data from -- coming from politicians, from journalists, from influencers, etcetera. And that documenting that, recording that and trying to sort of make sense of this was sort of an important objective.

And sort of -- we talk about the information ecosystem, but that's a relatively novel concept, especially in sort of academic terms. Like academics take a while to adopt new concepts.

And so this set of observatories around the world were developing and sort of we were part of that, and so the observatory is really trying to build like a world-

leading observatory in the Canadian context that can answer, as Professor Owen said, sort of the distinct Canadian -- understand the distinct Canadian features, not the least of which is our multilingualism, right. Bilingualism, but also multilingualism, which is a unique challenge that we have here in Canada and changes, really, the state and structure of our information, which we haven't talked about that much, but is enormously consequential.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And you mentioned that academic research can take quite a while. In terms of the timeframes of an analysis reporting that MEO is looking at, how does that compare to sort of the usual academic approach?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So just like minor anecdote. During COVID, all these academic journals -- the academic world in this space was seized with the moment and sped up the peer review process enormously. And so you had all these academic journals doing special calls, having very rapid peer review processes, and it was a very interesting moment in academia because a typical peer review process, depending on the journal, is like a six to 18-month from submission to publication. That's -- if from submission to publication it's 18 months, you're like, "That was pretty quick. That went well".

During COVID, the turnaround was between six weeks and three months. That was sort of the norm. And that was more our beat. That worked really well for us and is typically sort of what our turnaround typically is for sort of more like academic reporting type products.

In the last year and a half, we've tried to sort of stand up more of like a research/investigative function that operates much more quickly than that, and that's come with challenges to do in the academic sphere. But what we have seen is, actually, the academics and research organizations in Canada are capable of moving quickly when there's the impetus.

But we need to sort of -- we are building, in many ways, the world first sort of what we'd say is incident response capability centred in academic organizations, and that's not without its growing pains and it's readjustment in our rethinking of the role of student experts that, you know, are advanced PhD students who are capable of doing incredible analyses but are working on these long-term projects.

So this is a challenge that we're working on and have mitigated in many ways.

But just sort of to get a sense of the timelines, the hope is to be able to do very fast investigative response, and we've been able to do it for a couple incidents, but generally sort of the six to three-month timeline for like report writing is more our beat as opposed to sort of the typical 18-month, two-year kind of turnaround for academic work.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And just ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** And our -- to your first question, the mandate of the observatory is not first and foremost academic publication. It is to produce informed information and context about the information ecosystem in a

way that helps the public and policy makers engage within it and understand it. And that's a very different mandate because, as we know, the vast majority of the impact of a mis or disinformation campaign or a piece of content circulating through the ecosystem might happen in 24 hours. It might happen in a week or two with the way journalists and politicians frame that piece of content. And the entire effect of it might be complete in a two-week arc.

So if we as researchers can't intervene or participate in that discourse in those -- that -- those initial moments, to us we're sort of -- for the mandate of the observatory, we're missing an opportunity to contribute to that discourse and contextualize it.

So we've been working, as Aengus said -- and we'll talk about our incident response protocol. We've been working of ways of how do we responsibly bring what we know about the ecosystem into the public discourse in those very initial moments, 24 hours, one week, two weeks so that we can lead to a more informed discussion about this content that's circulating at that moment.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And just one last question maybe before we look at going on break.

I just wanted to give you a chance to highlight the way that MEO collaborates with other researchers and organizations.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Aengus, do you want to talk about protocol there a bit?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. So there's

sort of the history of it and then there's the current state.

So the history of it is sort of the observatory was born out in large part of the digital democracy project, which was an initiative with the public policy forum in 2019. There was also -- we were part of the digital ecosystem research challenge which brought together 19 different labs from across the country to study the 2019 election. So that report's still available to sort of look through kind of what that looked like.

And that was the observatory doing a centralized data collection function and sharing it with other researchers and supporting them, particularly sort of with technical expertise, given that that's sort of been a challenge in the Canadian context, to have sort of adequate like data engineering and data analytical capacity.

So the observatory was sort of born out of that -- those collaborations and sort of every major report has been with several research partners.

The current work has tried to make much closer those connections and to sort of have regular conversations and to have back and forths about issues and incidents, and we've had a lot of success at trying to build sort of a more networked set of researchers in the Canadian context.

But again, that is challenging conventional ways of academic and research operating, which is individual labs working on individual products and papers and sharing their data once publication occurs as opposed to prior. You

know, I collected this data, I want to publish on it, and then I'll share it for replication purposes.

And so we've been challenging a lot of those conventional norms, and so we've made a lot of progress. And I don't want to diminish that progress, but I want to also recognize we have a long way to go still in sort of structurally as a country that studies -- as researchers that study this stuff to work closely together and to build in sort of collaborative and non-jealous ways shared capacity to do the research and the investigations that we're talking about here today.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Commissioner, if this is an appropriate time.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Yes, sure.

So we'll take a 20-minutes' break, so we'll be back at 11:10.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Order, please.

The sitting of the Commission is now in recess until 11:10 a.m.

--- Upon recessing at 10:51 a.m.

--- Upon resuming at 11:16 a.m.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Order, please.

This sitting of the Foreign Interference Commission is now back in session.

The time is 11:16 a.m.

**--- PROF. TAYLOR OWEN, Resumed:**

**--- PROF. PETER LOEWEN, Resumed:**

**--- AENGUS BRIDGMAN, Resumed:**

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** You can go ahead.

**--- EXAMINATION IN-CHIEF MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD (cont'd):**

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Good afternoon. I just want to ask you briefly about the MEO's independence from government. I know in the interview summary you talk about sort of expecting from the outset that government financial support is going to be required, and my colleague, Mr. Herrera, will ask you some questions about that.

But you make a comment as well that you do not think that government should be directly involved in the actual data collection and monitoring. And I just wanted you to sort of layout a little bit sort of what you see to be the concerns with government involvement and how you've structured MEO to maintain its independence?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I can start with that, but that comment is referring specifically to largescale social media analysis and potentially mandated data access to platform -- to data the platforms have. And the norm that's emerging internationally is that in democratic countries, you do not necessarily want that core data collection centralized within government agencies. It includes a huge amount of private information about citizens, it is information that is -- but it's incredibly valuable to the public interest nonetheless, and that the norm that's emerging is that independent research institutions or centralized data depository type institutions are the ones outside of government that either request -- get -- that hold that data and distribute it to researchers on sort of a researcher

case-by-case basis. And that's the model we've been trying to replicate, is that the bulk of that data storage and distribution should happen ultimately outside of government. Government will obviously have their own ways of collecting information, whether it's intelligence or audit capacity in the terms of regulators, but in terms of understanding the bulk of the trace data on social media, that is best situated outside of government, in our view.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And can you tell us a little bit about the steps that MEO takes to preserve its independence?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I mean, I think we can all comment on that. I mean, the key is, is that everything we do and say is public. We decide what we research, we decide who we partner with, and we publish publicly, whether academically, or in newspapers, or on our website, all of our findings.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I'll add a few things to it.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Please.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** To the specifics of MEO, the decisions on a report-by-report basis, or academic paper-by-academic paper basis about what we will study are independent. There's no government -- there's never been any government review of those at the individual level.

In terms of what our conclusions are, there's no government involvement or review in what those conclusions are, or approval of them certainly.

And then in terms of the outlets in which we publish, whether it's an academic journal, or a media outlet, or whether we self-publish it on our site as a working paper, again, the decision is ours.

To go up another level, it is the case that, you know, MEO benefits from funding from the Federal Government of Canada through various departments. I think that's largely animated by the recognition that it's good to have it within -- it's a public good within the Canadian political system to have a group of immodestly good researchers who are examining and trying to understand this media ecosystem as objectively as possible. And that information is useful to the Government of Canada, it's useful to media organizations in Canada, by the way, who are trying to get a better sense of what the landscape in which they're operating is.

And the third point I'll make, which is just a more general one, but it's that the overwhelmingly vast majority of research in Canada, academic research, is publicly funded. It occurs in public universities in which scholars take their funding from universities, which are sometimes insufficiently, but are publicly funded to a certain degree.

And the great funding agencies we have in Canada, the so-called Tri-Council, SSHRC, CIHR, and NSERC, are the principal bodies of funding of academic research in Canada. And often that -- those research -- that research is thematic, in that SSHRC will lay out priorities for what it

wants to study.

So it's very normal for researchers in Canada to receive public funding of one sort of another and then to pursue their research without fear of favour and never worry about the effect of their conclusions on their funding, which is to say that we're participating in kind of that tradition of the most independence possible, in light of public funding in Canada.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Maybe just quickly to add, sort of the primary operational funding is for the Digital Media Research Network, and that is administered through the DCI program at Canadian Heritage, and that program is administered as a research grant. So that falls sort of under that stream. It's not, like, a consulting contract, or it's not a tender where you're like, "These are the specific products that you're going to be producing." It's to do research in this space in this way. And that's who we're accountable to, that's who we report to. And so report in the sense of we document the research that we've done, metrics that we've achieved and everything, and we send that report to Canadian Heritage, and there is no sort of -- Heritage is not saying, "Hey, you need to look at this, or this, or this." No, it's a research grant, and so it's administered as through the norm of research grants in Canada.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And again, that's -- the funding issue is a topic that we'll return to a little later today.

I want to ask you a little bit about the MEO's expertise looking at information ecosystems in the context of federal elections, so GE43 and GE44. Maybe we'll focus a little bit on the latter one on GE44, but just to cover the ground here, I understand that the MEO was engaged in monitoring during the 2019 General Election and produced a report out of that?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** We were.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And we have, actually, I guess, two reports. One's COM511 and it's called *Lessons in Resilience: Canada's Digital Media Ecosystem and the 2019 Election*.

Here we have it coming up.

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000511:**

LESSONS IN RESILIENCE Canada's Digital Media Ecosystem and the 2019 Election

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And this is a 35-page report. And then there's another report, COM578, called *Understanding the Digital Ecosystem: Findings from the 2019 Federal Election*.

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000578:**

Understanding the Digital Ecosystem: Findings from the 2019 Federal Election

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I'm going to ask you to maybe keep that in mind as we shift to the 2021 election,

because what I wanted to ask you about is I guess what the sort of techniques and methodologies were in the 2021 election and just very broadly what conclusions were reached.

We could maybe bring up the report on the 2021 election, which is COM512? All right. Great.

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000512:**

Mis- and Disinformation during the 2021 Canadian Federal election

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** This is the report entitled *Mis- and Disinformation During the 2021 Canadian Federal Election*.

So could you just speak to us broadly about the methodology employed in 2021, maybe some of the lessons learned from 2019, and how that was applied in the following election?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Do you want to start with this?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, I can start with this.

Okay. So sorry, there was a few different things you were mentioning there. So we're specifically interested in the content of this report and the evolution of our methodology from 2019 to the 2021 kind of context?

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Okay. So I think it's useful the brief kind of history of this. So in 2019, we set out using computer science communications political science methods, looking at large scale digital trace data

collection and surveying in the 2019 election. That was sort of the way we approached sort of data collection.

So we -- yeah, the PEARL Lab at University of Toronto had a variety of surveys running during the election, including a survey trying to -- and data collection trying to understand sort of the extent to which people -- or trying to understand the browsing history of survey respondents so that we could sort of match browsing history to attitudes and opinions.

So that was 2019 and we started with kind of survey. And then on the digital trace side, we started with sort of identifying the major platforms where we would be able to collect data and we used API access. So we used primarily Twitter and Facebook through CrowdTangle during that election.

We also did large scale collection of traditional media content during that election. So that was sort of 2019. So we stood up this team. We had very high ambitions to sort of try to collect everything digital trace kind of related in 2019 and we very quickly found that wasn't just wasn't feasible to do. There are too many platforms, too many custom scripts that need to be written to collect the data, it's just not feasible for a relatively small team.

So going into 2020 and the pandemic, we sort of reoriented our collection around a set of Canadian accounts, so we sort of identified at scale on Twitter at the time accounts that we thought were Canadian, so we identified 2.6 million accounts that we thought were Canadian and

started tracking them at the beginning of 2020.

We continued that data collection through the -- through to the GE44. We continued to CrowdTangle.

The approach was sort of a hybrid one where we collected both sort of influential people and identities, so those individuals that we thought were important, and we also did sort of keyword and topical analysis. So we sort of canvassed for all the election-related hashtags we could find. We continuously updated that during the election and sort of the primary data collection for the 2021 was on Twitter given sort of the API access that was available there.

So -- and we stopped collecting sort of traditional media during that election and just used as a proxy sort of what they posted on Facebook and X, so what all the major outlets kind of posted on X and Facebook for their coverage.

So yeah, in 2021 we had X, Facebook and we used sort of that combination of survey data and digital trace data focused on individuals and on kind of communities or subjects.

In addition to that, and something that we've done during election monitoring projects, is we sort of have a team of researchers that's dedicated to simply being online during the election and observing communities and conversations and there's sort of this continuous conversation as a team about what people are seeing and this is sort of more like the graphic approaches.

And this is -- we talk about it in terms of media monitoring now, but it's basically trying to sort of see what's out there in a qualitative way as opposed to sort of large-scale data collection.

So we sort of used those three streams in the 2021 election and, in particular and probably of relevance here, is sort of Mandarin language monitoring on WeChat, Weibo, and so that was done not in an automated way as it would have been done on Facebook and -- or on Twitter. That was done by a researcher sort of embedded in those communities and spending time there.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And maybe if we can flip to page 56 of the PDF.

So if we go down, this is a chapter on disinformation and foreign influence. And if we scroll down and get to the summary, there are, I think, four bullet points. Let's just see if we can get them all on screen.

Okay. So that's great.

So this is a little bit unfair because you're written an 82-page report and this chapter's a dozen pages, but just to put the pieces together, you can see in the fourth bullet point there's a discussion about an assessment by your group that Chinese officials and state media commented on the election with appearing to convince Canadians of Chinese origin to vote against the Conservative Party.

It talks about misleading information and information critical of current candidates found circulating

on Chinese language social media platforms, but ultimately finds no evidence that Chinese interference had a significant impact on the overall election but that you can't fully discount the possibility that some riding-level contests were influenced.

I'm just wondering if -- to use that as an example, if you can explain how the sort of digital trace data, the ethnographic research and the survey approach came together to help you reach those conclusions.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, this is -- it's sort of interesting to read this exact paragraph many years on, and I think it stands very well and is a reflection of sort of our data and understanding of things at the time, and continues to be.

So there were the three pieces here. The first sort of sentence there, the Chinese officials and state media, that sentence, so that is based on sort of that media tracking approach, so that's a qualitative assessment sort of somebody embedded in those communities observing this content being pushed, documented. It's documented in the report what we witnessed. So that misleading information and information critical of certain candidates was identified and did occur. So of that there is no doubt.

Then this, "However, we find no evidence that it had a significant impact on the overall election", that determination was made by two factors. One is looking at survey data, so we looked in our survey for individuals identifying as of Chinese descent and we looked at their

attitudes before and after the election and we tried to evaluate the extent to which there was a shift amongst that population.

And I think -- I mean, it might be worth scrolling down to that, just that level of detail. I think it's Figure 22 on page 65 there.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Great.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So this sort of very clearly lays out the survey findings there.

So what we looked at were feelings towards the then leader, Erin O'Toole, feeling towards the Conservative Party of Canada and intention to vote for the CPC. And we looked amongst Chinese Canadians and non-Chinese Canadians, and we looked at the first two weeks of the campaign and the last two weeks of the campaign.

And so we look at this data and what we find is null effects here. We find both amongst the Chinese -- amongst Chinese Canadians and non-Chinese Canadians no discernible difference in attitude from that first two-week to the last two-week period.

Now, these are large confidence bars, and that's important to note.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I'm sorry?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** These are large confidence bars that you see there.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Confidence bars.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** And so that's sort of the degree of confidence that we have that this is an

accurate reflection of a population level attitude. There are large bars because that reflects the number of individuals in those categories. And so ---

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I'm sorry. I'm just going to pause you there.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Just the confidence bars we're talking about, there's a black sort of line with little horizontal lines on the top and bottom.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Exactly.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** That's indicating sort of the swing of possibility with the actual bar indicated in the middle, I guess, of the confidence bar?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** The range of possible effects.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** The range of ---

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** The bigger the bar is, the more likely the effect could be. Well, the effect is -- the more likely the effect could be bigger or smaller than the one that you see there. With a very tight bar, we have more certainty.

So the greater the bar, the greater the uncertainty.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Exactly. So there is a degree of uncertainty here, but in this assessment we really found no shift amongst that population over the course of that election, and so that's sort of one piece of the

determination.

The other piece we looked at was whether or not major Chinese English-language media abroad -- whether or not we saw any inorganic content on their posts on social media, so we looked at X and at Facebook in their posts overall and their posts messaging talking about Canada or Canadian issues in their posts on Mung Wong Jow (phonetic) at the time.

So we looked at all -- sort of three of those things and we found no evidence of inorganic activity, undue amplification of trying to push those stories in a big way in English-language media.

So there's a few other pieces of evidence in there, but, you know, based on that evidence, if we go back to the summary sort of paragraph there, we sort of made this determination that there was no discernible impact. We don't see it in population level attitudes and we don't see it in the social media data.

And you would anticipate one or both of those to be true, and finding both to not be true, that's sort of the basis on which we made that determination.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And sorry, if we can flip back to page 56.

And sorry, Professor Loewen, it looked like you had something to say.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Go back if you like.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** If we can just go down to bullet point 4 again.

I just wanted to ask you about that last sentence. And again, this is covered elsewhere in the report, but we'll just stick with the summary for now, saying:

> "We cannot fully discount the possibility that some riding-level contests were influenced."

Can you just explain how you made that determination about something you couldn't make a determination?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. So the visibility that is in that second-last sentence where we can look at sort of survey and digital trace data across the country and we can sort of say there's no discernible shift here in either one of those, so we're not seeing any evidence that there was interference that was impactful, to do that at a riding-level is much more complicated, first of all, because you don't have the samples, so the number of people in those riding's who have replied to your surveys, so you can't -- you know, those big confidence bars that were already there, they would stretch from zero to 100. You know, we just would have no confidence in a point estimate there, so we would not be able to say for a specific riding-level contest.

Then on the digital trace side, because that was done using qualitative methods and monitoring in that way, it's not possible to do the same sort of figures and analyses that are present in the report for the national

levels. So that's why we say we cannot fully discount the possibility.

We don't find any evidence that there was sort of systematic national successful effort there, but these social science methods can't tell us about whether or not there was some influence or shift at riding-levels, and that's just simply a limit of methodology.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And are there any big lessons learned coming out of 2021 particularly relevant to the topics we're discussing today?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes. I mean, we've -- obviously, this is an enormously tricky thing and one of the things we try to do as a team is even when there are social science method limitations, we say, okay, but what information can we get, can we get, what is the best information that is available. For something like this, we did not have, sort of, dedicated observation of ridings where there would be, sort of, the possibility or the anticipation of this sort of interference. So specifically, ridings with large Mandarin speaking populations in Canada.

In sort of, a subsequent election effort, you could envision a situation where there would be greater scrutiny of the information ecosystem in those communities, in those ridings during an election if that was of concern.

This is something that, you know, is an ongoing conversation as a team about the resources to do that and the value in doing that, as an observatory that is intended to capture the information ecosystem and to talk,

sort of generally and clearly about trends and overall phenomena. And having that extreme sort of focus on a particular riding, a particular community, might come at the expense of an understanding of the whole.

So that's a conversation we're kind of continuing to have with sort of -- we might talk about it a little bit more, this sort of, maybe the incident response model being a more effective one than continuous ongoing monitoring which is quite resource intensive for this sort of action. So instead of saying we will always be closely watching this thing, you say, okay, when there's an incident identified.

So there'll be some ambient level of monitoring that is less resources intensive, upon detection of an incident you would say, okay, now our resources are going to be focused in. And so that might -- you know, those are two different approaches, and they depend on a variety of factors and we'd sort of be looking at both of those approaches in a subsequent election.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think we made -- in a sense we made some choices, right, that what we wanted to focus on was national versus local things. So that's one sort of choice and that's partially kind of a technological choice, but it's also -- it's one we made.

And the second is that we, I think, are looking for things that are pretty far downstream in that we're looking for behavioural consequences, right? So we're interested in what the attitudes are of people towards

leaders and parties for example, right? And we're looking at that for evidence of foreign interference.

So and that said, I'm very, very happy to articulate more why we made those choices, but that doesn't tell you a lot as a consequence of whether some actors try to interfere at a local level. Because we're not addressing things at a local level and we're not addressing the question directly of, was there interference? We're addressing the question of, is there evidence that interference would have worked in changing people's attitudes, or beliefs, or behaviour.

So just to be sure about where we come into the -- where our evidence comes down, that's where it is. We wouldn't want you, I think, to leave with the sense that we're saying there is not evidence that there was local interference. We don't have evidence that there was, but that does not imply that there is none, or that there was no effect.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And -- oh please, yeah.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Can I add a few things? You can follow there if you want.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** No, no. Please go ahead.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think it's a really important line of questioning and I think it's worth saying a couple of additional things. A lot of attention in this report has been paid to the sentence you highlighted, and for good reason, because that's something we collectively now

know much more about what occurred.

A few things for the context in which this is situated though, from our perspective. One, this is limited. This assessment is limited to our study of public social media and the potential behavioural effects of that public social media on the voting behaviour, and beliefs, and attitudes of citizens.

And we now know through many of the documents that were shared through this process and the work of intelligence services, and so on and so forth, that there were multiple other vectors at play than just the one we were looking at. So this in no way should be seen as a determination or even a statement on that broader foreign interference campaign and its effect. So it's a necessary piece of it, in our view, but it's in no way sufficient to making that determination.

The second is, I want to emphasize in the first Commission report, the comment which I fully agree with, that lack of effect in any one riding or even nationally does not preclude the overall effect on democracy. And that you can see, I think, over time in our work too.

