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Chair: Mr. John Brassard



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• (1535)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 133 of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, February 13, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the impact of disinformation and misinformation on the work of parliamentarians.

[*English*]

I would like to welcome our witness for the first hour today. From Bell Media Inc., we have Mr. Richard Gray, vice-president of CTV News.

Mr. Gray, welcome. I understand that all the tests have been completed on your Zoom. You have up to five minutes to present your opening statement to the committee.

Go ahead, sir. Thank you.

Mr. Richard Gray (Vice-President, CTV News, Bell Media Inc.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, members of the committee.

I am pleased to be here to contribute to your study on misinformation and disinformation, which are important issues facing Canadians. As Canada's most watched news source, CTV News is keenly attuned to the challenges of a changing information ecosystem. In a rapidly evolving world, it is more important than ever that Canadians have access to fair and balanced news coverage that they can trust. As a reputable news organization in a democracy, it is the fundamental purpose of CTV News to enable Canadians to know what is happening and to clarify events so that they may form their own conclusions. This is done through accurate, fair and relevant stories told in a clear and compelling way.

I want to recognize the tireless work of CTV News journalists and staff, who go above and beyond every day to uphold our mandate with the highest standards of honesty, transparency and independence. It is not always easy work, but it is important work and it deserves to be recognized.

For over 60 years, CTV News has kept Canadians informed of the stories that matter to them. In recent years, this has included a once-in-a-generation pandemic, elections at home and abroad, natural disasters, geopolitical crises, economic issues and much more.

Thanks to the hard work of its journalists and staff, CTV News has consistently been named Canada's most trusted news source. This is something we are very proud of because trust is something we take very seriously.

Our mandate is to uphold journalistic integrity and independence under all circumstances and at all times without exception. We are a member of the Trust Project, a global network of news organizations, and we draw on tools that they've developed to help Canadians make informed news choices.

As a news team, we have a responsibility to hold people and organizations with power and influence accountable to the public, and that responsibility extends to how we manage our own affairs. In this industry, mistakes sometimes happen, despite our best efforts. I am of the belief that how we respond to those mistakes is critical to maintaining public trust. This brings me to an issue that has garnered attention recently.

A report on the *CTV National News* broadcast on September 22 did not meet our expected and required high editorial standards. As is standard practice in these circumstances, we conducted an investigation to determine whether a breach of our editorial standards and practices had occurred. The investigation found that two members of the CTV News team were responsible for altering a video clip. Their actions violated our editorial standards and are unacceptable. As a result, those individuals are no longer members of the CTV News team nor are they employed by any Bell Media entity. This is a deeply regrettable situation.

In my 33-year career working in television news, this is the first time I have come across something like this. I hope that our response speaks to the importance we place on upholding our commitment to fairness, objectivity and the truth. Our duty is to provide accurate, fair and balanced coverage of the issues that matter to Canadians and to do so fully independently. It's of the utmost importance to us.

Moving forward, we will continue to work to earn the trust of the millions of Canadians who rely on us each and every day. Given the growing demand for round-the-clock news coverage, CTV News will continue to transform the way we deliver news to Canadians, both on television and online.

As someone with decades of experience in the news business, I have seen first-hand the decline in the trust in the media, in no small part due to the rise of misinformation and disinformation and their impact on media literacy. This concerns all of us. I hope we can spend our time together today discussing this challenge and potential solutions to combat misinformation and disinformation so that we can maintain and build trust in our institutions for the years to come.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gray. I appreciate your being under time.

Just one of the things I found myself saying lately is that the dynamic between Zoom and in-person sessions is one that's difficult to manage oftentimes. Members with the limited time that they have will try to reclaim their time. I just don't want you to take that personally, Mr. Gray.

We're going to start with our first six-minute round. I'm going to go to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Barrett, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Sir, how much money does Bell Media or CTV News receive in annual subsidies from Justin Trudeau's Liberal government?

Mr. Richard Gray: Unlike the CBC, neither CTV nor CTV News receives any subsidies from the government. In fact, we're required to spend at least 30% of our annual revenue each year—which amounts to \$1.2 billion since 2011—on Canadian programming expenditures. At the same time as all of this, we are losing \$185 million a year on our television operations, including a loss of \$40 million on news alone.

Mr. Michael Barrett: CTV hasn't received any regulatory relief or wage relief in the last nine years. Is that your contention?

Mr. Richard Gray: We receive no subsidies from the government.

Mr. Michael Barrett: The question was on regulatory relief or subsidies for wages in the last nine years.

Mr. Richard Gray: There was a decision made by the federal government recently that amounted to a \$40-million impact on Bell Media, but it was not a subsidy. It was, in fact, the elimination of a tax on our revenues that had existed since 1997—

Mr. Michael Barrett: There was \$40 million in regulatory relief—I will skip ahead of you—and \$122 million in subsidies for wages.

I want to talk about—

• (1540)

Mr. Richard Gray: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Michael Barrett: Pardon me?

Mr. Richard Gray: The \$40 million was not a subsidy.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Sir, you're correcting something that I didn't say. Let's get off on the right foot here. I referred to it as regulatory relief. There was \$40 million in regulatory relief.

Did you receive \$40 million in regulatory relief?

Mr. Richard Gray: We received \$40 million in relief through the elimination of a tax.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay. I have a sense of how this is going to go, so let's go.

We've seen a lot of examples of CTV activism masquerading as journalism. I want to give you a couple of examples of that.

On May 29 this year, you published a story entitled, "Poilievre panned for video saying Canadians fleeing to Nicaragua". Of course, this story was about the Leader of the Opposition talking to Canadians who are suffering after nine years of a government whose economic vandalism has made it all but impossible for millions of Canadians to survive here.

On April 2, just days later, RBC released a report on housing trends and affordability, entitled, "Toughest time ever to afford a home as soaring interest costs keep raising the bar". Again, that details the results of nine years of life under the NDP-Liberals. We don't see that. We don't see a story. I don't have a story to offer you from CTV on that, which speaks to the experience that Mr. Poilievre related about those Canadians.

Of course, we have the most recent example of the blatant disinformation spread by your network. There was disinformation that was perpetrated against Canadians and spread across your platforms. Instead of the message Mr. Poilievre gave—which is what we hear from millions of Canadians—on the need for a carbon tax election when Canadians "can't afford to eat, heat or house themselves", you altered it. You altered that quote from Mr. Poilievre into one that reflected talking points from Justin Trudeau's Prime Minister's Office. We wouldn't have known about that most recent case if you hadn't been called out by a Conservative staffer.

You said you're sorry, but we know you're only sorry you got caught. Isn't that right?

Mr. Richard Gray: I disagree with your characterization.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Are you sorry?

Mr. Richard Gray: We have apologized twice for a mistake that occurred. We have done a—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Have you gone back and reviewed all of your coverage of Mr. Poilievre and his discussions about the Trudeau Liberals' carbon tax on everything? They plan to quadruple it, raising the price of gas to 60¢ a litre. It's seen one in four Canadians not know where their next meal is coming from. Food bank use has skyrocketed to records never seen before in this country.

Have you gone back and reviewed all of your coverage of Mr. Poilievre, or will it be incumbent upon the Conservatives to have to go through and review historically the disinformation that CTV has perpetrated against Canadians? Is that something that CTV is going to proactively do?

I can assure you, sir, that going forward, we know we now need to do this not just for ourselves but for Canadians, because the trust has certainly been broken.

The Chair: I want to give Mr. Gray the chance to answer that, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Go ahead.

Mr. Richard Gray: Thank you.

I disagree with the characterization that we are engaged in a campaign of disinformation with respect to Canadians. It's our job to present all sides of public policy issues in a balanced, accurate and fair way so Canadians can make informed decisions on them. That's what we do consistently, on a daily basis.

This particular issue that happened on September 22—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Sir—

Mr. Richard Gray: —was a very rare and unique occurrence. It was a mistake and we apologized for it.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'd be interested to know how you verified that it was rare if you didn't go back and review all of the other instances of coverage, like I said.

I'd like you to tell us now, though, do you think it's appropriate for other media organizations to have criticized Conservatives for calling out this disinformation when you yourself admitted that you were wrong? Do you think it is appropriate for other media outlets to have criticized this disinformation having been called out?

The Chair: Give a quick response, please, Mr. Gray.

Mr. Richard Gray: It's not for me to suggest how other media outlets operate. My job is to manage CTV News.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Thank you, Mr. Gray.

I'm going to go to Ms. Shanahan now for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witness for appearing before us today.

Mr. Gray, I'd like to ask you what steps CTV news journalists and newsroom managers typically take to ensure that aired reports meet the current journalistic and ethical standards? I'm looking for a rather fulsome response because we want to understand. I don't know if anyone here has worked in a newsroom. I certainly have not. We want to understand what the process is from the beginning to the aired product.

• (1545)

Mr. Richard Gray: I think the first and most important component part of my answer to your question is that we have very rigorous and steadfast policies that spell out the expectations as to how our journalism is conducted.

In addition to these policies, we adhere to the RTDNA Canada and Canadian Association of Broadcasters respective codes of ethics. What occurs in the newsroom on a daily basis is that all of

our team members are expected to follow those policies to the absolute letter.

With respect to particular news stories, they are all vetted by a senior member of the team prior to their going to air to ensure they are factually correct and that there are no legal issues with respect to the content.

What specifically happened in this case on September 22 was that those policies and codes of ethics were violated by two individuals at *CTV National News*. In one case, a reporter altered a script after it had been approved by the producer, significantly changing the meaning and the intent of a particular clip to better suit the requirements of the story they were attempting to tell. In the second case, an editor spliced fragments of two segments of a statement together, creating a clip that hadn't actually been spoken in order to cover a technical issue with the original recording.

In my 33 years working in television news, I cannot recall anything similar to this ever happening before.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: How does it happen? How do the newsroom managers...? I take it that it would be the senior person who would be responsible for making sure this didn't happen, so there are questions there as to where they were. How do they ensure that they are broadcasting accurately and that it reflects the facts without any tampering? Do you have some kind of technical way of checking that?

Of course, we're living in an era today where deepfakes, video alteration and so on are almost child's play.

Mr. Richard Gray: We have an elaborate process of verifying all facts. It's multi-layered. However, even with that check and balance, it would have been impossible, in this case, to catch this error, because, as I said a few moments ago, what happened here is that the script that was produced and approved by the producer was later altered, and altered in two ways, by the reporter and by the editor.

Again, this is something I have never seen and I have no experience dealing with in my 33 years in television news.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: For a long time now, Mr. Gray, the Conservative Party leader has attacked mainstream media and journalists with the intention to mislead and to make Canadians believe that the news networks they have trusted before are no longer trustworthy.

Can you comment on the dangers that this presents to the state of Canada's information ecosystem and our democracy?

Mr. Richard Gray: It's critically important that there be absolute trust in all of our institutions, both in the media and our government. There has been a general erosion in that trust over the last number of years. I think—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Would you say that is due to public statements by political leaders, such as Pierre Poilievre?

• (1550)

Mr. Richard Gray: I wouldn't necessarily say that. I think it is the result of a number of things. Probably the biggest one is that there has been a shift in our society where there is a more prevailing attitude that "if you're not with us, you're against us."

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's very interesting. How, then, are these risks exasperated when a situation, such as the one with CTV News, as discussed earlier, happens? In other words, this "if you're not with us, you're against us" kind of attitude....

Mr. Richard Gray: I think the key point to be made here—and I have tried to do this in my responses to questions up to this point—is this: We made a mistake. It was a mistake that was impossible to foresee. We apologized immediately. We took follow-up steps to ensure that our standards were being met. It was determined that they weren't. We, as a result of that, made the decision that the two employees involved would no longer be part of CTV News or Bell Media, and then we apologized again.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gray and Ms. Shanahan.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gray, before I give the floor to Mr. Villemure, I want to let you know that that he may be asking his questions in French.

[*English*]

Just make sure that your interpretation is working.

Mr. Richard Gray: It is.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The floor is yours for six minutes, Mr. Villemure.

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Thank you for being here today, Mr. Gray.

We are currently doing a study of the impact of disinformation on the work of parliamentarians. We believe that this presents a danger to democracy. You spoke about the decline in trust, and I would like you to elaborate on that. We know that trust in politicians is declining, but this is also true for the media.

Could you tell us a bit about the source of this erosion of trust that we are seeing today?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: It's very difficult to say. If I were to suggest.... Probably the biggest cause is social media, the proliferation of social media and the manner in which it is consumed. Information that is shared on social media does not have the same rigorous journalistic and ethical standards applied to it as we apply and as other media institutions—like the Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, the National Post, Global News and CBC—apply to their operations. As a result of that, it becomes much more difficult for people to know what they can trust, who they can trust or what they should trust.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: How does CTV define disinformation?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I understand your question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: What is disinformation, from your perspective?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: Disinformation, from my perspective, is anything that is inaccurate.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Has CTV been targeted by disinformation originating from foreign influence, for example?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: Not that I'm aware of, no.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Is CTV concerned about being subject to that kind of risk? I am still referring to disinformation and foreign influence.

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: I am always concerned about the accuracy and the veracity of the journalism we do, based on the source material that's provided to us. It's why we use multiple stories, all independently verified by CTV.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: If I may summarize your thinking, disinformation is caused primarily by social media, and you are a victim. Is that correct?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: I would say that this is the prevailing factor, at least from my perspective, in this country.

• (1555)

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: A little earlier, you referred to a code of ethics for journalists. That is my area of expertise, and I would say that a code of ethics more often protects the person who wrote it than the person it applies to.

So beyond signing a code of ethics, how does CTV ensure that it is not broadcasting disinformation or misinformation? Remind us again of the steps you take, please.

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: Again, what happens is that as stories are assigned at the beginning of the day and as work proceeds on them throughout the day, the individual reporters who are involved in the pursuit of those stories are checking in constantly with members of our management team and reviewing what they're gathering and the focus of their stories.

Once they complete a near-final draft, I'll call it, of their story, the script is submitted to a producer for review. That review ensures that the story is factually correct and there are no legal issues with it. From that point, the reporter then works with an editor to complete that story for presentation on the television news.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Right.