You put into evidence the 2019 report, and that report was called lessons in resilience, because our determination there was that Canadian democracy was actually quite resilient to some of these negative influences that we saw in the U.S. for example. We had higher trust in institutions, higher trust in media, less effective polarization. And these things contributed to a resilience

of our democracy to these nefarious actions or incentives.

Those we have seen decline over time in a macro way. So across the Canadian population some of these measures of democratic health have declined over time in part because of the nature of the digital ecosystem. So that is a broader effect on democracy that isn't a riding-level effect of foreign interference in the digital space.

The final thing is that -- this is important too, is that this report was written before we scaled up the network and before we evolved our methodology to where we are now around incident response protocols. This was a very limited effort -- we can talk about how it came together, but we now have far more significant capacity to understand these problems.

And I think because of evolving the methodology, bringing more people into it, and because of the resources we now have access to, we're able to see these kinds of issues at a far greater degree of fidelity than we were before, and we think that will shine light on this very kind of -- in the next election we will be able to see these kinds of things in much more detail if we're continuing to operate.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And just to expand on that, and we'll come to the step by steps of the incident response. But broadly speaking, as I understand what you're saying, if an incident like the sort discussed here were to come up in the next election and the network were engaged in monitoring it, as I think it hopes to be ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** --- it wouldn't just be a matter of let's analyze the data we have coming in, it's a let's go apply resources to this issue and increase monitoring, increase surveillance. Is that sort of ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah. And that comes back to the point I made previously, which was -- and that Aengus just reiterated, which is there's a baseline understanding of the ecosystem that requires constant monitoring and study, and that's the baseline in which external interventions are situated. But those external events, the shocks to the system, whether it's a piece of content, or a campaign, or a change to the platform design, the effect of those can be very rapid.

And we've learned over time that we need the capacity to understand and add context to that intervention in a much more quick turnaround way than waiting until after the election to make some final determination, which we can -- we also do in a cumulative way. But that on an ongoing basis, both as in now, as we're running it now, but also more importantly during an election, we need a mechanism for getting the information we know about the ecosystem from us and our partners into the public domain in a much faster way and we now have a method, we think, for doing that.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And let's turn to that right now. So the Canadian Digital Media Research Network, sometimes referred to as the CDMRN, but I may just call it the network.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** We clearly need to work on the algorithm. We stumble on it every time.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I'm sure the folks in government have no problem with it, but I stumble over it every time.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** So do we.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** My apologies. Okay. So just very briefly, can you just again in short order, describe when it was founded, and who it involves, and what MEO's role is in the network?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** So the network was founded two years ago, two or so years ago, and it was the result of a recommendation at the end of the 2021 report, which is -- was that we still in that period, lack the research -- the capacity in the research community and civil society, to collectively help in this endeavour of understanding the integrity of our information ecosystem, particularly during elections.

So we determined in this report that we could say some limited things about what had occurred and what we thought hadn't. But there was an imperative for the country to scale up that exercise, and that required two things. One, the ability of a centralized body to manage and collect the large amounts of data that are needed to do this kind of work, and a network of scholars that could be deployed and collaborate to help understand those data, and that neither of those things existed in Canada in a real way.

And the network was an attempt and our pitch

at the end of this document, but also in broader proposals, was that there was a need for that capacity to be stood up and the network is a response to it.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And just to flesh this out, who is the centralized body that manages and collects this information?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** So it is -- so it's a combination, it's a partnership. It's the Media Ecosystem Observatory, because we had been doing that through multiple projects, including Digital Ecosystem Research Challenge, and a whole host of other collaborations over the years. So we do the central data collection, both on the trace data side and the survey side, and we work with a network of researchers across the country to interpret it, both on an ongoing and then case-by-case basis, as our expertise accounts for.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And is it right to say in addition to collecting the data, the MEO coordinates and supports the other players in the Network?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes. And on the work on this. I mean obviously these partners do all sorts of other work. But for this purpose, yes. And MEO, it should be said, also does some of our own core analysis. So we do our own analysis and we partner with others to help facilitate their work. And that's very important because often it's not just one body analysing this data. It's multiple groups across the country.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Does MEO administer

funding to its partners or do they have their own source of funding?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Both.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Yeah.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Both. Some of the core funding for the Research Network has been distributed to partners, both on an ongoing and a case-by-case basis. And they also have their own funding, which comes through traditional research channels, foundations, whatever it might be.

We think that providing data is adding to their capacity and is a contribution to their research capacity. So I think there's value in that, but that's not necessarily a commercial exchange.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, it's just a resource sharing. So there's dollars attached to it, but it's also the ability to field questions and surveys, it's also the ability to collect data on social media platforms, which is extremely challenging for individual researchers or labs. So each sort of Research Network member, there's a different sort of resource transfer that occurs, some more than others, and yeah, there's some money, there's survey time and space, and expertise, and data.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** That's worth emphasizing too. At the end of the 2021 report, we make the recommendation -- or the comment -- the observation that the status quo in Canada up until this network was that every individual research lab, and sometimes these are just one or

two people applying for academic grants, in order to study this ecosystem, needed to scale up a technical capacity and a huge data collection effort that they just weren't equipped, or financed, or necessarily technically capable of doing.

And the funding for this kind of work was happening just for elections. So every election, you would have a scaling up of dozens of researchers all trying to collect what is a massive effort to collect these data in a really *ad hoc* way and not leading to, like, a building of a core capacity. And so there's real value, we think, in collaborating on the core data needs and then decentralizing the analysis of it and ensuring that that capacity is sustained between elections as well so that we're consistently learning about the ecosystem and prepared for the next election.

So this the idea of just scaling up and down dozens of researchers just for elections is both inefficient and it really hurts our collective capacity to understand this ecosystem. You just can't do it like that.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. I want to turn the first part, I guess, of MEO's work as part of the Network, which is data collection. And I think we've covered some of this, so I'm going to lay out a little bit of it and maybe ask for some comments and explanation without getting into too too much detail.

But in terms of the kinds of data that MEO's collecting for the Network, I understand there are three main sources -- and please correct me if I'm missing anything --

digital trace data, representative surveys of the Canadian population, and the third one is media monitoring?

First, have I missed anything important in that listing?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Just to clarify, the Observatory does all three, but in terms of the Research Network and sort of the data sharing, it's the first two. So it's the quantitative data. It's the survey data and the digital trace data that are shared and made available to members of the Research Network. And if they want to add accounts or ideas that they want to capture in the digital trace data, or they want to add questions to the survey, that's what's provided.

But that last one is -- there's a function at the Observatory that does that and uses that to inform our work, and the other research labs also do that and, you know, we share, to a certain extent, in written documents, like, what we're seeing. But that data is not, like, a spreadsheet you can share. It's like an impression. It's a paragraph. So it's just kind of a different -- it's really those first two that are shared amongst the Research Network.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGHOLD:** Okay. So let's briefly speak about those two and then we'll come to media monitoring and flesh that out a little bit.

So the first one, digital trace data, can you give us a sense of, like, what that data is and what platforms you're looking at, broadly speaking?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, so we adopt

what we call an entity first approach. So what that means is that we've identified influential -- politically influential voices in the Canadian context.

When we identify somebody, we have, like, specific thresholds for inclusion that we think is of public interest. So for example, any federal/provincial politician, any large city mayor, journalist, news organization, and then influencer with a certain threshold of engagement or followers on any single platform.

So once we identify an entity for inclusion, we then identify their footprint across social media. So we capture all of their accounts, and sometimes they have multiple, on X, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and in some cases, Telegram. So those are the six sort of platforms we look at. So we identify any accounts associated with that entity and then we collect all of their public postings, as well as any data we can about sort of comments or followers about them sort of available to us. So that's sort of our core digital trace data collection, is around that.

We also have sort of *ad hoc* data collections around specific incidents or specific research projects, where we supplement that. For example, in the Meta report that we talked about earlier, we went and collected data on political discussion groups on Facebook in Canada. And so that's not part of the sort of core data collection, but we do that data collection as well and provide that as well, if folks are interested.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Are you also capturing

accounts from foreign countries that are known to spread mis- and disinformation?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, so sort of the core is a Canadian look. We also supplement that with accounts primarily from China, Russia, and India. So these are accounts with known links to the state or to sort of information operations abroad. Those accounts are identified through a combination of in-house sort of digging, as well as Research Network partners who have specific country area expertise and sort of flag to us, "These are the accounts that you should do."

And I really do want to emphasize this, that many of the accounts in that entity list are from Research Network partners who have familiarity with a community or familiarity with a topic and sort of flag, "Hey, these are the accounts I think you really need to be following to understand the Canadian discourse."

So in that way, that sort of core data collection is a collaborative exercise.

So those three countries. And then we do track a smattering of U.K., France, and U.S. based accounts, with the idea of an eventual supplement to that occurring, but that being relatively lower on our priority list for additional collection. That will occur at some point and we track some entities from all those places, but it's lower priority at the current time.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And when you spoke a moment ago about getting information from partners about

specific accounts in certain communities, does the account -- do the accounts you monitor include diaspora or ethnic language communities in Canada?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** There are some, yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Can I add a methodological point there, ---

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Please.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** --- which is one of the innovations, I think, of this methodology, and one of the insights, is that to understand a national discourse on social media, you don't need to be following everybody.

That -- there's a core number of accounts that -- and it's actually, in some ways, a limitation of the platforms themselves, that they amplify a limited number of people and a lot of people can speak, but not a lot of people are actually heard. We look at the people who are heard first and foremost. And then if other actors or other voices or accounts are picked up by those core people with influence, we can see it. But if they're not, we're sort of regulating them to kind of the margins of the discourse in some way. And that will -- that is both a practical question, and -- so -- and it's core to our mandate. We're looking at what is in the broad public interest. And to us, that is what most people see most of the time.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And when -- I'm sorry, Professor Loewen?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Well, I was just going

to say that this follows a rule, which is that the vast majority of content is produced by -- that gets consumed, is produced by a very small number of -- number of people. And it's a parallel distribution that seems to be a normal thing -- a regular thing of most social media networks.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And just one minor point. So you're looking at accounts across potentially up to six platforms, I believe. Are you able to see connections between the platforms as well as within each platform?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, so the sort of the two innovations of this approach are one that's sort of like, don't swallow the ocean. I mentioned 2.6 million accounts that we were following on Twitter over three years, and that data, those billions of tweets are sitting, you know, on a couple of computers somewhere, sort of gathering dust to a certain extent, because they are less important, they are less influential even though they are Canadian voices that are part of the conversation. So that's innovation number one.

And then innovation number two is that our perspective is not a platform oriented one. Our perspective is about entities. Ultimately, politics and political discussion and influence are done by individuals or organizations, by advocacy groups, by politicians, by journalists, who have footprints across multiple platforms. And so, we actually integrate all that data together into a single view of sort of saying, what has this entity posted across all their platforms, all their social media footprint.

And so, it's very rare actually, and you'll see in reports that we do a platform specific analysis. We talk about the information ecosystem, so the entirety of their social footprint across these platforms. Which again, sort of are chosen based on usage and -- and there's a variety of criteria, but basically these are the platforms that are the most used by Canada with the addition of Telegram out of concern for Russian disinformation.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** And just to put a point on that, and almost entirely to Aengus' credit, we think that's a real innovation in the study of this globally. We're not aware of other labs that use this method in the world. So I think that a product of this work has been to fundamentally innovate how we understand the ecosystem as a whole.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. Just very briefly, I wanted to ask you about representative surveys. Can you just give us a short overview of like, the frequency, number of respondents, and sort of, topics? Again, I know that's a big question.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** No, no.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** But try to keep it simple.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** So the second big piece of our data collection is that since 2019 we've been regularly surveying Canadians. We survey them online where they're invited into complete surveys on their screen in response to written text. So they're not being phoned, but

they are responding to surveys online about political topics in Canada.

The size of those samples of Canadians that we would survey and the frequency of it has changed over time. At its peak during an election, we would be surveying thousands of people a week. Now, I think Aengus, our rhythm is down to about 1,500 people a month. It depends on -- partially on funding, because we pay for those surveys on a per respondent basis, and also the event that we're in at that point in time.

But the aggregate result is that we are certainly the largest social scientific -- the largest set of social scientific research in Canada, probably by order of magnitude, and would be doing as much surveying as some commercial firms. Our surveys are typically more in depth than a survey would be -- than a commercial pollster, so to speak, or commercial market researcher would do. And those surveys are normally a combination of a core set of questions about what media people are consuming, their demographic information, their general views on politics so we understand who they are, and then things that might be specific to what we are studying at that point in time. So as different topics come on and off the agenda, modules in the survey will get adjusted to those.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** And just to add two quick things.

Again, research network partner questions are going into those monthly surveys as well and our -- so sort

of, their questions, always about the information ecosystem, but sort of that's something we work with and we provide expertise and the PEARL lab at Toronto will help, sort of, people develop those questions. But that's sort of part of it.

And just the one other thing about the surveys that I want to flag is typically, an incident response is also associated with the singular survey for that incident. So that really goes deep into the issues, and attitudes, and perceptions of a particular issue, and so that's like a really deep dive, single survey, that's -- we just care about this. That's really what we want to know, and that includes that core set of questions that Professor Loewen was talking about, but also really that deep dive into the issue.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** The third kind of data collection you do, and you helpfully clarified that this is internal to MEO, not necessarily shared with the network partners, is media monitoring. And I think you described that earlier as a qualitative approach. Folks who are sort of immersing themselves in the media ecosystem and developing a sense of what's happening on the ground. Is that sort of a description -- an accurate description of it?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And that capacity is sort of scaled up and down depending. There's sort of a continuous monitoring by members of the team of kind of the major issues and there's a functional reason for that, it helps up tune our -- both our

survey and our digital trace data collection to what issues are actually being talked about and being cared about. And so, there's sort of that continuous back and forth.

And then there's also kind of project specific. So for example, we're currently -- the B.C. is having a general election at this point in time and we have a team of researchers in B.C. that is entirely focused on this and that's their only responsibility during the election, is to monitor that information. And that's partly because the -- our visibility into B.C. while it's been supplemented, for example, this election, it's -- you know, having 4,000 accounts or 4,000 entities that we track across the country doesn't give you as fine grain visibility into a specific province. And so, you want to have individuals on the ground spending time just embedded in the communities and trying to, sort of, understand kind of what the discourse is like.

So that's part of it, is that sort of, more ethnographic approach. And then sort of, the other part is just making sure to be hyper aware of what is actually being said. So you can use large language models and computational techniques to analyze text at scale, which is what we're collecting. That's very good for telling you a lot of information, but ultimately the semantic understanding of a machine learning algorithm is limited, and it requires a human touch, and that -- so that's really that third category.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. I want to turn, if we could, to -- still on the topic of data collection, but

on MEO's ability to collect and analyze data that's consumed by diaspora or ethnic language communities in Canada. I had some documents I was going to pull up. For the sake of time, maybe I won't.

But I understand you will have seen some documentation indicating that there have been assessments from Canada's intelligence community about foreign interference in the information sphere by particularly China, and Russia, and the Government of India. And so, I wanted to ask you in the context of those concerns that have been raised, and I think you alluded to them earlier, Professor Bridgman, as well, what is MEO able to do to monitor the discussion in these communities, potentially in non-English, or languages other than English and French?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So functionally, it's project-based monitoring ---

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- at the current point in time. And that's sort of a resource allocation question that everyone working in the space is sort of struggling with, is how you know, it takes someone who speaks that language, who knows that community, dedicated solely to that task. And that is a staff that is unable to do other tasks. So during projects we do that.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And sorry, just to clarify ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** The kind of monitoring

that occurs is media monitoring/ethnographic?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Oh, yeah, yeah.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Is that how you would describe it?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So yeah, it's more that third category as opposed to the digital trace monitoring at scale. And so, you know, for example, if you wanted to do data collection at scale on WeChat, you would need to build a custom scraper, you would need to go in and invest a lot of data engineer time for that specific -- sort of to get that big, big scale data collection going, and that's not an investment we've made to this point because of resource constraints. So it would be that media monitoring would be what would be done in those instances.

It is a goal to be able to do that at scale for the observatory. This is now -- this is as good a time as any to just say that data access for researchers has been enormously scaled back in recent years. We are -- I cannot emphasize enough, we are at the point since we started doing this work, where there is the least data access available to researchers, and that coincides in the Canadian context with the highest level of attention and concern about this issue. And researchers who are trying to act in the public interest, and trying to get data are extremely limited in what platforms provide and are being forced to engage -- to do very resource-intensive sort of efforts to collect that data, jump through enormous hoops, get very partial visibility at sort of the platform's discretion into their infrastructure.

And so this is a rapidly evolving space, and when we set out to do this work, it very quickly became clear that there would be lots of choices that would need to be made because of the limits platforms are imposing on data collection. And so it's an enormous and continuous challenge that eats up a lot of time.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. I want to come back to that in just a moment.

But just to finish out on the topic of monitoring of diaspora ethnic language communities, I wanted to ask you if -- I'll just give you a double-barreled question.

One, how resource intensive is it, and second, does the fact that these efforts get kind of stood up and stood down project by project create any challenges?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** So I can speak to it from the survey perspective.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Please.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** So for example, every time we do a survey we translate it into both of Canada's official languages, so we're surveying -- every time. So we're surveying English speaking and French speaking Canadians.

In one instance, for example, where we wanted to understand attitudes towards issues of engagement with the Government of India and Canadian politics around the assassination of Nijjar. We did a survey very rapidly after

that, but that is much more resource intensive in that you're translating the survey, if you want to get foreign communities into Hindi and/or into Punjabi, so it's time and resource intensive in that. Not in an overly limiting way, but it's time and resource intensive in that.

And then there's a resource constraint in finding willing survey respondents whose principal language -- - everyday language is Hindi or Punjabi and/or are consuming Indian and Punjabi -- Punjabi media.

And the cost of doing surveys goes up as populations become more rare, so that can almost occur geometrically.

So those constraints are there, and they're just everyday constraints, right. With a limitless budget and limitless number of graduate students, you can do anything, but it is a constraint on our capacity to be able to continuously and/or rapidly get insights from, you know, the staggering diversity of people in Canada.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Could I add one thing?

I actually -- I think I responded to your question as if you were asking exclusively about non -- like the platforms we don't monitor, and diaspora communities use platforms that we don't monitor. But in fact, diaspora communities are also active on the platforms that we do monitor, and in those cases, even if they're posting in a non-English or French language, we do collect that data and we translate it and we make that available.

Now, that's machine translated and so there are limits with that, but all of that data is integrated and modeled, including, for example, we spoke about like semantic similarity, but like if somebody posts something in Mandarin and posts -- somebody else posts something in English that is semantically similar, we can identify that using, you know, machine learning models. And so that's done in -- by somebody who does not speak Mandarin and is not reading that content of that post.

So that data is collected and made available to researchers if it's on one of the platforms that we do follow, so just for what it's worth. And there are many entities in the seed list who do post in non-English and French.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** It's worth pointing out just how hard this is. We're talking about a massive information ecosystem consisting of billions of pieces of content a day across multiple platforms that we have limited visibility into. So that's the baseline.

And five years ago, almost all of the academic work on the information ecosystem was about English language Twitter. That's it. We were basing all our policies, our understanding of this ecosystem off that very limited view.

Now we're getting to the point where there's some more nuance here, but it really is both a methodological challenge issue and a capacity issue, right. Like both of those things work together.

We're getting better at it, and different people are evolving that together, but it's worth pointing out just how hard this -- and complex this ecosystem is.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** So I promised I would come back to this access to data issue.

If we could turn up document CAN24072.

**--- EXHIBIT No. CAN024072:**

New Impediments to Counter Foreign Disinformation Online

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** So this is a memorandum that appears to be the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and it goes back quite a ways. It's from 2020, I believe.

And you'll see the title is, "New Impediments to Counter Foreign Disinformation Online".

And if we could skip to page 2 at the bottom, I'm just going to summarize it.

The gist of the alarm here seems to be that RRM Canada is finding that its access to Twitter API is about to be shut down in July of 2020. And then if we go to the -- I'm sorry. I was looking at the bottom of the second page at paragraph 7.

"RRM Canada had access to Twitter's API [redacted] until July 2020 when Twitter informed that it was refusing RRM Canada's previously approved use case"

And indicates Twitter no longer intends to provide any government with access to its API.

And then if we see on the following page at the top, and this is paragraph 10, we see that -- the discussion about Facebook. Essentially, Facebook seems to have done the same thing a few weeks earlier.

And at the beginning of paragraph 11, it says:

> "Both Twitter and Facebook argue that governments like Canada should work with non-government experts who, have access to their APIs to identify potential foreign state-sponsored disinformation on their platforms."

Firstly, can you just -- and again, in very brief scope, explain what API is and why it's useful for understanding online disinformation.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So it's an acronym for Application Programming Interface. And basically what it is, is a query like you would send to a web page. You would say I want to go to Google.ca, so you send your web browser, you say, "Hey, give me something from Google.ca", and that returns the web page that you see and then you can provide more information and it sends you back more information. And that exchange is functionally the same thing as an API except what you're doing is you're sending a specific query saying, "Give me this data with these search parameters and these -- and return these fields".

And so essentially, some platforms were providing API access where you would say, "I want posts from

these users for these dates and I want these fields".

And so you would basically send a web query and they would return the data to you in a direct one-to-one response, and then you'd be able to store and share that data.

So that's essentially what an API is.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And this document's indicating that, at least in 2020, non-government experts had access to API. I think reading between the lines, it sounds like RRM Canada's a little concerned about themselves losing access to it.

Let me ask you this. Today, do non-government users have the same kind of API access across Twitter, Facebook, possibly other platforms?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So no, there's been a precipitous decline in access.

Twitter went from having a well-supported academic API which was limited but provided a lot of visibility into what was going on to an extremely expensive paid API. The cost of that academic API currently runs 50,000 U.S. a month to have that access. And so that's an impossible sum for any research organization in the Canadian context to fork over.

Even with that access, you have limited visibility. It's still very restricted.

Like even under a $50,000 a month world, you still really can't get the type of data that you would need to do this analysis consistently and very well. So that's

Twitter.

Meta just shut off their CrowdTangle API last month. There was an online vigil held by researchers around the world for this tool because it had been very useful and it had been the best visibility into their platforms.

They've replaced it with this Meta content library which is where applications are screened out of a university organization, ICPSR, at University of Michigan, and does provide some enriched data but continues to have severe limits of access.

And very importantly for our purposes, the way we think about an information ecosystem where entities do not -- the world is not on Facebook and then a different world on Twitter or on X and a different world on Instagram. This is the same world. And the Meta content library from Facebook basically says, "No, you can have a single platform view and that's the only thing you can do".

So that is a huge scale-back from what CrowdTangle was able to provide.

So this -- you know, if you were writing it today, you would say, "Academic researchers and civil society groups no longer have API access. These platforms are not providing reasonably priced available data access to their platforms any longer".

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Could I add a couple comments to that?

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Please.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** One is to reiterate

Aengus's comment before, that at the time when we need to understand this ecosystem the most, we have the least access to information. That is the baseline we're dealing with right now.

Two broader points, though. One, the core problem is in knowledge asymmetry here where the companies that determine the character of our information ecosystem have the -- have like almost exclusive access to data about behaviour within it.

The second is that the way those data are shared has been *ad hoc* by platform over time. So at some points in time, we've had great access, for some good reasons, for sometimes -- and at other times it's been restricted, for some good reasons and, in our view, some bad reasons. But ultimately it's the decision of the private actors what we have access to, to study information that we believe is in the public interest.

The solution to this that's emerging globally is mandated data transparency by democratic governments. So the Digital Services Act in the EU mandates data sharing with researchers via the European Digital Media Observatory for information that is in the public interest to European citizens. The *Online Harms Act* in Canada has a similarly modelled data transparency provision which would provide mandatory access to data for researchers in Canada to this data on platforms that's deemed to be in the public interest.

So like, again, they're -- I think there's a -- if we believe understanding the information ecosystem is

critical to democratic society, then we need a reliable, predictable, access that addresses that knowledge asymmetry that currently exist.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And just to put in context, the platforms that there's been reduced data access to are -- am I right that it's Meta, which is Facebook and Instagram, and X? Are there other major platforms that are ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** TikTok.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** --- not providing good API access?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So Reddit has an API that's been recently clawed back; TikTok has an API that's available to academic researchers that are US based, not currently available to Canadians.

The only platform that continues to have an API available is Google's YouTube. So that -- there is a still a YouTube API. It's fairly heavily throttled; that is to say, you can only put a certain number of queries and -- in a given time period. But is sufficient to sort of do, like, the type of work we do where we have a relatively constrained entity set. If you're trying to swallow more of the YouTube ocean, that API falls short as well. But, yeah, those are -- that's kind of like the space -- at Telegram there's no API.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** And if I can just kind of outline the -- just underline the commercial implication here for the companies, right?

These data are valuable to them, right, and if it's a wide open API, the capacity of third parties to monetize the data for advertising targeting, for intelligence for their clients, is very hot, right? So these platforms don't -- you know, they're economic actors, so they are -- in some ways, I think, academics and maybe governments to some degree sort of fall between the cracks here where we have very good public interest reasons for wanting to be able to access -- have open APIs. There's all sorts of commercial firms that have very good private interest to be able to want to access APIs. I think a lot of it, the gearing of the API happens against commercial interests.

Now, it is -- maybe also be the case that these platforms have good reasons of public appearance and reputation to actually start to limit the capacity of researchers to access the API if these platforms are being used nefariously, right? But we have to recognize this data is of very, very high value to the firms, to these platforms, and that's at least some of the reason why they want to try to find a way to throttle it and charge academics for it.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And in fairness to the platforms, I understand as well there's some cost associated with providing API access, is that right?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, you need to run a server, maintain the API, etcetera. We know this very well. We maintain an API for researchers in Canada who want

access to our data. And so we're in that -- not business, we're in that -- we're doing that as well. And it is -- it can be costly when it's done at scale.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** There's also very legitimate privacy issues about this data. You do not want a completely open API for all data that is on all Meta products for anybody. And that's not what we're advocating for. What we're saying is for research purposes, for a small subset of people who have the capacity to deal with those data and understand them, that some sort of access in the public interest is required.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. Okay, I'm going to go to incident response because I don't want to run out of time for this.

There is a document COM587; if we can just page down a little bit, just to get the title onscreen? Yeah, stop right here.

So this is Information Incident Response Protocol, Public-Facing Version 1.0, so we're right on the ground floor, September 2024.

**--- EXHIBIT NO. COM0000587:**

Information Incident Response Protocol, Public-Facing Version 1.0

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I just wanted to flag this document because this will have a lot more information about the subjects that we're speaking about.

And maybe if we can flip to page 2, a little bit further down. Yeah. So we see "Detect & Assess"; we can

put that at the top of the screen. A little bit further down, tiny bit. There we go. Okay.

So we've got the six steps of the network's incident response approach. Maybe we can talk about these steps, and we'll bring it into the context of the Kirkland Lake incident we were speaking about. I'm just going to lay out a little bit of context here, and please correct me if I'm mistaken.

So I understand that this incident response system was initiated once in relation to bought activity around a political event in Kirkland Lake, is that right?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And is that the first time this was released publicly unveiled?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** That's the first time this version of incident response that's, like, much more fleshed out, has been employed, yeah. We've been doing some version of incident response, but not to this degree of formality. So we've been doing it but this -- this is sort of really the formalization of that process, and, yeah, the Kirkland Lake bot incident is one where each of these steps were filled and now sort of there's that document at the end, the debrief.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Perfect. And I understand as well, just from your website, that this incident response protocol was also triggered and is actually currently underway, I believe, in relation to the Tenet Media allegations that we spoke about a bit earlier.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, yeah.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And that's still ongoing; that response hasn't concluded yet.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, exactly.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** All right. So at step 1 we see up on the screen here is "Detect & Assess." Can you just briefly explain how it is that information incidents come to the attention of the network?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. So we do our own monitoring, so the media monitoring we talked about, the data collection. So we're constantly kind of looking out for a potential incident. Over the years of operation now of the research network, the last two years, we've developed a strong relationship with journalists working in the space, working on the beat of mis/disinformation, foreign interference. One of them might flag any other stakeholder, any research network partner can flag that there's an issue. This is a very wide open funnel. "Hey, this could be an incident," and then there's that determination made, and there's some criteria laid out in this document upon which we make a determination about whether or not we deem this to be an incident.

One thing I want to flag here is that if an incident is, kind of, of interest but a "no go" determination is made, for whatever reason, that's documented and that will be released on an annual basis as well, saying, "Here are the other incidents that we considered but will not be -- did not pursue, for these reasons."

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. And in terms of the criteria, if we could flip to page -- I think it's 6 of the PDF. If you go to the bottom of the page, you'll see "Criteria," right. So it starts there, "Speed, Engagement, Scale," and then on the top of the following page it continues, "Scope, Complexity, Intervention Efforts, Learning Potential." And is it correct that these are the factors that get taken into account in deciding whether an information incident is significant enough to justify the protocol?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, exactly.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And just not to put too fine a point on it, but in an electoral context, what kind of priority would be given to an information incident that relates to elections and political acts?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So this process is out of Election Response Protocol. There will be a different one during an election. And we're currently actually trialing that in B.C. at the moment, that faster response, that more dedicated resources during an electoral event. And so that's -- that's under development. The timeline will be shorter than something like this. Depending on the issue and the complexity, and we talk about it later on in the document, about the extent to -- like, the duration that you can sort of expect for an incident response. The upper bound of that is five weeks here listed during this document. Five weeks during an election is obviously untenable because that takes us to the end of the election and so that will not be

the timeline during an election. The idea would be to get the notification and the incident updates as quickly as possible. Recognizing, of course, that generally staff work normal working hours; that a lot of the response depends on research network partners and their availability.

I really -- it is remarkable what the team has been able to develop here and the capacity to do this at all in sort of an academic context. And the response has been very good, but we do come up against, "Hey, there's an incident." "Oh, I'm teaching two, three-hour courses today, and then I've got some papers to grade." You know, this is the reality of an academic kind of research network response. This is one of the things that we emphasized in the 2021 report but there is -- there is enormous value to having permanent analytical capacity devoted to these sorts of things. You can rely on Research Network expertise and partners and you can have standing capacity of students and professors and things, but for incidents, there does actually just need to be sort of some standing capacity and -- in order to be able to respond adequately during elections.

Anyways. Long way to say faster during an election, slower outside of an election.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. So there's "Detect & Assess", which we just spoke about. Second step is, "Activate". It's set out in the document. As I understand, it's "Activate it"; sort of two aspects to activating an incident response team and preparing data collection. And so do I understand correctly; that's the

point where more resources get directed to a specific incident, it's not just background monitoring?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. Yeah. So the data collection there specifically refers -- so each incident is accompanied with an incident response team. So that is drawn from the Observatory, but also specialists in that topic, in either the methodological or the substantive area related to the incident. So if it's like bots, then the incident response team would need to include an expert in Canada on bots. If it's about Russian disinformation, we would need to have a Russian disinformation expert. If it's about, for example, the Tenet Media, if it's about influencers, we would want to have an expert on influencers. So each of those members would be flagged and sort of said, "These are members of the Research Network. Hey, here's an incident response. We need you as part of that."

Now, as that process is occurring, oftentimes, particularly in the -- well, actually on both the survey and the digital trace side, speed is key. So after the Tenet Media story broke, their YouTube channel was taken down the next day; right? And so you cannot necessarily wait. Any data collection that needs to occur needs to be done immediately because a platform might take down that data and provide no transparency.

To a certain extent, we saw this in Kirkland Lake as well, where a lot of the accounts were later removed by X and there's no visibility into how many accounts were removed, on what basis those were. That's just data that is

permanently removed from the public eye and actually limits the ability of an investigation to get to the bottom of something.

So that's why there's that data collection in that activate. It's like -- as soon as we make the decision, it's like, "Okay, engineers. What data do we need? Go get it right now. Don't wait."

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Okay. On steps four to six, we have "Notify", "Analyze", and, "Inform", and then "Debrief". And maybe we can talk about those in the context of the documents that were produced around Kirkland Lake.

So if we could pull up COM500?

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000500:**

Information Incident Notification:
Kirkland Lake Bot Campaign

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** So this is the incident notification around Kirkland Lake. And the gist of the incident, as I understand it, is that following a rally by the Conservative leader in Kirkland Lake, there was sort of a surge of bot activity that occurred, and then perhaps as significant, there was then a big response to the reporting about the bot activity.

In terms of the timing here, as I understand it, the incident was detected on August 3rd, and the protocol was activated on August 9th, and then the notification you can see here comes out on August 14th. Can you just speak about the timing aspect of that?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Obviously we need to

be faster than that. The incident response would be -- ideally the notification would be out in one to two days. And that's sort of documented elsewhere. And that -- you know, going -- having gone through this a couple times now, we sort of have the capacity to do that and we're set up to do that more effectively.

This event coincided with three core team members being on vacation, and so that, you know, just speaking to the August lull, it's a good time to attack democracy, in the middle of August.

So that -- you know, this one has an unusual long delay. But for example, the Tenet Media one is much faster already, and so we're sort of seeing that maturity and that capacity develop as a team.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Great. And then ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** It's also worth flagging here that yes, those variables were in place, but it's also the case that the relevance of this as an incident increased as the political discussion of the initial core incident grew. If it was just the initial incident, it may not have been flagged. But it became a point of political discourse, which then amplified it in some ways into our ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** It increased its importance.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Without question; right? Yeah. We can get to how I think we mitigated some of that political relevance of it, but that's about the conclusion of it.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Yeah, so actually maybe on that front, we can skip -- there was an incident update on August 16th, which is COM502.

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000502:**

Incident Update 1 Bot Campaign most likely the work of an amateur, reports CDMRN partner The Social Media Lab

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I'll just read in the title, *Bot Campaign Most Likely the Work of an Amateur Reports CDMRN Partner The Social Media Lab*. So I think that sort of speaks for itself, and we'll see a little more detail.

If we can also go to COM503?

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000503:**

Incident Update 2 More Bot than Bite: A Qualitative Analysis of the Conversation Online

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** This may speak to your point, Professor Owen. This one is called *Incident Update 2 - More Bot than Bite: A Qualitative Analysis of the Conversation Online*.

You folks really aren't getting paid enough. That's great.

If we can go down to the first bullet point? This may be what you were alluding to, Professor Owen:

"News outlets were the superspreaders

of the story, framing this incident as a threat to Canadian elections."

And there's some comment later in the document we don't need to turn up, but that essentially politicians from other parties sort of picked up the story a bit and there were in fact some calls for an investigation on the theory that this was sort of foreign collusion, and ultimately I should say you concluded there was no evidence to attribute this bot attack to any political party or foreign entity, for that matter.

But maybe you can just briefly comment on the way the conversation about this incident played out?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, you go ahead.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** In generalities, this follows a very common trend where the original incident of mis- or disinformation is seen by very few people, but the act of reporting on it amplifies that content to a much broader audience.

This can be a good thing, because it can bring us attention towards the initial act and the initial problem, but it can also serve to reinforce the exact effort that was intended behind it, which is for as many people as possible to see this negative piece of content or false piece of content. I think that's pretty clear what happened here.

It's also worth, I think, layering the counterfactual here, which -- and the value we think we provided to this through this protocol, is that had we not done the two weeks of analysis into what happened, or we

think actually happened, the political and ideological interpretations of that event would have been the things that took hold. And everybody was able to see in this incident something nefarious about their political opponent. And you saw that play out in the discourse and you saw it reflected in the media coverage of the incident.

The reality of it, because we devoted two weeks of research time and a number of people's analysis from across the country, is a very different interpretation of the event. And that interpretation of the event points to a vulnerability in our ecosystem, but one that is very different than what was originally attributed by the media and political actors. And I think that's just really important to put focus on, that by studying this in this way, we were able, we believe, to reveal the actual story and vulnerability that that incident represents.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And maybe I can take you to COM, I believe it's 577, which is the Incident Debrief.

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000577:**

August 3 bot activity on X related to rally in Kirkland Lake

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** And this may be my last point here. But if we can scroll down? We'll see we have the -- just go down to the second page.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** It looks like it's been redacted.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** There we go.

There's no pugs on this one, unfortunately, but.

All right. Yeah. So if we just scroll down a little bit down that page? You can see there's an incident assessment and then lessons learned.

And then if we could just highlight -- sorry, if we can just go up a tiny bit there to number -- that's it. Perfect.

So I'll just highlight the first two here:

> "Current technology supports rapidly scalable information operations."

And this relates to some further discussion about the use of generative AI in these -- in this bot operation.

The second point about the lack of cooperation and transparency from platforms, again coming back, I guess, to the API discussion partly, makes us more vulnerable.

And then maybe the last point we can highlight here on the next page is number 3, the way our media and politics talk about information operations makes the problem worse.

And you indicate there that the rapid instrumentalization of the Kirkland Lake bot incident to engage in partisan politics highlights a persistent gamesmanship in Canadian political discourse that threatens to amplify the impact of information operations.

And you note at the bottom of the paragraph

that evidence was remarkably absent from some of the accusations that were going around that political Parties or foreign actors were behind this, and yet there was a lot of finger pointing, I guess.

Maybe we can just end by you can comment on that aspect of things.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Do you want to describe the findings and what the vulnerability actually was here?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. How much time do we have to sort of talk about this?

We don't have time.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** We have a little bit of time. I don't want to -- I don't want you to feel rushed.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I mean, it's two pages, this debrief. Like it's read into the record. I think it speaks very well for itself.

In essence, we find that there is no evidence there was a political party or an international actor engaging in this activity. The activity and the profile of action here is not consistent in any way with someone trying to meaningfully shift Canadian politics or engage in any sort of manipulation at this point in time.

Instead, we perceive this as a capacity-building exercise for somebody who is interested in trying out a three-part pipeline of a gestion of news articles or other social media posts to a large -- sending those posts to a large language model to produce at scale messages designed to comment on that incident or -- not incident, on that issue

or event, and then sent to a bot network on X, which is incredibly cheap to procure and easy to maintain.

And that three-step pipeline, we find, is very not resource intensive to do and, actually, the unique sort of combination of generative AI, availability of bots and intransience of the platform and sharing data and providing data means that this is -- this incident was not consequential for Canadian politics beyond the discourse importance of it, but that an attack like this could be -- could be easily done and very difficult to detect.

So that's sort of the general conclusion of this, but we definitely did do some finger wagging at media.

One of the interesting things about this and part of the incident response protocol is that it only works if we're able to get the message out there and respond. And so one of the great things about this one is that we were able to speak to almost all of the journalists who had originally reported on the story. There was a fair amount of coverage of this incident debrief, and so the record was kind of set straight following the debrief, which is exactly what the ideal incident response would look like.

There's some event, there's a swirl of concern and accusation that hopefully diminishes over time as people become more digitally literate about kind of what this looks like and more responsible in their actions around this, and then there's a research investigation by impartial academic methodologically competent individuals who then -- or the network then produces a document or record that closes

the door on that incident and allows us to move forward and sort of say in a responsible way.

That's the ideal. And in this case, while it was a bit slower than expected, I think we were really able to do that here. I'm very proud of the work that we were able to do on this one.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah, I think just from a health of the ecosystem perspective, what it does is it shuts down the suggestion that one of the principal political actors in Canada is engaging in widespread online manipulation and/or that they're being assisted by foreign entities, which is what was being -- which is an incredibly serious accusation, right. And that's what was being leveled and was being suggested in response to this campaign.

So it's -- I think it's a remarkably effective demonstration of good work by Aengus and his team.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** I'm going to turn things over to my colleague, Mr. Herrera, and with the Commissioner's indulgence we'll press on a little bit longer before lunch.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Yes, Mr. Herrera, you think you have for -- you need how long for your ---

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Approximately 30 minutes.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thirty (30) minutes?

So would it be a good idea to break for lunch, but for a shorter lunch? So maybe we can come back at 1:50.

It means we will take one hour and 10 minutes for lunch. Is that sufficient for everyone?

Yes?

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Yes. Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Okay. I suggest we do that because it's -- honestly, it's very -- on top of being interesting, it's very useful and I don't want to limit what you're planning to do.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** That sounds perfect. Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Order, please.

The sitting of the Commission is now in recess until 1:50 p.m.

--- Upon recessing at 12:42 p.m.

--- Upon resuming at 1:51 p.m.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Order, please.

This sitting of the Foreign Interference Commission is now back in session.

The time is 1:51 p.m.

**LA COMMISSAIRE HOGUE:** [No interpretation].

**MS. NATALIA RODRIGUEZ:** Commissioner, sorry. It's Natalia Rodriguez, Commission counsel, before we start.

We just had a reminder from the transcriptionists over the lunch break if the witnesses and counsel can remind themselves to speak slowly, that would be very much appreciated.

Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you very much.

So just before we begin, I have a small matter of attendance, so I've been advised that the Commission's final overview report, which is entitled "Introduction to Social Media", is now finalized and ready to be entered into evidence, so I'll just read the doc IDs and ask that they be made exhibits at this moment.

So it's COM604.EN, and its French equivalent, COM604.FR.

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000604.EN:**

Introduction to Social Media

**--- EXHIBIT No. COM0000604.FR:**

Introduction aux médias sociaux

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you.

**--- PROF. PETER LOEWEN, Resumed:**

**--- PROF. TAYLOR OWEN, Resumed:**

**--- PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN, Resumed:**

**--- EXAMINATION IN-CHIEF BY MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:**

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. So gentlemen, I want to talk about your relationship -- the MEO and the network's relationship with the government.

So we'll begin by discussing the funding relationship and then we'll move on to, you know, more substantive interactions that you may have with the government and its agencies.

I think, Professor Bridgman, you indicated

earlier that both the MEO and the network receive funding from the federal government. Is that correct?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes. So the principal source of funding, of operational funding for the observatory and for the research network come from a Heritage Canada DCI, or Digital Citizen Initiative, grant. That's the principal funding at the current moment.

There are some other sources as well for the observatory, but the research network is entirely funded through that DCI grant.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay, perfect.

And in fact, the Commission has received an institutional report from Canadian Heritage. And I don't want to put it on the screen, but just for the record, I'll note the document number, which is CANDOC34 in English and, in French, CANDOC35.

**--- EXHIBIT No. CAN.DOC.000034:**

Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference - Institutional Report (IR) - Canadian Heritage

**--- EXHIBIT No. CAN.DOC.000035:**

Enquête Publique Sur L'ingérence Étrangère - Rapport Institutionnel (RI) - Patrimoine Canadien

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** And this institutional report indicates that there was a $5.5 million grant given by Canadian Heritage under the DCCP program to the network. So is that accurate?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes. Yeah, that was for the three-year award.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. And just while we're dealing with acronyms, so DCCP is Digital Citizenship Contribution Program. That's a program administered by Canadian Heritage, which is also part of the Digital Citizen Initiative, which is, in itself, a component of the 2019 *Plan To Protect Canada's Democracy* which was launched by PCO.

Is that accurate?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, as far as I know.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** To the best of my knowledge.

And we'll leave the acronyms behind for the moment. We'll come back to them, I'm sure.

And so you mentioned that this grant is the primary source of funds for the network.

Is that the same case for the MEO?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, at this time. Yeah.

So since 2019, the observatory has operated largely through research funding, some of which has been government, but the bulk of which has actually been from foundation money. But at the current time, the bulk of the funding for like the core operations of the observatory come from this research network grant which supports sort of the centralized functions, data collection, stewardship, analytical capacity, etcetera.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. So those are the five pillars of the network.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. So referring back to this document as well, it's my understanding that the funding was provided for a period of three years and that it's scheduled to lapse in March 2025. Is that accurate?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So I was wondering if, in light of this, could you tell us a bit about the challenges that this lack of long-term funding creates for the network and the MEO, if any?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** We only have 30 minutes. No.

This is difficult work and it's work that's at the leading edge globally of sort of information ecosystem monitoring. We're in touch with other observatories and other labs around the world and we see their work, we go to the same conferences and we talk, and we're really at the edge.