A little earlier, you explained how the mistake my colleague referred to happened. I would like you to tell us why that mistake happened. Was there malicious intent to spread disinformation?

You did act quickly to dismiss the two employees, despite their status as union members. On the one hand, that is to your credit, but it also kind of prevents us from knowing what happened.

[English]

Mr. Richard Gray: There was no malicious intent, from my perspective. This was two people who were acting independently to make a particular story work on a given day.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: There was an intent to spread disinformation.

[English]

Mr. Richard Gray: There was no intent to disinform.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: But the outcome was the same.

[English]

Mr. Richard Gray: There was no intent, but yes, the outcome was the same. That's why we took the measures and steps we did and why these two individuals are no longer part of the CTV News team or Bell Media.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: So the action you took was based on the consequence, not the intent.

[English]

Mr. Richard Gray: As I said, there was no intent.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[English]

We'll go to Mr. Green now for six minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the committee, Mr. Gray. I take earnestly your opening statement. When situations like this occur, the question is, "What did you know, when did you know and what did you do about it?" It sounds like you took pretty swift action.

I want to pick up on my colleague and friend Mr. Villemure's questions around the process. A statement posted on social media

on September 26 mentions that CTV News editorial standards were not followed in this case. Which CTV News editorial standards were not followed in this case, resulting in these two employees being dismissed?

Mr. Richard Gray: There were a number of specific policy violations. There were three policy violations under CTV News policy—our policy on misrepresentation, our policy on the utilization of source material, and our policy on the use of sound, specifically interview clips.

The RTDNA code of ethics was violated in two instances. Those were article 1 as it relates to accuracy and article 3 as it relates to authenticity. With respect to the Canadian Association of Broadcasters' code of ethics, two clauses were violated. Those were clause 5, relating to news, and clause 6, relating to full, fair and proper presentation.

Mr. Matthew Green: It sounds as if there was a breakdown in a bunch of different ways.

Are these standards similar to those at other news channels you might know of? Is this an industry standard you're referring to?

Mr. Richard Gray: Yes. The RTDNA and Canadian Association of Broadcasters codes of ethics are industry standards.

I would imagine, though I don't know for certain, that each media organization in this country has its own policy.

• (1600)

Mr. Matthew Green: What steps do CTV News journalists and newsroom managers typically take to ensure that aired reports meet the current journalistic and ethical standards?

Mr. Richard Gray: It's through that vetting process I described earlier.

Mr. Matthew Green: Typically, how many people would be involved in that process?

Mr. Richard Gray: It depends on the nature of the story. Minimally, one senior manager reviews a particular story. It could be as many as two or three, depending upon the nature of the story. We might also have a lawyer review the story, depending upon the particulars of it.

Mr. Matthew Green: I want to get a sense of the workplace culture there.

Back in February, Bell Canada laid off 6% of its workforce. This immediately impacted CTV News. You're on the record in a reported story that says, "multi-skilled journalists' would replace news correspondent and technician teams reporting to CTV National News".

Would these two people be considered "multi-skilled journalists"?

Mr. Richard Gray: No. Actually, those two individuals would have been constructing a story in what I'm going to call our more traditional format. It is of the style that we continue to apply to our teams in Toronto and Ottawa, largely because of the nature of the jobs they do. They cover stories in more depth and detail. They are often involved in media scrums where there are multiple interviewers. There is more likelihood that the stories covered in Toronto and Ottawa could potentially involve hundreds of people, live and on location.

Mr. Matthew Green: I want to get to the heart of the matter.

I know you are in a very fast-paced environment. Certainly, journalists are in a fast-paced environment. Was it the case, through your dismissal process...?

I want to mention to you that being at committee covers you. You have the privilege to speak without it being held against you in civil proceedings. Perhaps you could talk about this: Is it the case that these people were just racing and cutting corners, perhaps, to meet a deadline? Were they under pressure?

I'm still concerned about the points my friend from the Bloc brought up about the motive. I'll tell you, sir, on the face of it, even though this impacted the Conservative Party—with which I have no ideological alignment—it is still very concerning, as it undermines our faith not just in media but also in our democracy.

Can you help us understand? In your exit interviews, what was the motive, specifically?

Mr. Richard Gray: The motives were different in each case.

In the first case, the clip was altered to take out the reference to the carbon tax, with the explanation given that the story was being reduced in length for time. There was no specific ask of that reporter to alter their story for time. It was explained to us that the reporter believed it was understood that the clip's nature was about a “carbon tax election”.

Mr. Matthew Green: With 15 seconds left, can you summarize the other side of it?

Mr. Richard Gray: Yes. There was a technical error in our original recording that prevented the video from being presented as it was. The editor took the step to manipulate the audio so the video could cover it.

Mr. Matthew Green: How long had those two been working? Were they experienced?

Mr. Richard Gray: They were both highly experienced.

Mr. Matthew Green: I echo the concern of my Conservative counterpart. If this was something they felt comfortable doing in this instance, what is to say they hadn't done it in other instances?

Mr. Richard Gray: As I've said a couple of times, this is the first time I have ever seen anything like this occur in a newsroom in my 33 years' experience working with television news.

Mr. Matthew Green: How would they know to—

The Chair: I'm so sorry. You know we're over time, Mr. Green.

• (1605)

Mr. Matthew Green: Yes. I appreciate it. Thank you. I was just pressing my luck.

The Chair: That concludes our first round.

I did allow extra time in that first round given the fact that we have one witness here. I'm going to try to keep it a little bit tighter in the second round.

I want to welcome Mr. Scheer to the committee.

Mr. Scheer, you have five minutes. Go ahead, sir.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just have to go back to what you said. You said that the clip was altered. You showed Canadians something that never happened. You're telling me now that there was no intent to misinform Canadians and that the reason for that altering of a clip was because it had to be cut down for time.

The words that were cut out were “carbon tax election”. I just timed myself, and that took about 1.2 seconds. You're telling me that there was no intent to misinform Canadians, that they had to cut this down for length and that it would be understood that the quote from the Conservative leader was about a carbon tax election, even though you removed the words “carbon tax election”.

Can you understand how we're having a very difficult time accepting that?

Mr. Richard Gray: I want to be clear: What I indicated was the explanation offered by the individual involved. That was not my explanation as to what transpired.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Do you accept that, or do you believe it was deliberately done to mislead Canadians?

Mr. Richard Gray: I do not believe that it was deliberately done, but still—

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Do you accept the—

Mr. Richard Gray: —it was a violation of our editorial standards, so these two individuals are no longer part—

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Do you accept the explanation that was given to you?

Mr. Richard Gray: We have made a decision that, due to the violation of our editorial standards, these individuals are no longer part of CTV News.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: What do you believe the motive was?

Mr. Richard Gray: It is not for me to determine what the motive was.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Okay. All right.

CTV News is a division of Bell Canada. Is that correct?

Mr. Richard Gray: It is.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Bell Canada makes about \$2.3 billion in profit based on 2023 numbers. Is that about correct? Would you agree with that?

Mr. Richard Gray: I'm not aware of how our company performs overall. My responsibility certainly is—

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I can confirm that it's true. I'm looking at it on your website.

Does the CTV News division turn a profit for Bell Canada?