And in order to do that, we need to recruit talent and we have a team of data analysts and data engineers. And I highlight those two in particular because they have computational skills that are transferrable to other domains, and in particular industry.

We're not salary competitive with industry, and we never will be, but there's a strong public interest component to our work which allows us to attract

exceptionally talented members of the team and we have been able to build an exceptionally talented pool of staff with a wide range of expertises.

All of them are looking at a March 31st funding cliff and saying, okay, you know, I have bills to pay, I have children. I need to have some stability.

And so for sure that's a challenge currently.

This is an enormous challenge sort of in the research world to operate on project-based funding. And a lot of research labs do operate on project-to-project based funding with some anchoring funding from potentially university or a large grantee -- grantor.

But to do this sort of -- this type of work, which is not exactly in sort of the norm for academic institutions requires structural stable funding. It's something that we have added to every single one of our reports.

Yes, there's a self-interested component to that, but it is actually what is needed to be able to do the type of monitoring and month-over-month kind of work that is required.

We didn't get to the situation reports this morning, but just sort of flagging that, the value of the situation reports, which is a monthly report we put out about the state of the Canadian information ecosystem that relies on survey and digital trace data and gives month-to-month comparability is only possible if something is structurally -- structurally exists. And if you aren't up one month, you

can't get it back. That's gone. That visibility is gone.

So you have visibility until March 31st, and if there's a delay in funding or if it doesn't happen, then that's it. There's no continuing that. You have a snapshot of an information ecosystem and you can never recover that snapshot. It's just gone.

And so, yeah, this is a challenge.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** And thank you for the answer. I think you made some very interesting points.

So on the side of the employees providing long-term contracts as an issue, I was going to ask you about the operational challenges. And you hinted at that with the monthly situation reports.

Looking even further, if we're thinking about the fact that the Canadian election is scheduled to take place, at the latest, in October 2025, your funding is supposed to run out in March 2025, are you able to plan projects that concern the Canadian elections in this -- with the funding circumstances that you're under?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So yeah. I mean, yeah, you can ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think the answer, we can theoretically imagine what we would do and we can plan to a certain degree around it, but we cannot resource it or continue operation past March 31st.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** In the current environment.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** In the current form.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** And there's a bigger challenge than just that. It's more that scaling up this capacity is just a difficult thing.

It's a new field. We have to recruit people who are highly competitive in the market. We have to train them. We have to work together and build teams, and the analytic value accrues over time of that asset and that team. And the scaling up and down is something we flagged in 2021, which is a real challenge.

And so, yeah, we've said from the beginning that we think countries need some sort of long-term or semi-permanent institutional capacity to do this kind of work. Whether that's us or somebody else is immaterial. That's what countries need.

In some countries, in the U.S., there's enough foundation philanthropic money to fill that gap. In Canada, we do not have the equivalent and our academic research funding systems don't fund this kind of work. They do different project-based academic work, which is not what this is.

So there's just a mismatch in Canada.

In Europe, they're doing it through European Commission funding and the digital media -- the European Digital Media Observatory have core structural funding there. Something like that is probably the model for Canada, but we're not there yet.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. I want to turn

to something that you mentioned in your interview summary, which is the fact that the MEO -- tell me if I'm wrong or not, the Network also received funding from other sources than the DCI and the DCCP within the government.

So does that create any kind of challenges in terms of receiving multiple funding streams from the government?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Multiple funding streams from the government or multiple -- so the Observatory has received funding from Heritage and from other government departments at different times for some of the work, but I think what you're referring to is foundation money there? Or, like, other project money?

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** No.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** No?

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** No, I was referring to something that you alluded to in the interview summary regarding funding provided by GAC and by Public Safety.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Oh.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** They're sequential. They're not -- they didn't overlap ---

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** --- with the Network funding. They were prior to. So the 2021 election had some funding from Global Affairs in order to do that report.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** But I think to speak to this point, there is a range of funding envelopes across

Public Safety, across Heritage, ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- PCO, and Public Safety. There's lots of different pots. And then, of course, the Tri-Council. There's a variety of funding sources. And often a lot of those funding sources are actually only met by a certain number of researchers in Canada who can do this work. So what ends up happening -- and this -- you know, there's a limited number of researchers doing this work, and they are writing applications to multiple funding sources, all to do exactly the same type of work and project, but having to tailor their approach and their deliverables to each of these different funding sources. And that's been a challenge, and it's a challenge that I've spoken to at length with Research Network members, as well as sort of the larger, like, community of practice in Canada, is that this patchwork of funding speaks to a Government of Canada response to this issue that is not centrally coordinated and the funding of which is not centrally coordinated and discussed and sort of planned in such a way.

And so you -- I'll just -- I'll say from an academic perspective, operating in a university, a single grant -- to apply for a single grant with unique requirements is an enormous investment of time that takes away from the research, that is a one for one time loss, and it's something that all of us have struggled with, and we continue to struggle with, is fundraising takes time away from doing the

research. And in this case, fundraising for multiple government pots of money that are all intended to do the same thing, but each have different reporting requirements and application requirements, is in my view anyways, I won't speak for everyone, is nonsensical.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** If I could just add one more thing ---

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Of course.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** --- at the risk of us sounding deeply ungrateful? Is that as you may know, the federal government works on a fiscal year that I think ends at the end of March. Often it's the case that these -- and this is not the fault of anyone individually, but often these funds are a little slow in coming. There's a need to report very quickly on it before renewal and it takes up a lot of time otherwise spent on things when you're trying to wait for funds to come to get released.

Universities aren't models of bureaucratic efficiency in most cases. So there are challenges, and when the funding is renewed year over year, for example, the layering on of reporting requirements, which are all well and good, and then all sorts of procurement requirements, mean that often, you know, cash flow is lumpy and you're trying to really spend money quickly to get things within the fiscal year, for example.

So those things just add to the complication. If we were a large bureaucracy ourselves, it might be easier, ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** --- but we're effectively academics trying to run a research lab, which makes the time spent on coordinating the flow of money to be a dead weight loss.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** This might be beyond the bounds of this conversation, or even our input here, but speaking for myself, I learned a tremendous amount about the government's response to foreign interference by reading some of the briefing material for this session.

It is incredibly difficult from outside of government to know who is doing what, even when you're working in this space. And that fragmentation translates to the funding that's available across different departments. So it is very difficult to know which department has which funding allocated to this kind of work and it's very often topically delineated. So Public Safety will be interested in a very specific type of thing. Global Affairs will be looking at a very specific kind of thing. And it's very rarely, for the kind of structural ecosystem-wide work we're talking about here. So we're kind of trying to fit this capacity and model and need inside a very fragmented funding system that might reflect the fragmentation of the broader approach from government to this problem.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So in light of all your comments on the lack of long-term funding for the Network, if I were to ask you what kind of funding commitment

would you need, would you desire, to, you know, ensure the operational stability of the Network, ensure the employee stability of the Network?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I mean, it's a bit of a how long is a piece of string question. I don't say that facetiously. I mean, I think the current funding model allows us to keep doing what we're currently doing. There are a dozen other things we could be doing if this was scaled, and if mandated data transparency is implemented at the federal level in Canada through the *Online Harms Act*, then the capacity just to absorb and manage that is going to be significantly higher than what we're now capable of doing.

So it really depends on what kind of system we want to -- either institution or capacity we want to foster and develop in Canada.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Could I just add, super quickly to this, not talking amount, multi-year funding with renewal not at the last minute. Like, this is -- this is the key.

So when I'm looking at staff retention and I don't know if -- like, I'm having to tell people, "I hope to find out. I hope to find out. I hope to find out." And to have certainty about -- so, like, a multi-year agreement, but then we know it's going to be expiring in March of next year. To have that conversation of whether or not renewal will happen in the year prior, not the year of.

So we are sort of saying at the last minute, "This may or may not work." Well, actually, that decision

has already been made, and so choices can be made subsequently to do additional fundraising to try to find other sources, to scale down operations, to think about stretching existing resources. That -- all of that information would be very helpful. And so not just multi-year, but well in advance, knowing. The predictability would be enormously helpful.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you. Moving on now to the more substantive interactions that the Network -- the MEO has with the Government of Canada and its agencies, what entity within the government is the main point of contact for yourselves?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So in terms of funding, it's the Heritage, the granting operation at DCCP.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So leaving aside the funding.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** But the -- sort of the main sort of project contact is out of PDU or the DCI and the PCO. So that's the digital -- or not DCI. Digital ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** DI. Democratic Institutions.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** DI, Democratic Institutions, and the Protecting Democracy Unit there.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. So within the Privy Council Office, the Democratic Institutions Secretariat, and within that department, the Protecting Democracy Unit is your main point of contact?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, that's correct.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you. And so in your interview summary, you mention that you have monthly standing meetings with the PDU. Is that still the case? And if it is, could you provide just a bit of an insight into what the purpose of these meetings are -- is?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, so we have a monthly standing meeting. It doesn't always occur if we've had a conversation earlier in the month related to, like, a shared -- you know, related to what we would have discussed around some other event or some other conversation that we've had. But essentially, we have these monthly meetings where we share overall progress of the Research Network. So what are the projects being implemented, where status is on various data collection or project efforts. It does vary kind of month to month. Occasionally it's just sort of a presentation of the work with a few questions. But in general, we sort of have this opportunity to make sure that there is that possibility of connection once a month.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. And do you share material briefs, situation reports, with PDU officials at these meetings?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So the situation reports, it's a little bit different in that those are sent and then we have twice done sort of briefings on the situation report, on the findings and things, and that's been for -- the invite list for that has been wider than just PDU. There's a working group within government that is welcome to attend. And we sort of give a presentation on what we

observed that month and what the main findings are. So we've done that twice.

In general, PDU is an important stakeholder in the work of the Research Network, and whenever possible, when it touches directly on sort of their portfolio within government, we try to provide them with advance notice of, like, an incident notification that will be coming out, and that advance notice is done sort of on a best effort as we can do basis.

The general principle is that what we produce is done publicly but we try to give notice not just to PDU, but to other stakeholders as well, a little bit in advance to let folks know it's coming. And actually, sometimes extends to, for example, like embargoed research reports to journalists or other things.

So typically like the day before something goes out, there's some emails being sent out with sort of the content of what's coming out.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** I see. And is -- those meetings, are they an occasion for the government to provide you information as well? Is there an exchange of information on their end could be, you know, useful information for your research or a focus that you might want to implement?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes. Yeah, it does occur.

I'm trying to think of sort of a specific example, but yes, like those meetings are useful for

information as well. Often they're more like logistic type conversations, so there might be an event happening, you know, who should be invited.

So like PDU in particular serves, to an extent, a coordinating role on this file within government, and so that means that they are very well connected within sort of the Canadian government to individuals who are interested in our work, and so there's that sort of logistic part of the conversation as well.

And so in that sense, yeah, we definitely do get information from them.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. Do you know, to your knowledge, are there other consumers within the government of MEO or network materials that you produce? Aside from PDU.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

So for sure Heritage, many different folks in Public Safety.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** RRM and Global Affairs.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Global Affairs and RRM.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** SITE.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, SITE that's there as well.

Not part of government as you mean it, but like Elections Canada as well, you know, has consumed the reports and things, so yeah. There's a wide variety of kind

of consumers within government.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So it's distributed across various departments.

You mentioned RRM. Do you have a specific working relationship with RRM?

And I'm asking the question because, you know, RRM has monitoring and analysis capabilities. I just want to know if, you know, you have punctual collaborations or long-term -- longstanding collaboration with RRM in that regard.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Not at this time we don't have a longstanding kind of continuous like touchpoint with them.

We occasionally are in conversation over kind of shared points of interest or study, but it isn't a habitual thing.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. And if I could ask you, how do you view the functions -- how do you think -- the monitoring and analysis functions that you perform compared to those of the RRM, are they complementary, are they distinct, are they independent? What's the relationship?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** We ---

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** We do all three of those things you've just described.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** That's why I'm struggling a little bit.

But also, we don't know and we don't know

partly by design probably on both sides in that we aren't a government project. We're not embedded in the government.

Government has multiple capacities to engage in this kind of work that we rightly don't have visibility into, nor should we. And we do -- we act independently from government.

So I think some of those -- some of that lack of visibility is by design and it's probably the right structure.

That being said, we want our work to be seen and helpful and consumed by anyone in government who might find it useful, so when we are asked to brief, we always relish that opportunity because the core purpose of this is to inform the public and policy about the information ecosystem.

So it's a balance. And to be honest, we're trying to -- we're navigating this as well and as well, I think, government is, too.

But RRM is a case where we broadly know what they do, but we hadn't seen, for example, many of their briefings until they were shared through this process. And maybe that's by design.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you.

Court Operator, if I could ask you to pull document CAN35445.

**--- EXHIBIT No. CAN035445:**

Proposal for an Information Incident Research Approach

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** And while this is being pulled, I believe this document refers to a meeting that you had in February of 2024 with the people from the PDU, so the Protecting Democracy Unit at the PCO. So is that correct?

If we can just scroll down a bit just so we can see the title.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** It is.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you very much.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** That is correct.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So that's correct?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** And for the record, it's a presentation entitled "Proposal for An Information Incident Research Approach".

If we could go down to page 2. Did you -- did all of you three attend this meeting with the PDU?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So we're looking at the agenda, and we don't have the time, obviously, to go through all the presentation, but I just want to ask you a question about the last sentence there, which states:

> "Goal: Alignment between PCO needs and network activities."

Could you tell us a bit more about what the desired alignment was? What was considered?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I mean, I can ask Aengus to speak to this, too, but it's broadly in the spirit of what

I was just describing, which is we want this work to be valuable to the various and multiple government institutions and bodies that are working in this space. And in many ways, PDU is our access to a window into understanding that complex ecosystem.

And so we had -- in our initial proposal for the network, one of our objectives was to develop this incident response protocol. But as we've been describing, it's a new thing. We have been -- we evolved it over two years. It hasn't been done before, and so this was an opportunity to describe what we were imagining by this protocol and see if they had any feedback on it from the perspective of government.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Do you want to add something there, Professor Loewen?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah. I will say that I think that part of -- at this stage in the process, right, we were standing up sort of new phases of the project. There was a scale-up that was occurring and I think we were trying to feel out, candidly, from PCO and from people around there what they were worried about, what types of information would be useful to them.

So it's -- so it really is, here, asking them sort of what can we produce in a report that would be useful to you. What can we do to characterize the media ecosystem that would be useful to you?

And you know, that's not an easy question to answer for anybody in some cases, but I think that at this

meeting in particular, as I recall it, it was really about us trying to, I think, demonstrate our usefulness to PCO and also establish how we could become more useful to them in this work.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** What's the date of the meeting?

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** February 9th, 2024.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Twenty twenty-four (2024). Okay.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Or 19th.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** I see the February 9, but it's 2024.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** And just -- I think just to make the point explicit, when we say PCO needs here, what we're talking about is, yeah, the PDU coordination function across government, what are the needs in terms of an incident response, what are the gaps that they see.

And yeah, just like this developing what is an incident response protocol benefited enormously from us having conversations with researchers across the country, with many people internationally, with other people working in the space, with emergency management folks, and this was sort of part of a broad consultation and development process of trying to sort of say what is -- what does information incident management process even look like.

Like this is a well-documented territory for

physical disasters like floods, but in terms of information ecosystem incidents, that's a totally different ball game.

And so PCO and what PDU represents, which is this whole of government kind of function here, it is and will always be a key stakeholder in sort of that process. So I just want to re-emphasize that.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you.

We can take the document down.

I don't have time to take you to another document, but I want to mention, it's document CAN33655. And for the record, this is an annotated agenda that -- actually, well, maybe we can pull it up, Court Operator.

So CAN33655.

**--- EXHIBIT No. CAN033655:**

Critical Election Incident Public Protocol Panel Retreat

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So this details a meeting that you had with the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol, so CEIPP, and the panel of five. So you had a retreat meeting with the panel of five on March 25, 2024. Is that correct?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So we see ---

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** We were invited to their retreat.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Of course. Of course. I assume you didn't crash by accident.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Just to be clear, when

they held the retreat, they held it within the PCO, which is not -- in the middle of March, so.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So the reference to Mexico at the bottom of the document is inaccurate.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Correct.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** So if we go down, your names are listed on the list of invitees. But if we can go to page 5, page 5 is where the discussion with the network is detailed.

And if we can scroll down just a bit, there's three questions that were, you know, identified as potential questions for discussions, and I would love to go through all three questions, because they're very interesting, but we only have time for I think a limited sample. So I'll focus on the third one, which is:

> "how do you see the Network and the Panel interacting during the election period, particularly given the Network's independence?"

And so my question is a simple one. What is your answer to this question?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** In my recollection, we didn't arrive at a clear answer to that.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** That's perfect. So novel material today.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Pardon me?

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** You said you didn't

arrive to a conclusion?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** No.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Okay. Okay. So -- and do you have any thoughts that you want to share as to -- on the topic?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Their role and ours is just fundamentally different and they have access, rightly, to information that we don't and shouldn't. And what I believe we can offer them, as well as any other government body is a greater understanding of the nature of the ecosystem going into an election. And that requires studying it over time, but that's an important baseline, because if one's mandate is to look at shocks within that ecosystem, they need to know what -- anybody needs to know what the baseline is. What's normal in that ecosystem? What kind of behaviour is influential? What isn't? What matters? What doesn't? And we can only know that by having this kind of rich ongoing analysis.

They -- like I said, if this -- the mandate of that body is to decide whether something's meaningful, not us, ultimately.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you. So we can take this document down. And I want to wrap up. So obviously we've seen that there's a willingness on your end to provide information to the government, to engage with them. I want to ask you ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Information that we are also making public.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Of course. Of course.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Reinforce. I mean, that's key here.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** I should have specified. Obviously information that you released to the public in respect of your independence from the government.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** And so I want to ask your thoughts on, you know, potential additional information disclosure from the government to yourselves. And that could be as to narratives that are spreading on -- in the media ecosystem, eventually extending to, you know, classified information. This is all theoretical. But what would be -- do you think that that could be helpful for the Network and for the MEO?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think it could, in theory, be helpful to the Network and to government.

To be sure, I think the Network, MEO, prizes -- we prize our independence very, very much, which is a delicate balance to strike when we're reliant on federal government funding. But I think we also take serious the obligation to matter for Canadian democracy and to matter in trying to build up and maintain the resilience of the Canadian democratic system.

So, you know, you can certainly imagine scenarios in which the government could say, "We're really concerned about activity coming from this country generally." Right? "Could you look at it?" Or, you know, "What would

you say about that?" Or, "We're really concerned about something we're seeing online." We might come back and say, "There's no reason for you to be concerned about it for the following reasons." Right?

So I think that getting a sense of what is needed within Ottawa has always been something that we've been animated by. And, you know, if you have a better sense of what people need, you can do work that's more useful; right? But that can -- you know, if that came with very strong directives, obviously it comes at the cost of independence, and I imagine that wouldn't be something that we would -- it'd be something that'd be chaffed at a little bit maybe.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Can I ---

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Yeah, please.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So I talked earlier about a wide funnel for incident response. We should be really clear about what we're talking about here. It's something that is potentially damaging to Canadian democracy that's circulating in the information ecosystem. And if the government is the source of that, great. Add it to the list of potential sources, which are journalists, which are citizens, which are influencers, which are any researcher in Canada. So there is a wide funnel to bring incidents and potential areas of investigation to the attention of the Research Network, at which point a determination is made based on the criteria we talked about earlier, about whether or not that should be investigated or not. And that decision

is independent.

And we actually want that funnel to be as large as possible. That funnel should be as large as possible, because what we're trying to say is the more people that are watching for incidents, you know, we have capacity to do that, but we're a team, just one team amongst many working in this space. We want that funnel to be as large as possible and we want suggestions from everyone for, "Hey, this is something that is concerning to us." And we want every day Canadians to be able to say, "Hey, I saw this online. Like, what's up with this?" We want that information stream, because that actually just empowers the Research Network and ensures that any incident is identified as fast as possible, a response is weighed, and a response is undertaken when it's in the public interest.

And so there's -- this is limited in that what we're talking about is sort of the flagging of potential incidents here and not more than that. And if your question is getting at more than that, and is there something directive, then that -- yeah, that's something that the independence -- that we would -- that's not -- that's not a path we want to go down.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** But if it's that flagging of the incident, the more the merrier there.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Yeah, and it's a good -- I think you make a good point. My question was not so much about the directive, but rather the information -- a

wider array of information being provided, and as you, I think one of you mentioned earlier, you have a focus into the public material. I referred to, you know, classified information, that's obviously something you don't have access to. And I heard your comments about independence. I think they're valid points, but would there be a way to mitigate these concerns, maybe by having, you know, a public facing report that is not directed to the MEO, but that discloses information in the wider ecosystem and that allows you to focus on an incident or a developing incident that otherwise you would not have picked up as quickly?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** That's a broader point I wanted to raise, which is one of the benefits of this Commission is we've learned a lot about this problem. We've learned a lot more about what government knows about this problem. And -- at least I certainly have, from reading through these documents. And I think there's a broader point, which I think we'd all be better served if the government communicated what they know about this problem more to the public.

Part of the challenge is people don't know what's happening, and so they are prone to either exaggerate a single incident or underplay another. But the more we come to understand, collectively, this problem, I think the better served we are. And so I think the government should be sharing more on this, frankly. Not just with us, but with the public so that we can all dive into the aspects of this that really are the problem; right? That really are the

things that we should be paying attention to.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Incidentally, this is a point that's made in this disinformation guidebook that exists now within government, ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- and I don't know if -- anyways, it was provided in the documents and that is a point it makes exactly, right, which is that actually this is an area where better transparency is in the public interest. To a point, of course, ---

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- but that sort of transparency that doesn't go into the space of violating sort of -- or compromising national security interests really should be the goal, and is ultimately what we're engaged in from sort of -- from our unique datasets and our unique visibility.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Mr. Herrera, ---

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** --- I will ask you to conclude because ---

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Totally.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** --- we'll have to move to the cross-examinations.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Of course.

And so I think we could talk for hours or more with you.

I was going to offer, Commissioner, the witnesses to provide any final thoughts on points that we haven't discussed today so far that relate to the Commission's mandates, if you allow?

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** I do, but I don't know if you have anything to add? You'll be -- other counsels will ask you questions. So ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah, just thank you for the opportunity.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** --- maybe at the end you will have something to add.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Appreciate the chance to be here.

**MR. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah. Thank you.

**MR. BENJAMIN HERRERA:** Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Thank you, Commissioner.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

So the first one is counsel for Michael Chong.

**--- CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. FRASER HARLAND:**

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Good afternoon, Commissioner.

Good afternoon, professors. My name is Fraser Harland. I'm counsel for Michael Chong. And thank you for your very interesting testimony so far. I think it's -- many would agree that taking a class from any one of you

would be very interesting and it's been an interesting day so far.

I'm just going to ask you to expand or elaborate on a few points in both your witness statement, and then some of your testimony that I've heard.

And so I'm going to ask the Court Operator to call up WIT89.EN, which is your witness statement. If we could go to paragraph 74, please?

And focusing in on the last sentence in this paragraph, what we have here the witness statement, I think it's from you, Professor Owen, but discussing how identifying or attributing misinformation or disinformation to a foreign state actor is, in the words of the witness statement, "extremely difficult". And I was wondering if you could just elaborate a little bit on why that is the case and why it is extremely difficult to attribute in that way?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** So there's two parts to that; one is attributing the location of an actor, and the other is its intent and potential direction by a state. And both of those are difficult to identify.

The nature of social media communication and about how most platforms allow for accounts to be established is that the location is easily masked. So a small percentage of accounts on most platforms are linked to a specific location, and there are added technologies you can use to mask that location, in that case. So just difficult to know where content's originating from.

Now, some things can be assumed because some

outlets are known. Either people or location -- or media outlets or government actors are known and so we can assume something there. But the second piece is how do we decipher intent, and that is clearly beyond our capacity from our side.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Could I, just really quickly?

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Sure.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** The parentheses at the end of the sentence is using publicly available data that we use to inform our work, right? I mean, there are other ways to get at this, and I think sort of the Tenet Media, the indictment from the United States is a really good example where they have the literal text messages between Russia and -- right? Like, that's a very different scenario. We don't have text message data, right? We're looking at public social media posts. And that's the context in which this is very difficult, and in many cases, impossible.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** That's all very helpful. And I understand it would change your mandate significantly, but if you thought that you needed to have a high level of certainty to attribute to a foreign state actor in order to make a public statement, you wouldn't have a lot to say; is that fair?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** That would be a serious constraint.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Yeah.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** If we had to have

certainty that something is coming from a foreign source to report on it or do an incident around it, then it would be -- it would be very, very hard for us to do the work.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** And we heard during Stage 1 some uncertainty from the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol on whether foreign attribution is required, and I take your evidence on the difference between your work and what their work does, but -- so I'm not asking you to comment on the Cabinet directive or their mandate in that way, but is it fair to say that if a significant degree of state attribution is required before making disinformation known to Canadians, many incidents are just not going to meet that requirement?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think that's -- without access to intelligence, that's impossible for us to know. We don't know what government has access to.

I do think increasing the public understanding of disinformation as a baseline again going into elections is an important variable there. So that people don't demand flagging of content that isn't ultimately a deviation from that baseline. But on the first part, I just don't think that we can know that.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Sir, I think your question is slightly even more general than that, right, which is that if any process requires a certain attribution of a piece of information to a foreign actor before one can act, does that make it difficult? And the answer, candidly, is yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** It makes it very hard.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Okay, that's very helpful, thank you.

I have some questions now about MEO's resource allocation, and particularly for media monitoring.

So I understand from your discussion with Mr. Krongold that there's -- and correct me if I'm wrong, but I took it that there's three broad categories of research undertaken; there's digital trace collection, survey research, and then media monitoring. Do I have that right?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Okay. And for digital trace collection, you collect on six platforms, and I don't need to list hem here but one that's not on that list is WeChat; correct?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes, yes.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** And I'm wondering if you can just explain why that is. Is it just that it's one too many platforms or is there something specific about WeChat that would make digital trace collection either impossible or not something that makes sense for MEO to be undertaking?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So we did a preliminary exploration of a variety of social media platforms to sort of gauge, like, the -- in essence, what we're making is a calculation of how much effort would it be to collect data at scale on this platform, and sort of what

are -- like, let's rank the social media platforms in terms of applicability to the Canadian information ecosystem and importance to it. And WeChat, we would certainly like to be able to collect data at scale on that platform. But in sort of that determination it is below, for example, TikTok; it is below Instagram in terms of number of users in the Canadian context, consequence for politics in terms of where the majority of political influencers have accounts and are producing content. It doesn't mean that it's not important. It clearly is an important platform for many, many Canadians. But this is sort of like a resource allocation question, which is why when appropriate we devote resources to sort of that third stream to monitor the platform when possible.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** And that takes me to my next question. So you're not doing digital trace collection, but you do, or in some cases at least, look at WeChat in the media monitoring context, is that right?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, that's correct, although currently we don't have a researcher assigned to that.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Okay. And can I ask what kind of resources the media ecosystem dedicates to media monitoring during an election? And let's start sort of writ large, not just on WeChat but in general to that third branch of research of your work.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Are you -- is this, like, a full-time, an FTE question or like a ---

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Yeah, roughly -- I guess

the number of people doing that work would be helpful.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Actually the network wasn't in place during the previous election.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** So let's look at the previous election, ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** --- and then what you would expect in the upcoming election, if that's okay.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, so the core research team during 2021 were -- engaged in specifically that activity, there were eight researchers. They each were between 15 and 20 hours a week dedicated to that task. So that was, what, 2021? There was Mandarin-speaking research assistant as part of that team. So that individual had 15 to 20 hours a week, sometimes a little bit more, particularly in the middle of the campaign when these issues became salient. But that's sort of the resource footprint that was available at that time.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** And so the network that's now been established, will that make things look different for an upcoming election, in terms of the number of people that might be engaged in this kind of research?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, so given sort of the funding conversation we just had, like it's hard to predict exactly ---

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Right.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- the amount of resources we have. What I can talk about is the B.C.

election that we're currently working on. So there are four B.C.-based research assistants. So that's for a provincial election, a single province. And that's dedicated to that; that's their exclusive responsibility. And then it's half time for a team, like, the general kind of media monitoring team at MEO, which at current footprint, I think, I would say sort of four people categorizing that. So that's eight again. But what we're talking about is a provincial election versus a federal one, so it's a much smaller footprint. We wouldn't scale that up proportionately so it wouldn't be 80, but it would be more than the eight that we had in the previous election.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** And would you agree that to do that work effectively, more than eight is preferable, at least, for that work. I mean, you might say you'd like one in every riding, I understand that there's always a question here. But did you see limitations, I guess, with eight that you -- with the smaller number that you think can be addressed with a larger number of people doing that work?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. There's diminishing returns to this, where adding an additional person doesn't yield additional insight. But depending on sort of the areas identified, I would say, yeah, we would aim for somewhere in the 10 to 14 mark, I think, for a federal election. And that would allow us to cover sort of -- I'm just going to be delicate about it, like politically relevant linguistic minority communities, different sort of issue-based communities across the country.

Like, I think 14 would give a reasonable kind of overview but we'd have to really kind of make that determination at the time, and that would depend on sort of our assessment of where we think activity is going to be happening during the election.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** And with the Incident Response Protocol, can that lead to more people being added to that type of research, or is it only the digital tracing survey research that gets applied in an incident?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** It is that -- that third one is absolutely one of the main focuses during an incident. That's when resources are devoted exclusively to that incident. And so that's many -- that's many hours in a week of dedicated attention to a specific topic.

And so actually the surge capacity, I think it's called in the emergency management literature, is actually primarily on that third one with -- because the digital trace is sort of an engineering question. You know, it's tricky to scale up and down very quickly, whereas the third one is where you can devote the resources and surge that capacity fastest.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** And to be clear, that capacity is linguistic capability, understanding of a community, understanding of an issue, of a region, of a country, of a political context; right? So it's like, it could be a very diverse range of capacities that's needed to understand one of those incidents, ---

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Absolutely.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** --- depending on where and what it is.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** We discussed RRM a little bit earlier with -- or you did, with Mr. Herrera. And we heard during the Stage 1 hearings in the spring that the RRM team has about five or six analysts, and in 2019, they had no one who speaks Mandarin. In 2021, they had one person proficient in Mandarin.

So I'd take you'd agree with me that based on your own experience, and this first question may be a bit obvious, but without someone who speaks Mandarin Chinese, it would be difficult to monitor WeChat and other Chinese language platforms. Is that fair?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes, that's fair.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** And that team of five or six, just hearing what you said about an incident, that would be potentially straining them significantly, particularly if you have only one for a particular language to respond to an incident and understand an incident during an election? Would you agree with that?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, with an important caveat, ---

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Sure.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- which is that the research team that we muster are researchers drawn from across academia with various expertise that are not specifically trained and dedicated to that function at all times.

And my understanding, my limited understanding of the five-person team, I didn't know it was five, but this -- these analysts at RM, is that that they are entirely dedicated to this function, or primarily dedicated to that function, and have training and sort of an institutional structure that supports that as their primary function.

So I -- it's hard for me to make a determination about whether one is enough in that context. From our perspective, from research assistants in a university and an academic context, I would want more than one.

**MR. FRASER HARLAND:** Okay. I think I'm nearly out of time. And again, your testimony was very interesting. Thank you so much for answering my questions.

Thank you, Commissioner.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Ms. Kakkar for Jenny Kwan.

**--- CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MS. MANI KAKKAR:**

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Thank you, Commissioner.

Good afternoon, panelists. I appreciate you being here as well. We've gotten information from panelists who've previously told us that anytime they have a question about the internet or social media, they have to call their kids, so this is distinctly different from that experience.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I do too, sometimes.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Do you really? Well, it's good to know.

I've got one sort of minor question to ask you about impact, which I know you said was difficult, but the vast majority of my questions are going to be about transparency and regulation.

To get the one question out of the way, actually, Mr. Bridgman -- or Professor Bridgman, you had mentioned that impact was really on a bell curve and the impact was most visible of disinformation or misinformation at the extremes, rather than that middle.

I was curious if there were any studies done on the demographics of the people who make up those extremes? Age, ethnicity or background, membership in a diaspora community, how likely they are to vote, as examples.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, it's a really good question. The recognition of the importance of the long tail is a relatively recent phenomena in sort of this literature. So I'm talking in the last year and a half. So again, sort of the way academic cycles move, there hasn't been sort of a lot of opportunity to do sort of detailed investigations.

There have been several studies looking at the attitudinal profile of these individuals. So looking at the -- it will come as no surprise that the people who are most active online also hold the most extreme political views. They're also the most active in political life in online spaces. These sorts of characteristics.

I personally haven't seen any study that looks at their demographic information, and particularly, as you said, their status in linguistic or ethnic minority communities. It's a study that should be done and it's of great interest.

I'll leave it there.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** That's fair. And just as a small follow-up, I imagine it's outside the scope of the work that you do?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, our -- I mean, it touches on it to a certain extent.

Yeah, I don't know if you want to ---

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah, it's -- it could be done with the methods we use. Yeah.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Okay. Thank you, I appreciate that. I don't know if any of the other panelists want to add anything on that front?

Okay. Turning now more to the transparency and regulation piece, all of my questions will focus on sort of the data, the amplification, and then lastly on safeguards.

So speaking first about data, you talked extensively about API data that you were able to gather from different platforms, different platforms have different rules, rules change over time.

You also mentioned, and I think this was, again, Professor Bridgman, scraping data from some apps like WeChat. Could you just explain the difference between

scraping and API as a source of data?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So the API is a hosted service that a platform or an entity provides to provide access to its data. There are actually -- their origins are essentially because at scale, scraping was occurring in online spaces. So particularly on Reddit, sort of early days, people were visiting Reddit and instead of going through sort of a sanctioned API, they were just visiting the webpage and having a script that read all the contents and wrote it into an ingestible form in a database. So essentially that's -- the origin of APIs was scraping.

As APIs have been cut off, a variety of actors have turned back to sort of a scraping technique. And what a scraping technique essentially is, is that you use the front end of a social media platform and you collect data off that front end, as opposed to going through -- and so, you know, you're doing repeated requests to that webserver and you're saying, "I want every -- you know, I'm going to visit 1,000 webpages today." And you do that in a computer assisted way. You know, it's not a researcher going, and clicking, and scrolling.

So scraping is used by academic researchers around the world to get access to data that platforms or other entities do not offer up through an API or some other sort of digestible form.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** With that said, is one more reliable or accurate than the other?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** It is entirely

platform dependent. So ---

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Okay.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- in general, you would think that the API provides higher fidelity to the original source data. However, there have been several instances of, particularly with Facebook, where API access has turned out to have provided extremely incomplete and highly biased data. And so the ideal is that they match perfectly. It is very rarely the case. But as a general rule of thumb, the API tends to provide better data access. But again, it depends on the platform and year we're talking about.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Thank you.

Professor Owen, do you have anything to add?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Just that there's a broader principle here, which is if we think these data are in the public interest, then we need a predictable transparent way of researchers in a cautious responsible way getting access to them, and that's not the environment we live in right now. And it's not an overstatement to say that's created a crisis in this whole research community globally. We're not alone here. And the best way around that that we know at this stage is what Europe's done, which is mandated sharing of certain data that's in the public interest to researchers that are responsibly using it.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** I appreciate your response. And just to maybe have you think about what Professor Bridgman has just said, what part of your proposal would

address the quality of the data you get back to ensure that you're not getting API data that's biased or incomplete, that you could frankly maybe get better data if you scraped?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** My proposal? That model, you mean?

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Yeah, that model of mandating.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Like, how we share in that model?

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** How would you sort of address that issue?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** So it needs to be overseen by a regulatory body, in my view, which has audit capacity, which is what's happened in Europe with the *Digital Services Act*, in order to ensure that data's being provided and the -- it's accurate and so on and so forth. But it also needs a legitimate third-party institution that has the capacity, governance, and oversight, to distribute those data responsibly. So it needs both of those things or this doesn't work. If it's only the company deciding which researchers get access, and to what, it's missing that accountability function, ---

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Right.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** --- even if it's being distributed responsibly, which is probably is. And if it doesn't have that external body -- or if it doesn't have the governance oversight, we don't know exactly what we're getting and there's no mandate for the companies to share it.

So you really need both of those pieces.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** I appreciate that.

Professor Bridgman, Professor Owen, do you have anything to add?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Not on this.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** And actually, that was going to be my last question, but I moved it up. And I just want to go back a little bit to WeChat and TikTok as specific apps or platforms that I think you may have noticed in the Commission's documents that have been released publicly have appeared perhaps disproportionately.

So let's discuss TikTok first. I just wanted to know what has TikTok's API policy -- what is TikTok's API policy currently?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** The API is currently rolled out for researchers in the United States. If you have an "edu" address, you can apply and it's vetted by the company itself. There is no data access for any researcher outside of the United States at this point in time.

Maybe when DSA goes into force and data access is mandated there, there will be that availability in Europe, but currently, as a Canadian researcher, there is no horizon right now for data access to TikTok through an API.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Thank you.

I don't know if that, Professor Loewen, had anything to do with you moving to Cornell, but it seems convenient that you're there now.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I did not move to Ithica

so I could spend more time on TikTok.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** That's fair.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** But you have.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah, I have.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** What had TikTok's policies been before, or have they been the same with respect to the API access?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So prior to this, there was no API.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Okay.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** This is the first -- this is their launch of their API under pressure from our counterparts in other parts of the world who are saying, "Hey, we need data access to study this thing. It's enormously influential for political discourse in our country".

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** And how does all of this work for WeChat, which is different from TikTok? It's not a social media platform, it's an app.

Can you explain that a little bit?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So there's no data, there's no API data access for WeChat.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** I guess you'd just be scraping if you had to get that data.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** If you had to collect that data, it would need to be through scraping or some similar method.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** And there wouldn't be a

policy or regulatory approach like the mandate for API access by social media platforms that could apply to WeChat or WhatsApp or those kinds of apps.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So this gets into tricky territory of like private or semi-private groups, and I think that's a distinction that -- where we have historically drawn the line and we say we are interested in public data.

Now, a lot of groups on WeChat in particular are public. They are searchable, indexable in the same way that telegram channels are and you can just search and you can find them, and that sort of would be public.

There is nothing that would stop WeChat from having an API or providing that data access. Like that would -- well, there's nothing -- there's no technical reason why that could not occur, but it doesn't exist at the current moment as far as I know.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** And so going to your proposal or mandate, would that be something that you would include or would you have more concerns about the privacy issues?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I think you need to be very careful about mandating data sharing from ultimately private platforms.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Thank you.

Now, you've talked about sort of transparency and regulation of API data and how that is important to being able to have accountability in place. One other thing that

you talked about were the algorithms.

And one piece of your testimony really stuck with me because you said, "Platforms are like having a voice, but the algorithm is being heard -- determines who's heard".

Arguably, FI actors are more effective when they're heard, and putting aside sort of a situation like Kirkland Lake, I wanted to discuss with you the algorithms themselves, the differences across platforms, and potential regulation of them.

So to start, I just wanted to ask how are algorithms different across platforms at a high level?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I mean, in part we don't know, or almost entirely we don't know.

We can guess how they function based on the broad changes over time to the platforms and the trend line is towards, as I mentioned earlier, these centralized feeds that are pulling from, actually, a more limited number of variables and a smaller catalogue of content and pushing it to as many people as possible.

So that's -- what we know about the TikTok algorithm is, actually, a very limited catalogue of content is seen by a lot of people. A small proportion of content is seen by most people. And that's the algorithm doing that functioning of highly, highly filtering content to see what's going to really pop on the platform for whatever reason.

But the -- again, because we don't have visibility into these systems, we don't know.

On your point about foreign interference

actors possibly wanting to see large audiences, I mean, that might be the case, but it might also be that micro targeting is also a valuable capacity and it might be that micro targeting in the current algorithmic ecosystem is more difficult because of the nature of this filtering function of the current algorithms. But like, again, this gets to the point of we don't know, right, and we don't have visibility into this, which is a challenge.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** If I could just briefly add something.

So let's try to demystify a little bit. I mean, an algorithm is just a series of rules, right, that says why something will be seen. So an algorithm in the old newsroom might be, you know, if it bleeds, it leads, right. Something that's sensational put on the front of the newspaper is better than something that's not sensational. And that's a human making that decision, but take that as an analogy.

Where things are starting to become increasingly different, I think, is that the algorithm that actually drove Twitter a few years ago was actually quite simple, about how likely something was to be put on your feed was a function of how many people had interacted with it. It was very rule based.

There's a chance now that algorithms are going to be much less supervised in the sense that the algorithms themselves are going to learn about what makes a post interesting in a way where the person implementing the

algorithm may even not know why, exactly, that algorithm is choosing what it's choosing.

So before where a person managing the site might actually have set up the rules by which things get prioritized, that algorithmic learn has -- which is to say it has AI, real AI, not -- like in the true sense of it, can have the capacity then to start choosing things on grounds that we don't understand. So that becomes even more difficult from a regulatory perspective.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** I apologize. I realize I'm getting close to the end of my time.

Commissioner, may I have an indulgence of a few moments just to ask my last question or two?

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Yes, you can ask your last question.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Thank you.

So Lucy Watson, who is the head of the New Democratic -- NDP political party had suggested that algorithms need to be regulated. I think what you're also saying is that there's just a lack of transparency.

I want to ask you as my final question whether -- what your thoughts are on the possibility of getting more transparency or regulation when it comes to algorithms and how effective that might be.

Is it possible, would it be effective?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I'm not quite sure I would know what it would mean to regulate individual algorithms.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** What about on the transparency point? Could we be more ---

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** Could we get more transparency out of social media platforms?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** This is Taylor's point of expertise, but yes.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes, to an extent, but because of the challenge Peter outlined, in the policy context -- this policy conversation, I think people often put too much expectation -- too high expectations on what transparency and visibility in algorithms are actually going to do.

I think that these are constantly evolving. Often, now, AI structured systems that just seeing 10 or 20 or 30-page piece of code for any individual person at any one moment is not going to provide the kind of accountability many hope it will. I think it's part of it, and probably audit capacity's more important for algorithms.

So the -- in the *Online Safety Act* in the UK, the DSA and in the Canadian *Online Harms Act*, there is a power to a regulator to audit an algorithm if it's seen to be causing a harm or creating a risk. And that's probably more of a targeted forensic capacity than just making these things public to everybody.

It's a very different function. It's a visibility into it, but it's by people who can investigated a particular case and a case of an algorithm giving or feeding

or amplifying a particular piece of either illegal or harmful content.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** It might also be hard to just run it through the courts to argue that the government should be able to determine what a publisher prioritizes on their site, which is in some ways what we're talking about.

**MS. MANI KAKKAR:** It takes a lot of self-restraint not to ask a follow-up question, but thank you.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

So next one is counsel for Erin O'Toole. I think he is on Zoom.

**--- CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. PRESTON LIM:**

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** That's right. Thank you, Madam Commissioner.

Hi, everyone. My name is Preston Lim. And first off, I just wanted to thank the three professors for their insightful testimony today.

If I could first take us to the following document, CAN35445, and specifically to page 11.

Right. And do you all have that up?

I see.

That's great. Thank you.

So my understanding of the information incident research approach is that it grades incidents based on the reach and speed of the mis- or disinformation, the extent of the intervention effort required by appropriate government bodies, and the nature of the impact.

So the first question, just a simple

question, ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Sorry, could I just clarify super quickly?

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Two things. One, not intervention by government. Intervention by civil society journalists -- by any actor in the information ecosystem. And then the other thing that's just really important is that this was an early sort of concept note about how to grade incidents and sort of the -- there's been this updated incident response protocol.