Mr. Richard Gray: No, it does not. We lose \$40 million a year in news.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Okay.

Bell Canada makes a lot of money because it operates in a protected marketplace. Is that correct?

Mr. Richard Gray: Again, my responsibilities are for managing the operations of CTV News. I am not an executive at Bell Canada.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I can tell you that it does. It makes an awful lot of money off the backs of consumers because of government policies. In fact, I have here that Bell Canada, in the last year, lobbied this government over 50 times. That's more than four meetings with government officials a month. That's more face time with senior government levels than some Liberal MPs get.

I would like to point out that Bell would fear a government led by a party that believed in consumer-first, free market and pro-competition types of policies. It would benefit greatly from a party in power that continued the status quo or, even worse, took away more avenues for consumer choice, which would allow Bell to continue to make that kind of profit margin.

Is CTV News' viewership increasing or decreasing year over year? Would the viewership this year be higher or lower than last year?

Mr. Richard Gray: There has been a consistent erosion in viewership in broadcast media in this country for a number of years. It's falling year over year.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I wonder why. When you get caught putting things on the air that you then have to admit never actually happened, I can understand why viewership, as well as trust, would erode.

Mr. Richard Gray: I can give you a couple of specific—

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I'm sorry, but I only have about a minute left, so I just want to understand one thing. Does CTV News have a diversity target?

Mr. Richard Gray: Our goal is to reflect Canada. The current visible minority percentage in this country, according to the 2021 census, is 26%.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Do you have a target for diversity of political viewpoints at CTV News?

• (1610)

Mr. Richard Gray: It's our job, as I said earlier, to present all sides of public policy issues in a balanced, accurate and fair way.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: That doesn't answer the question.

Do you have a specific policy to ensure that the editorial direction, the journalists and the producers at CTV News reflect Canadians' political spectrum?

Mr. Richard Gray: It's not the job of journalists to reflect the Canadian political spectrum. It's our job to present stories in an unbiased, balanced, accurate and fair way.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Are you telling me that you have no way of determining whether or not the producers, the editors and the journalists all have the same Liberal bias? You have no way to determine that.

The Chair: Give a quick response, Mr. Gray, please.

Mr. Richard Gray: Our team does not have a Liberal bias.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Scheer.

We're going to go to Mr. Fisher on Zoom.

Mr. Fisher, you have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Gray, for being here.

I have to say that the questions posed by my colleagues from all parties have been excellent, and I'm sure you completely expected them. There'll be a little bit of repetition, just for some clarity.

I want to reiterate a few of the things you said in your opening statement. You claim to be the most trusted news source. You said that you have a responsibility to manage your own affairs. That strikes me as something that's difficult to jibe with when we're talking about the elephant in the room today. We're talking about the broadcast. We're talking about inaccuracies regarding a leader of a Canadian political party.

I think you may have touched on some of these, but can you go over with some clarity the steps you've taken to ensure you can still say that you at Bell Media, at CTV News, have journalistic integrity and the ethics that you must have under that Bell Media umbrella?

Mr. Richard Gray: I'm going to answer your question in two parts.

First, I'm going to talk about this particular incident. We had the matter brought to our attention. We immediately apologized. I took the further steps, because of the nature of what had transpired, to initiate a fulsome investigation into what I was concerned was a very serious breach of our ethics and our policies.

We made the decision as a result of that to do two things. We made the decision to terminate the two individuals who were involved in that policy breach, and we took the step to apologize one more time. I think that is entirely appropriate, given what transpired, and I think that is indicative of the manner in which we take seriously the trust that Canadians have in us.

The second component part to my answer is this. Canadians in this country overwhelmingly choose CTV as their number one source for news with respect to broadcasts at the local level and at the national level every day of the week. We are also the number one source for digital news in this country. That is not us pandering to an audience. That is people tuning in to us because, for 60 years, we have presented a product that they know, they like and they trust.

Mr. Darren Fisher: You seem like a very earnest person, and I want to thank you for the tone that you've struck here.

You said that you've never seen anything like this before, yet you also said that it was impossible to catch this error.

Have there been other errors like this where it was impossible to catch them and they've gotten through? Can you give me other examples of something like this that might have happened that slipped through and didn't get caught?

Mr. Richard Gray: Errors happen in news. It's the very nature of what we do. We try our absolute best to prevent them from going to air or being published. We are never happy. We are absolutely angry at ourselves when there is a failure in our checks and balances.

They happen in large measure because of the deadline pressure that exists and by virtue of the volume we produce. CTV produces approximately 25,000 hours of local news a year, approximately 20,000 hours of specialty news a year and almost 500 hours of national news broadcasts a year. There is a massive volume there. We go to air with stories that have been vetted and screened, and we do our absolute best to present material in a factual, accurate and balanced way at all times. However, sometimes—as with everyone—mistakes occur.

• (1615)

Mr. Darren Fisher: Are those employees gone from CTV? Are they gone from Bell completely?

Mr. Richard Gray: Those two individuals are no longer members of either CTV News or BCE.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fisher.

Thank you, Mr. Gray.

[*Translation*]

The floor is yours for two minutes, Mr. Villemure.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Gray, before I ask my first question, please allow me to make an editorial comment about diverse political opinions.

I watch CTV regularly, and I am always a bit surprised, and even offended, when I see the Bloc Québécois being described as separatist. The word conveys a meaning. It is a term that was reviled by Jean Chrétien at the time. Today, it carries negative overtones. Even just using the word puts our political position in a bad light in English Canada.

So when you talk about there being diverse opinions, I am a bit skeptical. Could you comment, please?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: As I've said repeatedly, we endeavour to cover public policy issues in a balanced way so Canadians can make informed decisions about them. We strive and endeavour to include all points of view.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: There is just something I would like to tell you, Mr. Gray.

You do cover all opinions; that is not what concerns me. However, every time the word “separatist” is used, it makes a value judgment. It is not a judgment on the facts; it is a value judgment. Personally, I would tell you to find a synonym or some other term, because I think we are getting off topic here.

I am going to come back to the problem we are considering today. I heard your explanation. You talk about how the media have lost credibility, about how trust is being eroded and business is shrinking. I come here with an open mind, but when I hear things like what we have heard today, I find it a bit hard to have any more trust after hearing the testimony than I had before.

What could you do to reassure me? What solutions could you propose to ease people's minds and restore their trust in CTV?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Gray: I fully anticipate that, as a result of what transpired in this particular case—although it was an isolated incident, from my perspective—we are going to have to work to rebuild a degree of trust among Canadians and our audience.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Gray.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[*English*]

Mr. Green, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

Mr. Gray, with the experience you have, and with the resources you have within your reach, what learnings would you provide other news stations in the mainstream environment here in Canada?

We have an election coming up. Obviously, this is going to be something closely watched. What have you learned from this situation, and what would your advice be to competitors in the market in terms of making sure this doesn't happen again?

Mr. Richard Gray: First and foremost, it's absolutely critical that we are all reminding our team members about our policies and expected editorial standards. That is probably the biggest and most important learning for us. You can't take it for granted, because this is something that has probably been the prevailing approach and attitude in newsrooms for a number of years. That would be number one.