But I think all your questions are still going to be relevant, just this is sort of -- this was a document ---

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** One hundred (100) percent.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- that now is a few months old and has been kind of updated by the public release of the protocol.

**Mr. PRESTON LIM:** Right. So that's great. I was actually going to ask about some of the differences, but let's just move on.

And I'll ask you to actually apply the protocol which you talked about today to a specific incident, to the extent that you feel comfortable.

So maybe sticking with Professor Bridgman, if I could just ask about the allegations related to mis- and disinformation that occurred in Kenny Chiu's riding, Steveston—Richmond East, during the 2021 Federal Election.

How would you apply that framework, that protocol rather, to analyse the extent of dis- and misinformation that occurred in his riding?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Okay. So I'm -- I think it's actually a useful exercise to talk through this. One thing to note about the protocol is this isn't a decision made by an individual person. It's made by sort of the -- it's named in the document as the incident commander in consultation with relevant stakeholders. So it wouldn't be just me kind of making that determination.

We could go through step by step, but I could just tell you off the top that is 100 percent an incident. That is one that would require a significant dedication of resources the instant that the Research Network is made available on it. We could talk through the specific categories if that would be of interest, but I could say without a doubt that that would be classified as an incident and would require a notification and as many updates as we would be able to do that would continue to shed light on the situation.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** That's a very helpful answer. If I could actually indulge you and if you could expand for about a minute or two just on why exactly that set of facts would be characterized as an incident, that would be very helpful.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes. I think it might be useful to go through the current -- I'm trying to -- sorry, there's a lot of these documents. I'm trying to find

-- I think they're WT -- no, they're not WTs.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** The current protocol?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** The current protocol.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** It's COM587.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** COM587. Okay. Yes.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** If we could pull that up, that would be great.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, and I think it's page 5 and 6 of that document. Or I guess it's page 6 and 7 of that document. Down to the criteria, I believe.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** I think it's on the screen.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Oh, yes. Thank you. Sorry.

Just scroll down a little bit more. There's the -- here are the different criteria.

So would you like me to sort of walk through each one? Is that kind of -- and just ---

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** That would be great.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Okay.

**Mr. PRESTON LIM:** Yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Okay. No, it's a useful exercise.

The speed was very high of this in that both the impacted community -- this is my understanding of the events, and again, this will be made in consultation, but let's say my understanding is that the speed was quite high both within the community itself and at the national level,

the rate at which this became a story of interest nationally. So it would have been a high speed.

Engagement. I think engagement with the original content was relatively low on WeChat, but with the subsequent discussion, which is also a factor here, again, high engagement, high interest.

Relatively small population affected. And remember, when we say small population, we're not -- we don't mean, you know, tens of Canadians. There's still many Canadians impacted, but this is at a population level. So relatively small scale for this particular incident.

If you go down, there's the four other criteria.

Scope. This is enormously important. This is the election outcome. So this is the protocol for an out of election period. During an election period, of course there's heightened attention, but the scope is the fundamental building block of our democracy. People voting, disinformation trying to persuade voters, this would be a serious -- this is not a question of, for example, not that these things are not enormously important, but social cohesion or faith in democratic institutions, it is also that, but it is primarily about sort of the fundamental success of our democracy. So I would say that in sort of the scope term, this would be a very high priority.

It would be a high complexity. So that would need to be considered in terms of resources needed to dedicate. High complexity because of the language, the

specific riding, and requiring to have resources in that riding and to -- this is the sort of investigation that will require a high degree of resources.

Intervention efforts, yeah, high.

And enormous learning potential and importance. Canada's a multi-lingual country and it is of critical importance to understand how out-of-country media and influence is consequential for our elections.

So I mean, we just walked through that quickly. I'm not sure the extent to which those comments would withstand scrutiny, but what I would say is that this would very clearly fall under an incident that we would want to investigate immediately and devote significant resources to.

In almost -- I can't imagine a situation during an election when we would not -- this is the type of kind of drop everything and dedicate resources to it moment.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** Okay. Great. That's very helpful. But if we could kind of stick with this theme of communication within the Chinese diaspora, I know that one thing that MEO is focused on is how disinformation narratives impact specific communities.

And we've heard before the Commission how the Chinese diaspora is particularly vulnerable to Communist Party of China dis- and misinformation efforts on WeChat. And I can point you to the language if we need to, but I think we can just move on to the question for now.

What specific measures should the government

or civil society implement to increase Chinese diaspora community members' resilience to such FI efforts?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think it's a bit beyond the bounds of sort of our understanding of that specific problem. I think -- well, I'm not sure it's radically different than what the Government of Canada should be doing to increase the resilience of all Canadians' vulnerability to disinformation.

There are clearly particular -- particularities to that example, but overall, I think we as a society need to know more about the nature of our ecosystem, know more about the vulnerabilities, have much higher degrees of digital literacy, and hear more from our government about what the real threats are.

And I'm not sure that's necessarily particular to any one community.

Now, there are communities that face, clearly, a heightened degree of physical precarity, in part due to the information environment they use and consume. And that might require more targeted assistance or education from government, but it's difficult to say on a case-by-case basis.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** Great. Professor Loewen and Professor Bridgman, anything to add, or shall we move ---

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I would just add that I don't think that there's a single strategy for trying to build out resilience against misinformation or disinformation of any kind.

It's worth government and civil society actors maybe exploring what it is in particular about Chinese mis- and disinformation on WeChat that is persuasive.

And it's probably, as you would know, I mean, it probably is influenced by the fact that there is very vigorous diasporic media in our Chinese communities. That's largely to the good, but it reports a lot of what's going on in China. There's a high degree of trust in those media sources, which can then become sources of misinformation and disinformation.

You know, there's also a fairly high degree of trust comparatively in our Chinese-Canadian communities in the Government of Canada. So if the Government of Canada could share information about what's happening here and some of the ways that misinformation is spread, it may well be the case that that alerts people a little bit more.

But I think this is -- the particular case you've identified is a serious example of what might be a more general concern about the integrity of information in that ecosystem.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** That's very helpful. So next question, sticking with this theme of integrity of information, another issue that I'd kind of like your input on, to the extent that we can get it, is -- you know, relates to the dangers that TikTok poses. So we have evidence before the Commission that discusses how TikTok poses a national security risk because of the types of data that TikTok can collect.

So the first question -- and this will be a two-part. The first question is, in your view, should the current ban on the use of TikTok on government phones be expanded to a larger ban that affects more Canadians?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I don't think I have enough information about the nature of the threat to give that guidance.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** So I can -- I can take us to a document, but that might not be helpful.

Professor Loewen, Professor Bridgman, any insights here?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Not from me.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I have none to share except that I think, obviously, the bar -- the bar is high whenever the Canadian government is going to keep people from accessing some information source. The bar has to be quite high. That's quite different from the bar that you might -- the test you might apply to public servants using government phones for something, right.

But I just note that it's -- you know, you're getting into the territory of constitutional rights.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** Okay. In that case, I'm going to move on to the final question, and I'll direct this, perhaps, to Professor Owen because you talked about some of the European legal tools and policy tools that have been adopted in recent years.

So sticking, perhaps, with the example of TikTok and how it's a conduit for mis- and disinformation,

the current regulatory framework in Canada, I think many would agree, has large gaps that prevent the effective countering of Chinese Communist Party led or other foreign led interference efforts. Could I get your opinion, to the extent you have one, on the German approach whereby social media companies are fined up to 50 million euros if they fail to take down obviously illegal hate speech, criminal material and fake news from their sites within 24 hours of being notified?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think it's been shown to be a flawed approach to governing online platforms.

There's two broad ways you can govern harmful content on platforms. You can do what the German government did through its NetzDG policy that you described, which is called a notice and takedown approach, which requires platforms after content is already posted and flagged as illegal or -- in the German case, illegal. They have to take it down or face that penalty.

The challenge with that is it leads -- because the fines are so high, it incentivizes any content close to that line to be removed by the platforms, so it actually incentivizes a limitation on free expression. And that's what's been shown to happen in Germany.

The alternative approach, which, as you mentioned, that Europe has done and is in the Canadian *Online Harms Act*, is called an *ex ante* approach, which is to incentivize better and safer design of the product itself so that that harmful and illegal content is not amplified and,

in some cases, is not allowed to be posted at all. And that structural approach has been shown in the context it's been applied to be far more effective.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** That's very helpful and I ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Neither get at foreign interference, I should say.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** Could you expand on that a bit?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Foreign interference requires an adjudication of intent that is difficult to mandate through regulation. Certain platforms have their own mechanisms to engage with it, governments have theirs. But mandating through regulation platforms to make real-time determinations of the intent of foreign actors is a challenge and probably one that I wouldn't recommend a government do.

**MR. PRESTON LIM:** That's very helpful.

Unless the other professors have anything to add, I cede the rest of my time back to the Commissioner.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

So next one is Me Sirois for the RCDA.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** We were supposed to take a break at 3:00. I believe it's ---

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** No, it's after you, the break.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** After me?

Okay, that's fine. I was going to about 25 minutes, so I was wondering whether ---

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** No, I think we'll go on and we'll take the break after that except if there's a reason for taking a break right away, but I don't think so.

**--- CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:**

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Good afternoon. I'm Guillaume Sirois for the Russian-Canadian Democratic Alliance.

I'd like to ask the court reporter to pull document RCD61, please. For the record, it is the World Economic Forum, the Global Risks Report of 2024, the 19th edition.

**COURT OPERATOR:** Can you please repeat the number?

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** RCD61.

Thank you.

**--- EXHIBIT No. RCD0000061:**

The Global Risks Report 2024

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** I would like to look at page 8, please. And those are the -- this is at the introduction of the report and it talks about the global risks ranked by severity over the short and long term.

I wonder, could you please tell us for the record what you notice for the top risks over a two years period and over a 10 years period?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** The authors of the report seem to think mis- and disinformation will be less of a threat in 10 years.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** But it's the biggest

threat now.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** But it's the biggest now.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** And what are the other threats that are beyond -- more significant, perhaps, in 10 years?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I can read them for you, if you like. Extreme weather events, critical change earth systems, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, and natural resource shortages.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** All environmental risks.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Okay. I would like to go a bit further down the document, please.

And I will to you the -- well, the conclusions or -- the introduction of that report, the first paragraph that we just skipped. Yes.

I will read that to you and just ask you whether you agree with these conclusions or findings:

> "Emerging as the most severe global risk anticipated over the next two years, foreign and domestic actors alike will leverage misinformation and disinformation to further widen societal and political divides. As close to 3 billion people are expected to head to the electoral

polls across several economies over the next two years, the widespread use of misinformation and disinformation and tools to disseminate it may undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments. Resulting unrest could range from violent protests and hate crimes to civil confrontation and terrorism."

Do you have anything to -- do you agree with these conclusions and do you have anything to add?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** In my own estimations, I think they might be over-indexing the wider consequences of misinformation. I think there's lots of things that might, unfortunately, lead to civil confrontation, hate crimes, terrorism, violent protests. Those existed long before the internet.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think they're pretty sweeping statements that I'm not sure I fully agree with.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** You believe they are exaggerating?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I don't want to say that. I think it's -- I'm not sure what the value of commenting on what is pretty sweeping conjecture is.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Okay. I'd like to take you to a Government of Canada report, then. It's RCD53.

Sorry. RCD53, not 52. Thank you.

**--- EXHIBIT No. RCD0000053:**

Disruptions on the Horizon

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** This is a 2024 report called "Disruption on the Horizon" prepared by the Government of Canada. I'd like to go at page 10, please.

Again, the report -- this is top 10 disruptions that Canadians will face over a nine-year period.

The top one, disruption, is people cannot tell what is the truth or what is not.

I'd like to go at page 14, please, where there is a greater explanation about that risk. And scroll down a little bit, please.

So we talked about the information ecosystem being flooded with human and AI generated content.

Can you please read the first two sentences of the paragraph in the blue box, please, one of you, for the record?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:**

"The information ecosystem is flooded with human- and Artificial Intelligence…"

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** I'm sorry, the ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Oh, in the box?

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** --- paragraph in the blue box, yeah. Exactly.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:**

"More powerful generative AI tools, declining trust in traditional knowledge sources, and algorithms

designed for emotional engagement rather than factual reporting could increase distrust and social fragmentation. More people may live in separate realities shaped by their personalized media and information ecosystems."

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Is this less sweeping statements perhaps that you could agree with?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So the points being made in sort of both documents that mis- and disinformation are a serious threat, I think we devote a fair amount of our lives to studying mis- and disinformation and online harms. I mean, that's something that is very important to us and we consider to be an enormous threat.

So we -- you know, to a certain extent, maybe I'll speak for myself, like, I agree that this is an enormous challenge.

I will also say though that our work at the Observatory and the work of the Research Network, mis- and disinformation plays an important role, but it is not the only kind of area of focus. And some of the other ones, including in the first document, sort of talking about social polarization and other social forces are also important and sort of understanding and helping to facilitate sort of democratic conversation in online spaces is what we are kind of working towards, what the goal is, ultimately. And mis- and disinformation erodes that and is a serious threat. I do

not want to downplay that at all.

But I think this mis- and disinformation category has come to be used to talk about anything online that is dangerous or harmful, and it's -- I hope one of the things our testimony has done today is to share that the reality is actually a little bit more complicated and the work we're trying to do is not just about that -- those phenomena, although they are enormously important and enormously problematic, and frequently sort of the types of incident response we're going to do are going to be about that. But, like, is the Kirkland Lake bot thing an instance of misinformation? Some definitions would say yes. Others would say no. But it's still an issue and something that needs to be addressed.

So that's my little soapbox there.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Thank you for your clarifications. I'll go ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Can I add one thing to that?

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Yes, please.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I'm very hesitant and I'm generally sceptical of efforts to prioritize harm -- levels of risk of different -- like, how do we prioritize the risk of ecological collapse against the risk of misinformation? Like, I don't know the metrics on which we would make that comparison, and so I think that's -- those kinds of efforts in these reports, and I noticed them when we first were shared with those reports. Like, these are very difficult

things to adjudicate between and I'm not sure we have the capacity to do it.

But part of the work of the Observatory that we've been trying to do is to give context to statements like this. I mean, there's a huge -- this is -- you said this isn't a sweeping statement. This is a sweeping statement and there's a lot of nuance even just in this. I mean, it's very -- just to give two examples, it's very possible that the -- some of the risks of the generative AI tools that we've talked about, this combination of readily available bots and the automation of their content production, like that is a real harm.

But it's very possible ---

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Potentially.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Potentially.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** But it also could very well lead to increased trust in traditional knowledge, not declining trust in traditional knowledge sources; right? We don't know. But there's -- it's equally as plausible that that will -- the degradation and the increase -- the degradation of content and reliability of content in our ecosystem will drive us to more traditional content. But we don't know that; right? These are things we need to study as they happen and get a better understanding of. So I think we have to be very careful of certainly making policy based on these kinds of sweeping statements.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** You can pull the

document down now. I just have a quick follow-up question about your last statement.

I'm wondering, over the last 10 years or so, have we seen a greater trust in our traditional media or what has the trend been? I understand it's hard to make a definitive answer -- to have a definitive answer, but what is the trend currently?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** We know it's declining.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** I'll move to the 2021 Election now, please.

If we can pull CAN134, please? CAN134.

**--- EXHIBIT No. CAN0000134:**

RRM Canada Weekly Trend Analysis

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** So this is the RRM Canada Weekly Trend Analysis for the week of September 9, 2015.

I understand the MEO was involved in this -- with the RRM Canada in monitoring social media at that time?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes, that's correct. We were part of, I think in these weekly trend analyses, there are two kind of external partners that were part of these regular conversations with RRM during the election, and we provided sort of information as we were able to, live. Yeah.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Okay. Yeah, we see -- we can go a bit further down the document, please.

We see actually a paragraph where -- that is attributed to the MEO.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Right.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** I think it's that same page.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Contracted partners. Yeah. You just passed it.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** No, it's right -- well, there may be more, but I'm most interested in the one -- --

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Okay.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** --- right here at page 2, at the middle of the page, approximately. Yes, exactly.

So this is -- I'm wondering how this paragraph came about. Is this you talking with RRM Canada and they summarized your discussion? Did you prepare that sentence yourself? How does it work?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes, that was a summary of the conversation we had with RRM. We had a weekly meeting between Yonder, MEO, and RRM during the election. And this was a -- sort of an opportunity to share what was being observed amongst these three kind of groups that were doing sort of election work at that time. Yeah.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** And we see that Yonder, which is another contracted partner, was identifying amplification from Russian state sources, or Russia friendly accounts in the paragraph just above. I'm wondering what -- why was this not observed by the MEO?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think the -- so what we're looking at, I think, is the answer; right? I think the reason why -- another way to ask and answer your question is

why were we finding some things that they weren't finding? And it's because we had more focus on behaviour.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Okay.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** So as we're surveying people, right, and we've got information on -- sorry, this is on social stuff. I guess you take this, sorry.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Without getting too detailed here, I am skeptical of the analysis that Yonder provided in this, given that there was extremely low level of engagement with the content. So I recall these meetings. And to have an account on Twitter on the time that historically tweeted in Russian interests make a comment on Canadian politics is not an indication of an interference effort, especially one that had such small and minimal impact.

So I think in this case, everyone was doing their due diligence and trying to sort of understand what was there, and getting a baseline understanding, and something that we advocate very strongly is to try to have that baseline understanding. But in this case, what we're seeing is very minimal activity, very inconsequential. We like to talk about impact. Inconsequential activity that was documented, but was not meaningful.

And so we would not -- the methodologies varied slightly as well. They had this basic list of basic -- sorry, the list was basically a set of Chinese and Russian state affiliated accounts that they were monitoring during the election and evaluating the extent to which they were

commenting on Canadian politics. This is from my recollection.

And so we were primarily oriented around Canadian discourse on sort of -- amongst Canadian entities and Canadian hashtags, and so we weren't observing that data and Yonder had that covered.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Okay. I'd like to go to RCD19, please, which is the indictment that we've been referring during your examination concerning Tenet Media. RCD19, please.

**--- EXHIBIT No. RCD0000019:**

U.S. Indictment Kalashnikov and Afanasyeva

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Can we go at page 5, please? Specifically at paragraph 10(a). Yeah, so we see paragraph (a), subparagraph (a) is really the one that's interesting. Just below, please, further down, 10(a). Yes. Thank you.

So we see:

> "From in or about March 2021 to in or about February 2022, Founder-1 [who has been identified in media reports as Lauren Chen] created videos, posted social media content, and wrote articles pursuant to a written contract between Founder-1's Canadian company ... and RT's parent organization, ANO TV-Novosti."

RT is "Russia Today".

And this paragraph also explained that the content being published was not always or rarely attributed to RT.

I want to show you some examples of that influencer's Twitter feed during the September 9 to September 15 period. It's at RCD36, please.

**--- EXHIBIT No. RCD0000036:**

Lauren Chen 2021-08-15 to 2021-09-25

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** If we can go at page -- yeah, we can go at page 11, please, to start.

So that's a post by Erin O'Toole on September 14, so right before the report was -- RRM Canada report was published.

Can we go down to see the reaction of the posts?

So there's a publication from Lauren Chen:

> "I would rather Trudeau than you. At least he's honest about being a leftist."

We can go further down a little bit to page 12.

So this is a live discussion that Lauren Chen, who was under contract with RT -- there's no attribution to RT here. And that influencer received $10 million to set up Tenet Media network as well more recently.

So she hosts a discussion with Maxime Bernier and PPC candidate David Freiheit. It receives 17,000 views.

I'm wondering if this is inconsequential, in your views.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** There's two ways of answering the question, right. One is -- and the answers are yes and no in the following sense, just in my own estimation and professional opinion.

The first is, it's highly consequential that someone, a Canadian, was taking money from a Russian government-controlled entity to influence Canadian politics. That's highly consequential in and of itself.

If one person had viewed this, it's consequential, right.

Aengus and Taylor can give you a sense of how many views of videos there are even if we look to Canadian content on YouTube in a day, but the potential for 17,000 views to have a material effect on a Canadian election is exceedingly low. You know, every dollar that was spent here did absolutely nothing to elect a single PPC candidate in this election. You may make an argument it took away from Conservatives a little bit, but my own research in my lab is done on how little Canadian elections are affected by local factors suggests that you really have to meet a lot of conditions to have an influence on an actual election outcome at a local level. And 17,000 views, most of them from people who are probably already persuaded to support the PPC likely from across the country, was probably immaterial, to be candid with you, in my opinion, on the outcome of the election.

It says nothing about the stain that this

places on this individual for this -- the creation of this stuff in concert with the Russian government.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Maybe I'll just add here.

The reason we open an incident on this indictment and on the events surrounding it is that we consider them enormously consequential and enormously important for understanding -- to -- you know, that Canadians really do need to understand the context in which this occurred and what occurred.

That incident, we will be reporting on it in the weeks to come with a debrief and we will sort of have our full analysis of it.

Yeah, this stuff does matter and, you know, there's important questions here. Why did RT do this? What was their interest? Who were they targeting? These sorts of questions, they should be asked and they should be answered as best as possible by us and by others.

And yeah, I scrolled through these Tweets. I guess maybe it was you, but whoever had sort of pulled out like references to Canada from this individual -- and this isn't unique. The six Tenet Media influencers all discuss Canada on a regular basis and we are, by virtue of proximity and embeddedness in the North American information ecosystem, the North American English and speaking information ecosystem, we are enormously subject to this sort of effort.

Influencers are incredibly important at spreading messages and convincing people, particularly those

tail ends that we were talking about earlier.

And so I think as a Canadian and as a researcher, this is a matter of enormous importance to have a real thorough investigation of.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** There's -- just a last thing.

There's a subsequent question about if we find this is impactful and damaging and potentially something we want to dissuade, what do we do about that. And I don't think the answer is to ban the speech itself.

There are lots of either harmful things that are done online or acts of foreign interference that efforts to ban will have widespread repercussions on the legitimate speech of others.