Number two is constant reinforcement of what I've said repeatedly. Our job is to present all sides of public policy issues. It is to function in a balanced way. Accuracy and fairness are of critical importance. That's our job. That's our role.

• (1620)

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Gray, I do have to reclaim my time. I have about a minute left.

You've stated the ways in which CTV is dealing with this. I talk about how there's an ecosystem within the news media sector. In the event that you were to rebroadcast reports or take information from other news channels, are there any tools or methods that CTV News can use to ensure that these reports do not contain misinformation or disinformation?

Mr. Richard Gray: With respect to Canadian stories in broadcast, we run 100% of our own material. We do not source Canadian story content for broadcast from any other source in this country. With respect to international news material, we only align ourselves with organizations that have similar editorial standards to ours.

Mr. Matthew Green: That's helpful.

Thank you very much for your appearance here today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

I understand that Mr. Cooper and Mr. Caputo are going to split their time at two and a half minutes each. Then we're going follow that with Mr. Housefather.

We're going to start with Mr. Cooper.

Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Gray, you have repeatedly stated here today that you believe that there was no intent to mislead. Let's look at what happened. CTV spliced together three short sound bites. Sound bites were spliced together, not even in the order that they were stated, to create an entirely made-up sentence. It was literally fake news that entirely changed the meaning of what Pierre Poilievre said. On exactly what basis do you conclude that there was no intent to mislead?

Mr. Richard Gray: Two now-former staff members of CTV News acted in a way that was in breach of our editorial standards.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You made a conclusive statement that there was no intent to mislead, so I'm asking you this: On what basis do you draw that conclusion?

Mr. Richard Gray: It's based on 33 years of experience and this being the first and only time that anything like this has ever happened.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Gray, no one believes you. You said, for example, that one of the two employees who altered the video said that he or she believed that it would be understood to be about the carbon tax election. However, nowhere in the report is there any mention of a carbon tax election, so on what basis could anyone reasonably believe that this statement was made in that context when there was no context? Its quite the opposite: disinformation.

Mr. Richard Gray: I disagree.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You disagree. It's a fact that there was no mention of a carbon tax election. You have no credibility. In the face of the fact that CTV peddled a fraudulent news story, you haven't apologized. You haven't explained the basis upon which you have asserted that there was no intent to mislead. To simply say that you disagree isn't good enough. No one believes you.

Mr. Richard Gray: We have, in fact, apologized twice.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You haven't apologized at all. You said that there was no intent to mislead. You said that there was no intent to mislead, but you can't even articulate the basis of why.

Mr. Richard Gray: There was no intent to mislead. We have apologized twice.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You say that, but I asked you to provide a basis and you haven't been able to provide a basis.

The Chair: That's two minutes and 30 seconds.

Go ahead, Mr. Caputo.

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Gray, I take issue with something that you said, and it's actually been said a number of times at this committee. You characterize this as a mistake. Do you stand by that?

Mr. Richard Gray: It was the violation of our editorial standards.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Sir, I asked you if this was a mistake; you've said that before. You stand by the fact it was a mistake. Is that correct?

• (1625)

Mr. Richard Gray: I stand by the fact that this story went to air in a way that it shouldn't have.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Sir, you have called it a mistake. With all due respect, a mistake is when I put milk in my coffee instead of cream. This was a massive error in judgment. This was a previously unforeseen breach of trust by what was once a trusted media organization. You have said, picking up on what Mr. Cooper said.... The explanation given was that there was no intent to mislead Canadians. Sir, do you even believe that?

Mr. Richard Gray: I stand by my testimony today, wholeheartedly and unreservedly.

Mr. Frank Caputo: You stand by your testimony that the intent was not to mislead Canadians. Did you talk to these people to get their motive, sir?

Mr. Richard Gray: There was a fulsome investigation done into what transpired.

Mr. Frank Caputo: That's not what I asked, sir. With all due respect, I didn't ask whether there was an investigation. I asked whether you spoke with them—yes or no?

Mr. Richard Gray: I did not speak with them beyond having an initial conversation with the reporter the night that this was brought to our attention.

Mr. Frank Caputo: You had a brief initial conversation, and based on that, you come to the committee and say that there was no malevolent intent to mislead. I ask whether you believe that, and you stand by it. With all due respect, sir, that is an untenable claim that you have arrived at. We are getting ready here for a carbon tax election.

At the end of the day, is there one thing that you have done, that you have implemented, to ensure that this won't happen again? Is there one thing?

Mr. Richard Gray: Yes, we've terminated two individuals.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Sir, you have countless other employees. I mean, that is possibly the worst answer you could have given. What about moving forward? That is retrospective. What about moving forward?

Sir, this is what I can say: Why is it that it is always the Conservatives who are fighting this battle? Why is it? Why is it that, when it comes to Justin Trudeau and the Liberals, they are not misquoted, but when it comes to Conservatives and Pierre Poilievre, this type of thing can happen? That is shameful.

The Chair: I'm going to have to end it there.

Mr. Richard Gray: I disagree with the mis-characterization.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Housefather, you have five minutes. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you.

Mr. Gray, when you hire employees, do you ask them what political party they support?

Mr. Richard Gray: No, we do not.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Would it be impermissible for you to do so? I would think that under the law it would be.

Mr. Richard Gray: I would expect that it would not be permissible.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I understand the general principle that CTV News is not trying to be biased in one direction or another, but let me come back to this incident because I think there are some unresolved questions that I have.

With regard to this incident, did you interview personally the two journalists or the two people in the newsroom who were fired?

Mr. Richard Gray: No, I did not.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: That actually surprises me. Have you taken the time since the incident to talk to the two of them directly?

Mr. Richard Gray: I initiated a due process investigation into this matter, which was conducted by professionals. I was apprised at all steps as to what discussions were occurring, and I came to the conclusion following that investigation that it was necessary for these individuals to no longer be members of the CTV News team.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I agree with that because it sounds like a step that needed severe disciplinary action.

However, my question is.... Today you've testified as to their motive, and you've stated that you don't believe that they did something for wrong reasons. I won't use Mr. Caputo's word of "mis-take", although I think you did use it. How would you know that if you haven't directly taken the time to speak to them to understand?

Mr. Richard Gray: Based on the explanations offered, it is reasonable.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: That's all second-hand. That's all hearsay. You've come here to testify on behalf of CTV, and you didn't actually take the time yourself, in what you describe as an incredibly serious incident, one that was very embarrassing to the network. Why would you have not personally taken the time to meet with these two people to understand?

Have you reviewed the previous footage of this reporter and of this producer to check to see whether they did this on any other occasion? Have you gone back to previous footage?

Mr. Richard Gray: No, there have never been any—

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Why would you have not gone back? If I know somebody has done something wrong and that it's incredibly serious, wouldn't I want to go back to see if they've done it before? I mean, you only had to randomly look at, let's say, 10 of 100 of the different stories covered by this reporter to look at that.

Why would CTV not do that?

• (1630)

Mr. Richard Gray: I didn't feel it was necessary.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I can say that it's not only the Conservatives, from my perspective, who have concerns, because I am not a Conservative and I have concerns about the way it sounds this matter was treated in terms of.... I don't think it was taken seriously enough.