There's also lots of other levers we could use from a policy context to engage with the challenge of foreign interference, in this case, something like a foreign registry, foreign agent registry. So I think when we look at these problems, even if they're in the digital environment, we need to look at a range of policies that aren't just about shaping what can and can't be said online.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** I want to -- we can pull the document down now, please.

I simply want to go back to that notion of incident. And like I think I can follow you on the idea that on an incident-by-incident basis the impact may be relatively low, but if we take a broader perspective on the whole environment -- ecosystem over the years since then, let's

take a -- since 2016, the U.S. Presidential election, up until 2024 where we have Tenet Media in Canada over 500,000 views for the Canadians only, considering that there is a great exchange between the U.S. and Canadian ecosystem, considering that -- this has been ongoing for almost a decade, what is the cumulative impact of those various incidents over the years?

Can it impact how Canadians are divided, can it impact the support for the war in Ukraine, can it impact the support for the present government? What is the cumulative impact?

Maybe one incident is not that much, but what about 10 incidents, what about 20 incidents?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah, I appreciate the question very much.

I think part of the challenge in answering your question is that we live in a time in which there are a whole bunch of things converging at once, they're all happening at once and they're coincident with each other. A serious rise in social polarization in which people feel more enmity towards people who simply disagree with them on politics, right.

We have people spending more time online than they've spent before. The geopolitical system is getting more complicated, not less.

So all these things are happening at the same time. And I can appreciate that it's a bit tough to -- you know, we're coming in here, so to speak, with large error

bars around what we say or large confidence intervals saying I'm not sure about this and I'm not sure about that, right. None of these things are desirable, right, but making causal attributions from one thing, for example, the presence of misinformation, to all these things is just very, very hard to do, right, despite, you know, just kind of how difficult the world looks now compared to 20 years ago, for example.

The other thing I should say is that, you know, we are -- we've been speaking, I think, about the very narrow and hopefully precise effects of estimates of the effects of misinformation and disinformation. It gets away from the larger question of whether online platforms more broadly have been corrosive of our public discourse, public experience.

I think there's a very good argument that they have been. I think there's a fair amount of evidence that they have been. Exactly how and when and why, to what extent and among whom, those are harder questions to answer.

But I think if you're sort of saying, you know, has the accumulation of all of this over the last eight years made our public life worse, I mean, in my own estimation as a citizen and scholar, yes. Very much so.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** Anything else to add?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I agree with that.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** I'd like to go to the incident update about Tenet Media. It's at RCD57.

There are two updates, but I only have one minute left, so I'll bring you to the second update, please.

RCD57.

**--- EXHIBIT No. RCD0000057:**

Incident Update 2 An Inflection Point on the Current State Russian-Directed Foreign-Interference Operations

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** I'd like -- in the interests of time, I will only point you to page 4. Page 4.

Yes. So the -- it's a report published on -- by your network -- Stephanie Carvin researcher, I assume, at your network, on September 20th, so five days ago. One of the four key takeaways is that when it comes to -- according to that researcher, is that when it comes to Russian foreign interference, Canada is collateral, participant, and example. I want to read to you the first sentence of that paragraph and then I'll let you comment on this:

> "Canadian intelligence agencies believe that our democratic processes are not directly targeted by Russian online foreign interference campaigns, yet [this act -- sorry] this case acts as a harsh reminder that Canada is not only affected, but also implicated."

I'm wondering if you have any comments about this sentence?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** No, I like the sentence. I don't know enough about the case to comment.

**MR. GUILLAUME SIROIS:** I don't think I like

the fact that this is happening in Canada, but I find the sentence very compelling as well.

But thank you. Those are all my questions.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you. So now it's time for the break, so we'll take a 15-minute break. So we'll come back at two to 4:00. It's 1540 -- at 4:00.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Order please.

The sitting of the Commission is now in recess until 3 -- 4:00, until 4:00 p.m.

--- Upon recessing at 3:42 p.m.

--- Upon resuming at 4:03 p.m.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Order please.

This sitting of the Foreign Interference Commission is now back in session.

The time is 4:04 p.m.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** So I understand that we'll make a slight modification to the order. So it's going to be Maître Johnson for the AG.

**--- PROF. TAYLOR OWEN, Resumed:**

**--- PROF. PETER LOEWEN, Resumed:**

**--- AENGUS BRIDGMAN, Resumed:**

**--- CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:**

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And I'll just say thank you for the flexibility for childcare related purposes, so I do appreciate that very much.

I will introduce myself; my name is Matthew Johnson. I am counsel for the Attorney General of Canada. I just have a couple of topics that I want to take you to

during my time.

First, I want to ask you about something that came up in earlier cross-examination and I believe this was, Professor Bridgman, directed at you, relating to the incident involving Kenny Chiu in the 44th general election. Do you remember that discussion?

**PROF AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. I mean there were a couple of them, I think. But specifically -- yeah, go one.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And I'll take you to the specific point. But just want to situate ourselves. And you were asked about whether the situation involving Mr. Chiu would have been considered an incident under the current IRF framework.

Is that a fair way of summarizing what you had said?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** What was asked and you said yes, it would be?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And I think your response, and correct me if I'm wrong, was that given that it was an incident, you would want to investigate it further? Is that fair to say?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. Yeah, so, you know, upon an incident being identified, that's when sort of the full protocol kicks into effect and we would do investigations such as, you know, we consider them valuable

and sort of commensurate with the effort. You know, yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And I think just to make sure that there's no misunderstandings, the fact that you would like to investigate something, or that it would be important enough to investigate doesn't necessarily mean that it had an effect or an impact, that that incident necessarily changed anything; it's just important enough that an investigation is important. Is that fair?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** I'm going to turn, to more broadly, the impact of mis- and disinformation on the last two elections and a couple of questions around that.

First, I just want to confirm, I'm not going to take you to the document I think you said in your witness summary, but is it fair to say that your research has shown that disinformation did not play a major role in the 2019 election?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes. In the outcome of the election, yeah.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Yes, and that's -- outcomes is what I'm concerned about here ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** --- so I appreciate that clarification.

And then this is directed to the whole panel. It's not to any specific one of you, but is it fair to say that your research also showed that there was more disinformation in 2021 than 2019, but that it still had a

limited impact on the outcome of the election?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And I think you said that true information was more likely to be believed by voters? Is that fair to say?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes. Yeah, in the 2021 study we have, yeah, that.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And I think I want to acknowledge the limitations that you've indicated, which is that you can't necessarily say with a great deal of confidence the -- with precision at, say, the riding-level, but would it be -- would you agree with me, given the research that you have done, that Canadians can have trust in the outcome of those two elections? They can trust their democratic processes that they were resilient?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Thank you. Professor Loewen, taking a step back more sort of general principles, based on your earlier testimony, would you agree with me that we shouldn't assume that just because we see mis- and disinformation, that necessarily means that it's foreign mis- and disinformation?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Well logically, I mean, not all mis- and disinformation is foreign. So if you see some, you can't assume it's foreign.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And that's part of the

investigation that's necessary; fair?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes. Yeah.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And fair to say that there is mis- and disinformation -- this may be an obvious point, but there is mis- and disinformation that's produced domestically?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Again, general principle, and based on your earlier testimony, I just want to make sure that we're -- that I have something clear, but the Network is focused on foreign interference that is effective in changing behaviours, not simply whether there was an attempt to introduce disinformation to the system? Is that a fair summary?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** No, the use of the word "focused" makes me think that it's not, in the sense that we are -- not that we're unfocused, but that our focus is really on the media system as a whole, not on one particular slice of misinformation, disinformation, or one particular origin of misinformation or disinformation.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Is it fair to say that you're looking for mis- and disinformation that has the effect of changing behaviours?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And that's the target, really, in terms of what you're trying to identify?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** A target.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Well, a target.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** One potential -- one potential impact of disinformation is that it changes behaviour. There are potential others.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Okay. But that -- okay. That's a fair point. But the effectiveness and the impact of mis- and dis-information is an important element to your work? Is that ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** It's something we're trying to understand, yeah.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Fair to say. I want to talk a little bit about the role of journalists and other participants within the media ecosystem. And I think you had found, based on some of your work in 2019, that the Canadian political information ecosystem was, and I don't know if you'd say continues to be and is, but you said at the time it was more resilient than other countries due to, in part, the news media that's present. Is that a fair summary of what you said before?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes. Yeah, that was one of the features of resilience that we identified in that report. Yeah.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Okay. Perfect. And I think in one of your more recent situation reports, you've talked about the use of media. And for example, I think you've said that half of Canadians use legacy media? Is that -- do you recall that? I can bring up the report if necessary, but if these are ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** That sounds right.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Okay. And I think a third of Canadians use print media?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And three quarters of Canadians use digital media to access news?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, that sounds right.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah, so those aren't mutually exclusive categories, obviously.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And obviously, yes, fair enough. I'm more establishing the amount of access. And I'd say based on all of those premises, those sort of building blocks, would you agree with me that journalists and news media have an important role in ensuring that Canadians are fully engaged, are resilient, as part of the aim of countering foreign interference?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I personally agree with that. Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Thank you. And Professor Owen, before the break, when you were in direct examination with my friend with the Commission, you were talking about the Kirkland Lake bot incident, and so specifically here, you mentioned, as I recall, that the incident, sort of as discussed by the media and political actors, was different from what the network ultimately

determined after your analysis. Is that a fair characterization?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Sorry, I transitioned very quickly from my prior one. There's an ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** That's fine.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** --- exceptional distinction between them so I don't want to confuse ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Okay.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** --- with what I'm trying to do.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Okay.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Given that sort of error, and that might be a good object lesson, but would you agree that it's, to a degree, incumbent on sort of everyone involved to exercise caution and not jump to conclusions when there's allegations of foreign interference within the system?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes. And I think it's -- it's also -- yeah, let me -- yes. Yeah.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** There's a risk of finger pointing at a certain point before we actually know what happened?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Without question. We also need the capacity to better understand what happened and some of the restraint ---

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Yes.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** --- to wait until we know

what happened to fully talk about it.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Yes.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** That's a very difficult thing to control though. Journalists will report on imperfect information, political actors will comment on imperfect information. Our job is to put better information, we think, into the public domain as fast as possible.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And that makes total sense. In terms of the restraint you're talking about, would that apply to media?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah. In certain cases of mis- and disinformation, I think yes. I think ---

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** It would also apply to politicians?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And it would apply to the public?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yes.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** The last area that I would like to quickly go through, because I recognize I have about a minute and a half left, ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Sorry, could I very quickly ---

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Sure.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- jump in there and just sort of say ---

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Please.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- this incident

response protocol now exists and journalists and the community know that this will be produced, ---

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** M'hm.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** --- which in and of itself, my hope and optimism is that that will cause reporting to be a little bit more reserved and statements by influential entities in the ecosystem to be a little bit more reserved, knowing that this sort of analysis is going to take place.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And that's a fair point. Thank you very much.

I want to last turn to a couple of questions about social media companies. And I think in your witness summary, you talked about how fact checking by online platforms has generally ceased, and I think you said the two reasons were generally the nature of the algorithms and the sort of increasing view that fact checking is censorship. Is that fair?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I believe I said that.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Yeah. Is that fair?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I think that's, yeah, roughly right.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And I think you would agree with me that -- or I think you said earlier, and tell me if I'm wrong, that governments should not be monitoring Canadians' social media use. Is that a statement that you had made?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** It depends what we mean by monitoring, I think.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** M'hm. How about this? Would it be fair -- would you agree with me with the proposition that the Federal Government should not be telling Canadians what is true and what is false? Put another way, that the government should not be policing truth?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** On truth, yes, I agree with that completely.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Okay. And I think you agree with ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** There's many kinds of speech that, in my view, government does have a role in overseeing, legal speech, particularly harmful speech, yes, but not adjudicating truth.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** Fair enough. And as counsel for the AG, I would agree entirely with that statement.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** It is your job to do that adjudication, yeah.

**MR. MATTHEW JOHNSON:** And here I say thank you very much for your testimony. We appreciate it.

Thank you, Madam Commissioner.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

So next one is Mr. Doody for the Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

**--- CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. JON DOODY:**

**MR. JON DOODY:** Good afternoon, Professors.

Jon Doody. I represent the Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

Today you painted the landscape of the current media ecosystem within Canada, and I wanted to explore that with respect to a Canadian citizen, perhaps a member of a diaspora group, especially in light of the election that's going to occur at some point in the future and while a lot of the recommendations and policy changes you'd like to see are unlikely to happen before that election.

And so we know that as a result of the *Online News Act*, Canadians can no longer get news through Meta's platforms, Facebook or Instagram. That's correct?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I personally don't think that's a consequence of the *Online News Act*. I think it's a consequence of a decision of Meta to ban news.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Right. As a result of the *Online News Act*.

In any event, regardless ---

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Just, sorry, one additional very important caveat that we've documented extensively is that Canadians actually still can get news on the platform despite links and their posting ability being blocked through screenshots, other workarounds, and through mediated news sharing.

So just flagging that that's an important nuance there.

**MR. JON DOODY:** There's a limit on the amount of news you can get through those sources.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** It has become more restrictive. There's less news.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** There's less news than before.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Considerably.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Thanks.

And we know that the news that you actually might obtain from social media is being determined largely by algorithms.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I mean, "largely" is a difficult word to -- sorry. You're getting us at the witching hour here.

I don't think "largely" is -- but yes, algorithms help determine which news you see on social media.

**MR. JON DOODY:** And on that point, is there a concern that there is an echo chamber of sorts for an individual to receive information and news related to their interests as determined by algorithms and, therefore, receive less news that is contrary to their beliefs, creating this essentially echo chamber individually among citizens?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** So there is the potential that happens. There's a fair amount of debate about the degree to which people actually exist in echo chambers online, to be sure. But even if they don't exist, humans' capacity as scholars call motivated reasoners to pursue information that they want and that they like versus that which is -- which is objectively true in some sense or is going to inform them is a -- has been with people long

before social media.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Right. But it still exists on social media.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** The potential to seek out information that you want is still there, yeah.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Which would be an echo chamber -- a filter bubble is more what you're talking about, which is the algorithmic decision is putting you into a category.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Echo chamber is you opting in and then being reinforced in a category.

**MR. JON DOODY:** And the ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** They're slightly different concepts.

**MR. JON DOODY:** And the rest would be that if you're not aware you're in an echo chamber, you might believe it more than if you're aware that you're in an echo chamber.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** You might opt in. I think you're generally more aware you're in an echo chamber than you're in a filter bubble.

**MR. JON DOODY:** And ultimately, the primary goal of social media sites is to make a profit. They're not primarily concerned with the accuracy of the content on their sites.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think the primary objective of social media companies is to make a profit.

**MR. JON DOODY:** And as you've said, Canadians

are more aware both of FI concerns as well as the existence of mis- and disinformation.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, considerably.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Right. So this is ultimately my question. In light of all of this, what advice or tips would you give to Canadian citizens, especially in light of the upcoming election, on how they can identify mis or disinformation when they're watching the news cycle, if you can provide us with assistance?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think the -- if a Canadian was listening to this wondering how can I be a better citizen in the next election, how can I make a more informed decision and how can I understand politics better in my country, I would say spend a lot less time online, read some articles about what's going on in the election and then go talk to a neighbour about it and ask them what they think and listen to other people more and maybe even ask them why they might disagree with you. But actually get into the business of talking about politics with people, which is not something people do as much as they used to.

They might share information on politics, they might like stuff, they might proclaim their views, but there's a lot less talking and listening.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Apart from getting out of your house and speaking with other members of society, is there anything that you could do when you're consuming media to attempt to identify it as mis or disinformation on your own?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I'm sceptical of placing the responsibility on the individual information consumer when they're scrolling through hundreds or thousands of pieces of content. I think Peter's advice is probably the wise course corrective here.

As the information ecosystem is increasingly less -- harder and harder to decipher reliability based on the appearance of the content, I think that degradation of -- the filter function of reliability should push us to other mechanisms of seeking reliable information.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Fair to say it's quite difficult for individual citizens to make informed decisions on their own.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** It's -- no, that's a much bigger statement.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Sorry. Whether something is mis or disinformation.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think it's incredibly difficult to know, in particular with the speed and the way we consume content.

**MR. JON DOODY:** And would you agree that that problem is probably exacerbated within diaspora communities, especially those that may not have English or French as their primary language?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I don't know the answer to that.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Thank you. Those are my -- oh.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** No, I think that's a very good question, to which the answer is hard to know, but it should actually be -- I know we're concerned about it, but how Canadians in diaspora communities for whom English and French is not their first language experience Canadian politics is something we should have -- we should have an appreciation for, I mean, across this whole effort for how important it is that we make sure that that part of the ecosystem is as healthy as possible.

**MR. JON DOODY:** And going back to your recommendation of leaving your house and speaking to members of society, that solution as it is is further hampered if you are a member of a diaspora community who does not speak English or French in that you are limited to other members of your diaspora community to have that conversation.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**MR. JON DOODY:** Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

Mr. Singh for the Sikh Coalition.

**--- CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. PRABJOT SINGH:**

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** Thank you, Commissioner, and to our panelists. My name is Prabjot Singh. I'm legal counsel for the Sikh Coalition.

I have two kind of broad themes I want to you about and ask some questions, firstly about some of the observations made by MEO in some of your reporting and then talking about some of the challenges you've touched on in terms of media reporting and kind of some forward-looking

best practices.

So you talked earlier about identifying around 4,000 key accounts that have significant impact on the spread of political information, including accounts from countries known to produce disinformation like India.

Are you able to share any information about the Indian accounts observed by the observatory and whether that's the account identities, the targeted messages or the other activities that we're kind of seeing?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So I can say as a matter of principle the data is available to Canadian researchers and we provide data access through an API and through a web portal for that information. So Canadian researchers have access to that information.

Other than that, we don't publish our seed lists beyond just to Canadian researchers interested in using it, and there's a variety of reasons for that. But that's sort of a base position.

It would be useful to have -- be able to produce better public reporting on some of these metrics and some of these things that we track, and we would like to do that, but there is some staff limitations on the ability to sort of produce that analysis on a regular basis. But I hear the implicit thing there that there would be some value in that.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** So is it -- am I understanding correctly that the observatory is trying to follow and maintain some kind of baseline analysis of Indian

disinformation, but it hasn't been aggregated or analyzed in a form that can be presented or reported on?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** There hasn't been ---

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** Is that what you're saying?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. There hasn't been an incident or an analysis specific to the disinformation produced by that set of seed accounts, no. We track all the data and it's all there and it's sort of absorbed into the broader kind of analysis of mis and dis, but not a specific analysis, which is what this would demand in order to produce something sort of of value.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** Okay. And so at this time at this kind of status quo right now that we're sitting at, it's a resource or staff shortage that's kind of inhibiting the observatory from producing that?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, so there's two things.

One is, yes, there's the observatory limitations, but also the hope would be -- the hope of the observatory's centralized data collection is that there are other researchers who are better specialized, so I do not have a particular focus or awareness of or understanding of the Indian diaspora community in Canada. There would be a researcher in Canada who would be interested in doing that.

So if any of them are listening and are interested in accessing the data and doing that sort of analysis, please get in touch and we can do that. We do

still get access to that data.

**MR. PROBJOT SINGH:** And in the witness interview with Commission counsel, you mentioned that the network tested out its incident response framework in response to Hardeep Singh's assassination in June of 2023. Can you tell us about those observations during that test, what that entailed, what was recorded or observed?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yeah. This was an interesting case in which when the Prime Minister made public in Parliament that the Government of Canada believed that the Government of India was involved in that assassination, very swiftly afterwards I had a meeting with officials in the Privy Council office about that incident. They were interested in understanding, as were we just generally, what the responses to this incident were among different Indo-Canadian communities, if I can use that phrase, of different language groups within Canada.

So we very rapidly, as sort of a test case in some sense of our survey capacity, did a study of the opinions of Canadians, including Canadians who consume foreign language media in Hindi or in Punjabi, and those who speak Hindi and Punjabi at home, and those who speak English as well, to just sort of get a sense of what the correlates were between information sources both here in Canada and abroad, and what people's opinions were on the Government of Canada, Government of India, this particular event, how well it was responded to, etcetera.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** So there wasn't actual

observation of Indian media accounts and their responses, it was more a kind of Canadian focused survey?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** In this case we really leaned in on the survey side of it as opposed to -- and that's not any particular reason about this case, except that we thought we could do a survey quickly and at that point we were testing -- doing some sort of testing of our capacities to survey rapidly.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** If that event had occurred today, that would almost certainly be an incident according to sort of our criteria. One other thing about that event is it did catalyze a massive expansion of our -- or our following of Indian based accounts -- or India based accounts and the India diaspora community in Canada.

So but it -- at that point in time we were not -- the incident response protocol wasn't mature and we just weren't -- we weren't able to deliver sort of an incident response at that time. But if it occurred today, that's certainly what would happen.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** Okay. So I want to turn next to the observatory's report on the 2021 elections. If the Court Operator can bring up COM512, and go to the bottom of page 10? So this document was referenced earlier as well in your testimony, and if we could just go to the bottom? Yeah, right there.

And so, the last paragraph cites a study by the EU DisinfoLab, which talked about a large-scale Indian-based disinformation network spanning across 265 websites and

over 65 countries, including 12 sites that were linked to Canada. So the report mentions that they didn't seem to be active at the time, but they seemed to be part of a highly sophisticated network connected to a web of fake thinktanks and NGOs, and other media websites and platforms.

So is this technique of creating complex networks that essentially self reference each other, or different nodes, a common disinformation practice?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** It's been a few years since I've read this EU DisinfoLab report. What I can say is that there have been numerous instances of websites posing as news outlets in other countries, not just by India, but by other countries as well, that have produced a large amount of coordinated content, and this is not the only such example. And there have been a few instances where, yeah, there's been sort of a strong Canadian connection. And so certainly, this is a -- this is in the playbook of would be interferers.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** Okay. And so, I just want to follow up on that with another report published by the DisinfoLab. If we can bring up TSC6?