Again, have you changed any policies? Have you changed any company policies as a result of this incident on a forward-looking basis?

Mr. Richard Gray: We took appropriate action in this case through two apologies.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I'm not questioning your apologies. I believe you apologized. I believe you fired two people. I just want to understand. As a result of what happened—two people were allowed to do something that violated policy—what has been done to prevent two people in the future from doing exactly the same thing? What has changed in your policy?

Mr. Richard Gray: I want to correct something that you just said.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Okay.

Mr. Richard Gray: Two people were not "allowed" to violate policy. Two people violated policy, and there were consequences for that violation of policy.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I'm not trying to suggest that CTV gave permission to the two of them to violate policy. The two of them did violate a policy.

What has been done to prevent two people from doing exactly the same thing tomorrow?

Mr. Richard Gray: As I've said repeatedly, this is the first time I've ever experienced anything like this in 33 years.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I know, but you haven't gone back to look at the footage of what these people had done before. You didn't go back to previous stories to check to see whether they did it. It's just that nobody was ever aware of it because no Conservative staffer ever caught it.

Will you undertake to the committee to go back and look at 10 previous stories done by these two people to see whether there is anything in there that CTV may not be aware of?

Mr. Richard Gray: I don't think it's necessary, because there had never been previous complaints about the conduct of these individuals.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Housefather.

Unfortunately, that concludes our time with Mr. Gray.

Mr Gray, I want to thank you for appearing before the committee today and making yourself available.

I am going to suspend as we get set for the next panel.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1640)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Welcome back, everyone. I appreciate your patience.

We're now entering our second hour. I'd like to welcome our witnesses for today.

As an individual, on Zoom, we have John McAndrews, who is the managing director of the digital society laboratory at McMaster University. From the National Security Centre of Excellence, we have Neal Kushwaha, who is the chairperson.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. McAndrews. You have up to five minutes to address the committee with an opening statement.

Go ahead, sir. Thank you.

Mr. John McAndrews (Managing Director, Digital Society Laboratory, McMaster University, As an Individual): Thank you, and good afternoon.

My name is John McAndrews. I'm the managing director of the digital society lab.

We are an interdisciplinary research centre based at Hamilton's McMaster University. For transparency, the digital society lab has received funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Mitacs, McMaster University and Facebook's parent company, Meta. These funders do not decide how the lab does its research or what it publishes. Our list of funders can be found on our website: digital-societylab.org. The lab is also a proud member of the Canadian

Digital Media Research Network, and receives in-kind support from the CDMRN in the form of space in its surveys.

It is an honour to appear before your committee today.

Let me begin by speaking plainly about why, in my view, misinformation, and particularly misinformation circulated on social media, is so hard to deal with.

First, misinformation is hard to detect and its effects are hard to measure—not impossible, but hard.

Second, the underlying technologies in this space are changing rapidly, and it is challenging for both research and policy to keep up.

Lastly, there are sometimes difficult trade-offs regarding free expression in deciding if or how to respond to misinformation. It is the job of Parliament to make some of these calls, in my view, and I do not envy you in your task.

Next, let me say a few words about how the digital society lab is trying to help. The lab has two in-progress research projects about misinformation. In the first, we begin with the premise that, while new technologies risk making the ancient problem of misinformation worse, some of those same technologies also have the potential to help humans combat misinformation. The lab is thus actively developing applications of generative AI to help distill fact-checkable claims from among the vast numbers of posts on social media, and to then leverage information about how these claims are created and shared to provide timely insights. We envision this as a kind of early-warning system to surface potentially misleading claims for further human review.

In the second lab project, we begin by observing that amidst the growing international body of research about misinformation, we still do not know enough about what features of misinformation the public considers to be harmful and what types of responses citizens consider appropriate. To that end, the lab has recently embarked on new, pilot, survey-based research to answer these questions for our partners at CDMRN.

The work of both of these projects is preliminary and not yet peer-reviewed, but I believe it holds promise in better understanding misinformation and public support for policy responses to it.

In the time remaining, let me turn to offering for your consideration three recommendations for how this committee can help fight misinformation and build a more resilient information ecosystem.

First, this committee should recommend robust, sustainable, public support for research about misinformation and its effects in Canada. This should come in the form of public funding for high-quality, transparent and publicly accessible scientific research, and in the form of rules that require platforms to share their data with researchers under appropriate conditions and protections.

Second, echoing the views of prior witnesses, this committee should also recommend robust, sustainable, public support for initiatives that promote up-to-date, evidence-based media and science literacy efforts. There is no single response to misinformation, but an important feature of such literacy efforts, in my view, is that they largely sidestep the most difficult trade-offs regarding free expression, which I noted earlier.

Lastly, this committee should maintain its own ongoing visibility into the subject matter. To my mind, this means regular quarterly or annual hearings about the state of misinformation in Canada after the committee concludes its present study.

Let me end by commending committee members for undertaking its crucial and timely work.

I look forward to the discussions that follow. Thank you.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McAndrews. That was under the time. The committee always appreciates very succinct messaging.

Mr. Kushwaha, that gives you a little extra time if you need it.

Please, go ahead, sir. You have up to five minutes, or a little more, to address the committee.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha (Chairperson, National Security Centre of Excellence): Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, Chair, vice-chairs and committee members. Thank you for inviting me to offer the findings and recommendations of the National Security Centre of Excellence.

The NSCOE is a Canadian NGO composed of academics and practitioners covering key elements of international law and domestic law, technology, policy and politics that impact Canada and Canadians. We assist private and public sectors with their insider and foreign threat actor risks and issues through research across Canada as well as globally.

Our findings are summarized as advice, maintaining privacy, and are shared with various departments and agencies of the Government of Canada to help them formulate policy.

I will begin with some normalizing information regarding espionage and sabotage. Under international law, espionage and sabotage are expected from foreign states, dating long since before all of us were born. We do it too. Indeed, key areas are considered off limits, including inherently governmental functions and critical infrastructure.

When entities behave this way, our domestic laws can hold them criminally accountable. While we expect foreign governments to perform espionage and sabotage, we don't expect foreign companies, nor individuals, to do so. When they do, the government where they reside or are headquartered should hold them account-

able. When their government does not hold them accountable, others could consider these actors organs of the state acting on behalf of their government. Cyberspace presents another means to perform such actions. It's not surprising or new.

With that out of the way, I present to you our findings. On September 27, Vanessa Lloyd and David Vigneault testified at the foreign interference commission. They shared examples of foreign activities by the governments of China, Pakistan, India, Iran and others. While studying the behaviours of China and Russia at our centre, we noticed the trend of these countries and their ability to perform intricate influence activities over cyber that approach—but do not cross—the threshold of armed conflict, limiting Canada's options for lawful responses. Their intricate methods also make it very difficult for the public, or even elected officials, to notice.

As an example, since COVID, working from home is very common and expected. Companies and governments around the world supported this, including the U.S. Army, for matters up to classified secret in 2,000 homes. From a cyber perspective, the communications are well encrypted and considered safeguarded. From a physical perspective, a small sensor on a window will pick up voices, which are sent for processing to determine methods to influence. Civil servants and elected officials remain easy targets.

Similarly, we've studied the behaviours of Canadians raising monies within domestic communities to send abroad to influence the public of another country. These types of activities are not limited to specific cultures or backgrounds of people. Some of the Canadian religious groups are sending money abroad to help with protesting and sometimes violence. Indeed, it's not the entire group of individuals at these places of worship.

We have noticed an increase in the number of active organized crime groups and in those in smaller cities in Canada. In various well-respected restaurants, one can observe drug deliveries to affluent patrons and staff ordered over mobile phones, as they would for an Uber ride. Organized crime groups send their monies into foreign jurisdictions using cryptocurrency and influence foreign policy and publicly elected officials.

We believe Canadian laws are not adequately written or tested to counter such activities. Because of this, certain governments in Europe and Asia see Canada as supporting foreign influence and even terrorism. While the U.S. is a strong ally, they have very different views and legal disputes on matters important to Canada, such as trade and our Arctic sovereignty. U.S.-headquartered companies are highly influential in civil servant promotions in terms of offering them well-remunerated roles upon their retirement, influencing government operations and senior decision-making. Foreign-headquartered companies are employing Canadians, allowing foreign states to legally drive influence through their headquartered companies into the minds of their staff located in Canada.

These are really no quick solutions. I'll move on to our recommendations.

The Government of Canada should undertake comprehensive educational programs to immunize Canadian society against misinformation and information manipulation in general using Finland's model. Almost a decade ago, Finland recognized the same vulnerabilities as Canada does today and embarked on a whole-of-society education effort to protect democracy, bringing fact-checking awareness to kindergarteners up to and including retirees.

Canadian voters located abroad fall directly under the jurisdiction and influence of foreign states. Our findings suggest that some states are using this as a strategic long-term influence vehicle. The only reasonable mitigations to such influence upon foreign-located Canadians are to strengthen international norms in Canada's favour.

• (1650)

Cyberspace has only been around for 30 years, and in that time we can't formulate international customary law. We've signed treaties. In 2015, Canada ratified the 2001 Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, but we haven't signed the additional two protocols, nor the 2014 Malabo convention.

Like in many other countries, Canadian civil servants were stuck accepting data sovereignty risks on behalf of Canada. Instruments like the UN convention against cybercrime exist; however, the centre is recommending rejecting the treaty as it diminishes our sovereignty. It's the centre's position that Canada should continue to promote good state behaviour through open communications and normative behaviours. We need to show international parties we do not support these actions onto others from within Canada and upon Canada.

Thank you very much for your time and best of luck.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kushwaha.

I'm going to start by going to Mr. Caputo. We have six-minute rounds to start, and Mr. Caputo is going to start us off for six minutes.

Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Thank you, Chair.

I would like to thank Mr. Kushwaha and Mr. McAndrews for being here.

I listened with a lot of interest to the openings. It's really interesting stuff. I feel like I could talk with both of you for some time.

The Chair: You have six minutes.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Frank Caputo: I didn't say how long I was going to talk, Mr. Chair, I said how long I could talk, because those who know me know I like to talk.

It's very interesting, Mr. Kushwaha. You talked about foreign companies as opposed to governments. They're different entities. Government is completely different. What I found really interesting was when you talked about a foreign company becoming an organ of the state, I would say akin to or essentially carrying out a government's bidding.

Is that an accurate framing?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: It's a way of saying it, indeed. Please continue.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Yes. Sometimes government does things, and they might be deliberate or they might not be deliberate. At the end of the day, they can result in misinformation or disinformation. I'm going to give you an example. I'm just going to have a quick look here to get the date. I believe it was September 17, 2024. The Trudeau Liberal government actually gave \$340,000 to the production of a film that appeared at the Toronto International Film Festival. This was a pro-Russian film, as I understand it.

I don't know that anybody went through this and said, "Okay, this is exactly what we're doing." If it was, somebody should be fired. If it wasn't, it seems to me like quite a mess-up when we're giving \$340,000 of your money, my money and our money to pro-Russian propaganda. Do you have anything to say about that?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: I'm not familiar with that particular case or scenario, but it is an interesting piece of information you're providing. Based on what you've shared, I think it's very difficult for us to point to any politically elected individual in that decision-making process. The challenge we have, as I pointed out, is that sometimes it's our civil servants who make these decisions that harm.

Let's clarify that. There are three different types that we characterize as insider threat actors. There are some who are non-malicious, without intent: "Oops, I did this. I had no idea." Then there's malicious with intent. There's also non-malicious but with intent, and that's the really weird one. I can say that I'm not malicious, but I really thought this would be better, so I did it and, yes, it contravened policy or it didn't have the right outcome.

• (1655)

Mr. Frank Caputo: Right.

What's interesting to me about what you're saying there is that so often in misinformation and disinformation we assume it's a problem that impacts us from elsewhere, that it is external and coming into Canada. However, the example I just gave, and I know that there are other.... We just had a panel about a formerly trusted news source propagating blatant misinformation.

What I find interesting about that is that it's almost like a wake-up call to Canada that—do you know what?—sometimes when we have \$340,000 being given to a film that shouldn't be or we have news sources or as parliamentarians we suffer from it.... I don't know that this is just someone else's problem that impacts us. I think we need to look in the mirror.

What do you say about that?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: It's interesting. I like the idea of looking in the mirror, indeed. I think it works well at a diplomatic relations level as well.

It's interesting to note that, when funding is received by external parties, we trust them to do certain things for Canadian interests. While they may continue down this path, those perspectives may change as a result of their reporting or whatever work they may do, in this case, a film.

It's a complicated matter that one may need to oversee them. There's just so much funding that we give to so many different entities, NGOs and even supporting entities around the world. It would be very difficult to have that kind of oversight with our small taxpayer income.

Mr. Frank Caputo: You raise an excellent point there as well, and that is that, so often, people will be very quick to say that this is a problem just on the right, but there's a fair amount of money that comes in on the left. I hate using right versus left. I would call them extremes. We'll just call them extremes.

There is a lot of money that comes in illegally from American NGOs, for instance. I think that a lot of people would find those views as not being within Canadian norms or not within the mainstream, and that funds people who are carrying out extremes in Canada.

This happens seemingly during elections. There's one name. It is the Tides Foundation. My understanding is that money sometimes comes up into Canada, and then that propagates local disinformation.

How do we stop that?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: Yes, especially if we are allies, coming from states in the allies, as we call our allies.

I feel your pain, and I will say that it's something that we see. Canada's not the only country that's facing this. When we speak with other countries around Europe, they're facing it. Asia is facing it, as are the African states.

It's unfortunate, and I think it's just more obvious now. It's always been there.

Mr. Frank Caputo: I think I'm probably done.

I'm sorry, Mr. McAndrews. I had questions for you as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Bains, you're going to pick it up from there for six minutes.

Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Parm Bains (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both Mr. McAndrews and Mr. Kushwaha for joining us today and providing some very interesting insights.

As you know, we've had this discussion around misinformation and disinformation. This committee's been studying it for quite some time.

I noticed that you mentioned Finland, and I've heard about Taiwan as well. Previous witnesses have also stated that Finland and Taiwan are examples to follow when it comes to fighting misinformation and disinformation due to their proximity to Russia and China, respectively.