**--- EXHIBIT No. TSC0000006:**

#Bad Sources (BS) How Indian news agency ANI quoted sources that do not exist

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** So while it loads, this is a report titled #Bad Sources. Oh, there we have it, if we can just scroll down to the title, I guess. So it's titled "#Bad Sources - How Indian news agency ANI quoted sources

that do not exist".

So the publication follows up on that original report that was cited by MEO and it lays out how a major news syndicate in India believed to have some ties to the Indian Government, regularly quotes non-existent entities and individuals. And my concern here is particularly that reports from the ANI, according to this publication, are then picked up and reproduces by well-established media outlets across India, as well as services like Yahoo! News.

So I understand that you may not be able to talk about the specifics of this example, but in general terms, can you talk about the impacts on an information ecosystem when actors intentionally set out to distort the landscape with these kinds of manufactured narratives that have the possibility of being amplified on such a large scale?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I mean, I can't speak to this, but the original definition of fake news, which for a moment actually meant something, before it kind of got distorted into this thing it is now -- was fake new sites, and fake sites, or false information designed to look like legitimate journalism. And part of why that was effective, or why it can be powerful, is we are deeply conditioned and particularly, generations of people are deeply conditioned to see the liability in things that look like journalism.

And so, it can be incredibly effective to do websites that just look like the something Tribune, or have the font of a newspaper, or Facebook posts that look like

they are from the New York Times. We're just conditioned to see some degree of reliability in them that we wouldn't if they looked different.

And that's not a foreign interference problem, that's been present in every democracy domestically as well. The current manifestation of that that's a much bigger problem is what they call pink slime websites, which are much more sophisticated networks of thousands sometimes, of Facebook pages, or thousands of websites, all often funded by a central organization, often funded by super PACs in the U.S. and they are really just political advocacy campaigns designed to look like journalism.

The point's the same though, is that there is a -- there has been a real attempt, or there's been an opportunity to use the signalling effect of the reliability of things that look like journalism to influence populations. And I think foreign actors are doing that too.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** So in a case like this where we're not talking about a fake news website, but we're talking about a major news syndicate that's a source of a lot of journalistic stories in India that are picked up by other services internationally as well, do you have any thoughts or suggestions on how Canadian media or other government institutions can develop resilience to this kind of threat?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** They have to be far more cautious and careful with what they're citing. If there's cases of Canadian media using false -- citing false information by foreign news organizations then that's the

fault of Canadian journalism.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** And what role does MEO, or RRM, or other government entities play in kind of flagging that?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think we have a limited capacity to monitor journalistic content coming from out of country and to fact check Canadian news organizations' citations of foreign news organizations.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** Okay. So while answering questions from the Commission counsel this morning, you talked about some of the challenges and we're kind of touching on it now as well in my questions ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** --- about the limitations, resource or otherwise, of monitoring media ecosystems that aren't actually in English or French. And my friend touched on that earlier, right before me as well. Can you confirm whether MEO has researchers that have Punjabi or Hindi skillsets and are engaging in research with you?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yes, but in a limited way. And so, this sort of falls again, under sort of a project-based kind of approach. Again, we do this data collection at scale. There is a lot of data in our -- in our regular data collection that is not English or French, including Punjabi. That gets translated in an automated way, and we know the severe limitations of automatic translation, but that is integrated into sort of the data collection process.

But what you're talking about there is the media monitoring, and do we have -- we have very limited capacity. Some, but limited capacity to do media monitoring today with existing resource footprint.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** So just given the fact that Canadian security and intelligence agencies have identified India as being one of the most concerning or prolific kind of threat actors in terms of foreign interference and disinformation in Canada targeting a vulnerable ethnic community, is it just a matter of resource restraints? Can you shed some light on strategies you would suggest that, resource restraints aside, what best practices ideally for entities like MEO or for the RRM or other government agencies?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think there's almost a building block approach here. And I don't want to speak to RM, but if I was the Government of Canada and I was starting up a new process in terms of trying to keep track of what's going on in Canada or thinking about communities, you know, you want to think about these communities getting their information, where they get them, and it's just not the case that we're an overwhelming English-speaking country anymore, we're not. So I think you want to start from a position where you respect the fact that a very large portion of Canadians get their information from Mandarin, Cantonese, Punjabi, Hindi-speaking sources, and other ones as well. And then work out capacity from there, right?

But I think you have to -- we have to

recognize the limitations of this, right? And we haven't talked about this much but when all this happens in the context of an election campaign that's 40 days long and things are amplifying, it gets even more and more -- it gets more and more difficult.

But recognizing how many Canadians are not using what we would regard as traditional news sources is, I guess, the first step.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** And so would you agree or recommend that, you know, going forward when we're looking this kind of forward-looking kind of perspective of Canada's ability to detect and counter disinformation, that the government should be allocating more resources to these vulnerable communities who are being targeted, whether that's in grant funding or other programming?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I could agree.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** Any other comments, or...?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah. Yes, I would agree, and it should be structural and support and -- structural and support the ongoing -- an ongoing familiarity with those media ecosystems.

The hesitation there is just there is this real danger that there becomes this sort of extensive monitoring of linguistic minority communities by government or by some other body, and that's not the interest here. And so this needs to be done carefully. This is not, like, just throw a bunch of resources at it and you can sort of

effectively monitor this community and know if they and their information providers are getting disinformation. Like, there's a -- I think there's a prudence with which this needs to be approached, and I wish we had the capacity and the ability to sort of actually do that in an extremely thoughtful way.

This is a huge gap in the academic literature for sure. This is really not well known. There are a few scholars, some of which are part of the research network, that are doing this in effective ways but they're doing them at sort of -- in an academic context. And so additional support for them and the way that they're interacting with the communities and really developing those relationships and allowing them greater visibility in sort of a non-exploitative way is going to be key here.

So I just want to articulate that discomfort with the notion that there should be extreme or heavy monitoring when linguistical minority communities, because we're worried about disinformation circulating in those communities. Yes, but also careful, and no.

**MR. PRABJOT SINGH:** Okay. Thank you so much. Those are all my questions.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

So Ms. Teich for the Human Rights Coalition.

**--- CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MS. SARAH TEICH:**

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Good afternoon.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Hi.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** You'll be happy to know I'm

your last one.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** That does make us happy.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Sorry?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** That does make us happy.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** I understand that MEO publishes monthly reports. Are these reports published in English and French?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** They are published in English with the front page fully translated into French. The reason that is done is that the bulk of the text on a month-to-month basis does not change on the backend of the report. The measures, the percent change in, you know, a month-to-month percent change, that does -- that varies, but the actual text varies very little. And sort of so the summary and the ecosystem snapshot on those reports are published in both official languages.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay. Are they translated into any other languages?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** No.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Do you think that would b valuable to do in the future? Resources dependent of course.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I would allocate -- if I was interested in translating for other communities, I don’t know if the situation report is the document I would start with. Things like the incident responses might be more valuable, or some of the other ecosystem briefs, or featuring

some of the research network partner work that we think is particularly useful would be, I think, a better allocation of those ---

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** To a particular community, too, yeah.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Yeah, would be a better allocation of those translation resources, again, because it doesn't vary too much month to month, but yes.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay. Now I'm going to pull up some documents and ask you some questions about them. So let's start with HRC121, please.

**--- EXHIBIT NO. HRC0000121:**

Situation of human rights in Eritrea

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** If we can pull that up on the screen. Yes, perfect. And going to page 13, paragraph 62. Thanks so much.

So I'll read out this paragraph, just for the record:

> "The use of digital technologies, including social media, to target and harass human rights defenders, activists, and journalists in the diaspora has reached alarming levels." (As read)

I'm sorry; I should note, this is the document from the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea. So they're talking specifically about the Eritrean diaspora.

> "The Special Rapporteur is

particularly concerned with online threats and attacks against women human rights defenders which often featured feature gendered and sexualized abuse." (As read)

Am I correct in understanding that if this targeting does not involve mis or disinformation this would not fall within your mandate?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** It does fall within our mandate, this sort of thing. So this is one of the things that we really wanted to emphasize about mis- and disinformation being one piece of the puzzle. We have a report that should be released last month, but has not been, looking at harassment targeting journalists in Canada. It looks at exactly this question over the last 14 years.

And so this issue is enormously important. Journalists and -- I'll talk about journalists because that's what -- our study, but obviously there are other entities as well here. Harassment of journalists, politicians, and other public figures in online spaces can have a chilling-out effect. There's some really great work that's been done in Canada and around the world demonstrating that.

So that absolutely is something that we're interested in. If the information ecosystem is hostile to a particular community, that is something we care about.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay. That's great. Can we now, please pull up HRC123?

**--- EXHIBIT NO. HRC0000123:**

Foreign Interference & Repression of Falun Gong in Canada, Key Development & Case Studies 1999-2024

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** This is a report published by the Falun Dafa Association of Canada this year, in 2024.

If we can jump to page 23, please, section 2.1. Scroll down just a little bit further. Perfect.

So the report here notes that:

> "The large quantities of hate, inciting propaganda against Falun Gong, distributed by the Chinese Embassy and Consulate in Canada replicate the disinformation used in China. This kind of official endorsement systematically propagated hatred and disinformation against Falun Gong in Canada." (As read)

You can keep scrolling, please, to the top of page 24. It goes on:

> "The Chinese Embassy in Canada has dedicated sections on its website specifically for Falun Gong propaganda." (As read)

And then there's a screenshot on its website as an example.

Would the MEO monitor this kind of mis- and disinformation on websites of embassies and consulates?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** We do not currently

collect website data that is not sort of socially connected.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So that's not something that we do. In our testimony this morning, I talked a little bit about our 2019 effort to do that, and I will just say it is not possible without a resource footprint so large that it would just -- you know, it would just take up an enormous amount of resources to do that monitoring. So that's not something that we currently do.

That said, if there was an incident related to this, and that incident was flagged, those websites and other content like them would certainly be in -- would be part of that investigation. It just wouldn't be like a systematic daily kind of data collection.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay. If we can stay with this document for a moment and scroll up to the bottom of page 22.

So this paragraph speaks a bit to the impact of mis- and disinformation on diaspora communities such as Falun Gong practitioners. And I'll just read another excerpt here:

> "The most concerning aspect of this hate propaganda is its impact on swaying public opinion toward the CCP narrative on Falun Gong. This has led to controversy and indifference towards Falun Gong, allowing the persecution to persist unabated for

almost a quarter of a century…" (As read)

Actually now it's more than a quarter century.

"…including becoming more engrained in Canadian society. The culprit is the Chinese Communist Party and the victims are not only the Falun Gong community, but also the Canadian public at large." (As read)

Would you agree with this statement that mis- and disinformation first can be leveraged by authoritarian regimes to allow for indifference in the face of human rights violations? And then second, that the victims are not only the diaspora community members, but the public at large?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think it depends on the particular case, to be sure. You know, when you see public indifference towards something, it's best to just assume the public is just completely inattentive to it. I mean, I understand the argument might be that if there was more attention -- if there's more a spotlight on the particular persecution of Falun Gong within China, that would raise concern among Canadians, and then there wouldn't be indifference towards Falun Gong. But unfortunately, I don't mean this flippantly, the list of people around the world who are repressed to the complete inattention of Canadians is very long; right? So I wouldn't attribute it necessarily to a successful campaign. Unfortunately for Falun Gong

practitioners, there's indifference towards their plight in China, as there is indifference towards the plight of many, many groups around the world.

So I suspect this has as much to do with -- more to do with inattention than it does with a particularly adept campaign by the CCP in this instance.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay. Just to be clear, you haven't studied this issue; right?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Well I've studied public opinion. But yeah, but not the particular one about Canadians' views towards Falun Gong and why they're indifferent. Yeah.

**Ms. SARAH TEICH:** Okay.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** In theory, that could be a strategy though of ---

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Yes.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** --- Chinese foreign policy. And we just don't know whether it's been effective in this case.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Right.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay. Can we please now pull up HRC39?

**COURT OPERATOR:** One moment, please. The document's not in the hearing database.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Thirty-nine (39)? That's odd, but I guess I'll just move on.

How about HRC8?

**--- EXHIBIT No. HRC0000039:**

Tigray conflict sparks a war of fake tweets and intense propaganda

**--- EXHIBIT No. HRC0000008:**

In Plain Sight - Beijing's unrestricted network of foreign influence in Canada

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** We've got a copy here if ---

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Oh, you do have a copy there?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Well just on my machine. I don't know ---

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** I mean, I have copy pasted the quote I wanted to read, Commissioner. I can proceed unless we need it on the big screen?

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Yes, go ahead.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** That's fine for us.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay. So to -- just keep 39 on their screen, if you don't mind. And just for the benefit of everyone as well, it's an article from the Globe and Mail from April 2021. Oh, wait; is this coming up? I'll just give it a second.

**COURT OPERATOR:** Apologies.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Thanks so much.

So this is, as I said, an article from the Globe and Mail. It speaks about disinformation surrounding the war in Tigray, which, as you may know, kicked off in the

second half of 2020.

If we can scroll to the middle of page 2, please? And I'll just read out another excerpt:

> "The war has killed thousands of people, forced as many as two million people to flee their homes and destroyed much of the region's health care system and other basic services. Countless women have been violently attacked and sexually assaulted. But the severe damage and the rising death toll have often been obscured by a fog of falsehoods and duelling propaganda claims."

Then a bit lower down on the same page, the reporter writes:

> "Disinformation has been a key element of the government's communications strategy."

And then the article details some examples of this and methods, including the use of fake Twitter profiles.

That article also discusses the spread of objectively false information such as initial denials that Eritrean troops were present in the region.

Is disinformation, in this context in the war in Tigray, something that MEO tools picked up on?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** So no, in so far as, you know, potentially a post about this, or posts about this

are in the dataset. That is possible. Our focus is really on sort of the Canadian discourse. So to the extent that the Canadian discourse would talk about this, that would be picked up.

This article highlights many of the dangers, sort of the most severe cases of dangers of social media-based propaganda. I mean, it just does. It sheds a very clear light on some of the harms and some of the tools that people can use, including governments against their own people, to manipulate public opinion. And, I mean, it's tragic.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** I agree.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** I think it also highlights a couple of realities of the global nature of these platforms, which is that the attention paid to online safety and content moderation is radically concentrated in western English language content, mostly in the United States, and we're a benefit in some ways of that. But there is content moderation, we know, and content moderation policies are almost non-existent in many languages on social platforms. And those other -- often that coincides and overlaps with places where there is a strong incentive for a liberal or authoritarian regimes to take advantage of that lack of content moderation. And this is one of many, many examples where that's been the case. And that's, I think, something we need to demand of online platforms, which is that the content moderation policies they impose or they implement in western democracies where they know they're

being held to a higher account and people are watching, should be expanded globally. And that's going to mean a pretty significant expansion of their policing of their platforms.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Anything to add?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I would just say, yeah, I mean the niche into which these fake accounts fit is pretty clear. As Taylor said before, it's useful to appear like a newspaper; right? To appear to be credible. Now you just need to appear to be a credible Twitter expert, and someone creates an account, and puts a bio there, it looks credible.

And in conflicts like this one, which unfortunately the amount of news information that's paid to them is not proportional to the human scale of them at all; right? So it takes a while for credible news organizations to start reporting on these conflicts. So Twitter fills -- X often fills the void, and that's often filled, as noted in this article, by fictional actors.

So there's something of a perfect storm here: a lack of mainstream media attention; a lack of attention by the general public; and then the ability to look like an expert, deceptively.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Right. Can we please now pull up, and this is my last one, HRC8?

This is a document put out by Alliance Canada Hong Kong in May 2021. It's called *In Plain Sight*.

If we can please scroll down to page 15?

So this is under -- so although the

subheading isn't shown here, it's under the "Information and Narrative Discursion Warfare" section. And I want to draw your attention just to the first paragraph under the subheading "Methods". This paragraph notes:

> "The CCP exerts its influence in Canadian media in the form of censorship, propaganda, and control over content-delivery systems including control over media outlets, the entertainment industry, and the frequent use of social media campaigns. Simple, overt methods have included sponsored posts or advertorial inserts written by Chinese party-state media. Other direct methods include running digital or print advertisements parroting party rhetoric purchased by groups closely tied to the Chinese authorities."

If you can scroll to the top of page 16? The report then details:

> "There have been incidents with Chinese Consul Generals in Canada applying direct pressure to outlets to remove quote critical of the CCP, or preventing publications of certain ads from Falun Gong.

> Chinese-Canadian journalists face job losses, death threats, online threats […] threats to relatives in China for unfavourable coverage of Beijing."

This is a good illustration of the intersection and overlap between digital and non-digital methods of engaging in mis- and disinformation. Person to person direct pressure, threats to relatives can be leveraged to facilitate the spread of mis- and disinformation.

So my question is, how does MEO contend with this fluidity?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Well, I think this is a great example of how our ability -- where our core competency is is to study the digital information ecosystem. That does not mean there aren't a wide range of other foreign interference tactics, both about the media, engaging with the media and engaging with information, and much more broadly than that, as has been outlined by this Commission.

And I think it's a very difficult thing for -- I don't think it's within our capacity or mandate to fully get a handle on the scope of what's being talked about there. There are other methods and other research tactics in investigative and government tactics that should get -- should explore that, right? But not necessarily studying social media. You know what I mean?

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Yes, I do. Anything to add from either of you?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think Taylor has put

it well.

**MS. SARAH TEICH:** Okay. Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you. Re-examination? She was not the last one.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Always one last lawyer.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Only an hour, right, this last session?

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** That's right. That's right.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Fake news.

**(LAUGHTER)**

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** We were misinformed.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** But not disinformed, I think.

**--- RE-EXAMINATION BY MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:**

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Just two questions. You were asked some questions about the decline in trust in traditional media, and you were also asked some questions about transparency in digital media. And I'm wondering if we can look at both of those in a sense, and ask you to comment on transparency in traditional media. And whether you think more transparency around things like financing, and relationships with political actors, and anonymity of editorial boards, whether changes in those areas might increase trust in traditional media?

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Yeah, I think that's a really interesting framing and I think one of the consequences of the financial pressures that -- the

combination of the financial pressures that journalistic entities are under and the changes in norms around what journalism is in the digital ecosystem, has led to a blurring of many of those lines that we came to rely on to ensure the accountability of our traditional media, and that's been a loss.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Any other comments from the other panelists?

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I think you've suggested some things that might help. I think they would help with the margin. The challenge here is that the general degradation and trust in our traditional institutions is a rally serious largescale problem that is rooted in a lot of things, and changes around little things like advertising, stating who's on an editorial board, right, or being clearer about advertorials or something. It might help. But these are large scale challenges.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** My second and last question is that the Commission heard evidence at stage one about the notion of the information ecosystem cleansing itself. And I think the idea was things like fact checking by other media sources might have a role to play. And I'm wondering if you have any comments to make on the effectiveness of this approach in addressing mis- and disinformation?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** I think to a certain extent we are also trying to play a cleansing role, and the cleansing role that we are trying to play is not just one of

fact checking, but it is of sort of, you know, redirection, refocus, a more informed opinion, etcetera.

Such as it is true that when mis- and disinformation is shared in online spaces, very often it is called out by users on platforms. Very often there is sort of a degree of policing and social commentary on it, and that is part of things. So yes, that can be somewhat effective.

Fact checking in general as a primary strategy, we've done studies on this, and many others show that basically the fact check doesn't get the reach of the original kind of false claim. It sort of -- it's the old thing about truth is just getting its shoes on and the lie has already ran out the door, right? And it's kind of like that.

So fact checking can play a role. But it is not sort of just because something is fact checked we can't go, okay, it's -- the truth is out there, the end. We can go home now. That's just simply not how social media platforms work today. That's not how information circulates or how people respond to information. So that's maybe an important step, but it is insufficient on its own.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Anyone who claims there's one solution to this pretty structural problem, like Peter mentioned, is misleading or disingenuous. I think fact checking can probably play a role in the margins and we should be doing more it. The idea that the information ecosystem will cleanse itself is to me fanciful.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** I would say that just as

a final comment and with thanks to the Inquiry for having us in, is that I think that getting a very clear sense to as wide a group of the public as possible about exactly what the nature of foreign interference in our country is, and where it's occurring and why it's occurring, and at the same time making clear where it has not affected the body politic will be very helpful for the next stage of this process.

What's poisoning to a political system among other things, is knowing that it is sick or poisoned in some part, but not knowing where, and really wondering how widely spread it is. So I think it's very important to the degree that your mandate allows you to do this, to articulate the things that are working about our political system and the things that are functioning properly; and then shining a very, very bright light -- as you know, the best antiseptic is sunlight -- on the areas where in fact foreign interference has occurred, and being very, very clear about that.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Great. Well, I think all three of you for your time today.

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Thank you. Thanks for having us, it was a pleasure.

**MR. HOWARD KRONGOLD:** Thank you, Commission.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you, and honestly, I want to thank you. It was very, very useful and I think we have food for thought to say the least. But it was very instructive.

**PROF. TAYLOR OWEN:** Thank you.

**PROF. PETER LOEWEN:** Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Thank you.

So tomorrow morning, 9:30?

**PROF. AENGUS BRIDGMAN:** Not for us, right?

**COMMISSIONER HOGUE:** Not for you. If you want to come back you are welcome, but I imagine you have other things to do.

**THE REGISTRAR:** Order, please.

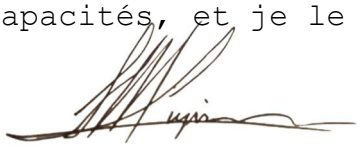
The sitting of the Foreign Interference Commission is adjourned until tomorrow the 26th of September, 2024, at 9:30 a.m.

-- Upon adjourning at 5:02 p.m.

**C E R T I F I C A T I O N**

I, Sandrine Marineau-Lupien, a certified court reporter, hereby certify the foregoing pages to be an accurate transcription of my notes/records to the best of my skill and ability, and I so swear.

Je, Sandrine Marineau-Lupien, une sténographe officielle, certifie que les pages ci-hautes sont une transcription conforme de mes notes/enregistrements au meilleur de mes capacités, et je le jure.



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Sandrine Marineau-Lupien