Could you expand on their programs and suggest other ways that we can immunize Canadians from the effects of misinformation and disinformation?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: Absolutely. Thank you for that.

In Finland, obviously, as you described, they do have a significant challenge right at their doorstep, and it's not too far from ours as well, if you think about it. They took action immediately. In their model, as opposed to Canada.... Our policy for education may come from a federal level, but it's delivered at the provincial and territorial levels. It's very difficult to appropriately govern from Canada as Finland does.

Similar to their model, we need to come up with methods. I'm not suggesting that this committee does it or that I'm proposing any policy methods to drive from federal down to provinces and territories, but I'm suggesting that something needs to get done to normalize that kind of information, as we normalize mathematics, physics, science and language.

To that effect, Finland did an amazing job on that, teaching kindergartners how to do this by giving them silly examples to real examples, as you would to any child. It helped them grow. Even the elderly and the retired, having a conversation at a coffee shop, who would have difficulty with technology and receiving information from their friends and their neighbours, can then really consider what they're hearing and say, "Do you know what? Let me look that up. I know how to do that, because it's now part of my ecosystem, my living and my being." It transformed. It took a decade.

• (1700)

Mr. Parm Bains: Searching for sources is something that could be done at a national level, where some type of a policy could be introduced and delivered to provincial authorities, educational awareness or some type of thing.

Do you think misinformation and disinformation are increasing? You said that they have always been there. Are they increasing or is the sophistication around them increasing? Why are we seeing an increase in this activity, or has it become more obvious to us?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: Maybe it's a mix of all of that. If I can make it really simple, I feel like we're all living off of digital devices these days, like laptops, computers and mobile phones. Kids are on them. Adults are on them. It's a great mode of digesting it. Previously, if I wanted disinformation or misinformation and I was in a war zone, I'd get pamphlets from the sky, or if I was sitting in my home, I'd need to turn the television on to a very specific channel—otherwise, I would see snow—to digest some information that would be considered misinformation or could be considered misinformation. Today, it's at my fingertips.

While it seems like there's more, it's just so much more accessible. There is more and there are means to deliver it faster. With the ability to use someone's existing video, like, probably, even mine now, and adjust my voice and apply it to something else and use... I'll use technologies—

Mr. Parm Bains: That would be deepfakes and things of that nature.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: Absolutely.

Mr. Parm Bains: You may be aware of the recently passed Bill C-70, an act respecting countering foreign interference. One provision of the act was to expand the preparatory acts offence. If you have knowledge of this, can you expand on how it will help address espionage or new foreign interference offences?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: I can speak to the justice side of things. My opinion is that I feel some positive work has been done there. I commend the work that was done on C-70, especially on the ability to deal with that in a legal form as well as expanding some capacity for CSIS to perform in certain ways.

To get into the intricacies, I feel it would be best to tear that apart another time, if you choose. There's some content in there that still limits Canada, but we have to take steps and we're taking good steps. That's positive, so I commend everyone who participated in that to make that happen.

Mr. Parm Bains: Can you give an example of a limitation and then make a recommendation for addressing it? Is that possible?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: Some of the limitations we can see, as described earlier, are that, for some of the behaviours that are happening within Canada, it's very difficult to collect legal evidence—that's probably the right term there—or evidentiary data that you can use in court. It makes it very difficult to do that and show intent. Those are two very difficult things to capture in all of these cases.

Mr. Parm Bains: I'm going to ask Mr. McAndrews the same question. I know you talked about the difficulty of really knowing the impact of these things. Could you expand on that same question?

The Chair: I hate to do this, Mr. McAndrews, because I know we haven't heard from you, but can you give us a quick response in 15 seconds? I'm sorry.

• (1705)

Mr. John McAndrews: I would commend for your consideration the June issue of the journal *Nature*, which expands on this healthy discussion about the prevalence and effects of misinformation on social media.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Thank you, Mr. Bains.

[*Translation*]

The floor is yours for six minutes, Mr. Villemure.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. McAndrews, I have done some extensive studying of the work done by the digital society laboratory you belong to, and I have found the research it does very interesting. A lot of people have appeared here and described disinformation for us, but I would like you to tell me about the future of disinformation.

[*English*]

Mr. John McAndrews: Thank you very much for the question, Monsieur Villemure. I'll do my very best.

In earlier testimony, Professor Bengio said he didn't think we spent enough time talking about the future, and I entirely agree. Right now, as he has testified to, generative AI is making it cheaper and easier to create deceptive video and audio and to better target messaging to individuals. We need to make sure that research and policy keeps up with that. He is better placed than I am to describe the future of generative AI—I'm a political scientist by background—but I do worry very much that we will struggle to keep up with the changing technology in this space.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: The reference to Mr. Bengio is excellent, by the way.

Our mandate relates to parliamentary disinformation, so I would like to ask you what you see in your crystal ball when it comes to parliamentary and political disinformation.

[*English*]

Mr. John McAndrews: This is always difficult terrain for looking into the crystal ball.

I think the most optimistic scenario is that we're going to create a transition whereby people will observe more and more deceptive material and may turn back to more trusted sources that have a long-standing code of ethics and the resources to do the careful work of compiling and presenting the news in compelling ways. That's the most optimistic view.

The more pessimistic view is that the information ecosystem becomes overly polluted to the point that people tune out. As a political scientist, I worry not just that people might believe false things, but that they also don't know enough. I worry that many folks are not interested in politics, as it is very much their right and perhaps also their privilege, but the danger is that as more and more people tune out because they cannot distinguish between true and false, it further degrades our democracy.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. McAndrews.

Mr. Kushwaha, we might say that everywhere we look in public life, truth has been replaced by whatever seems plausible, and with truth now being out of reach, people are satisfied with something seeming plausible. This opens a door somewhere to disinformation. What do we do in a society where truth is out of reach?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: That is a good question: What do we do? With all the doctored videos we see today, I think people are going to just close their ears. The problems associated with this have been discussed here before.

[*English*]

People will just ignore everything, and it's going to come to a point that it doesn't matter what you present.

[*Translation*]

I think there are already societies in the world that have got to that point.

[*English*]

We have something to learn from them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Earlier, you talked about the fine line between what is legal and what is illegal. It separates the two, but it connects them at the same time. Could you elaborate on that, please?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: You're talking about what I said about China and Russia, is that it?

Mr. René Villemure: Yes.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: We have done studies in Europe, with the Europeans, and it is very clear that since about 2012, Russia has constantly been finding new ways to interfere in the affairs of other countries. Its campaigns are very obvious and it is easy to understand what it is doing. Once again, however, because this is not quite covered by the laws of war, there is not much we can do.

• (1710)

Mr. René Villemure: Apparently.

I have another hard question for you. Earlier, we were told that the truth does not matter much these days. You talked about Finland, and a few other people have also talked to us about that. What I take from it is that it is really important to have very strong media and to start educating people from a very young age.

I wonder about critical thinking, which is no longer being taught. It is not being taught anywhere in Quebec and Canada, unless you do a Ph.D. in philosophy, for example. Do you have any sugges-

tions about this? Forget about levels of government for a minute. If people are not interested in the truth, we cannot hope to interest them in critical thinking.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: What are children, even older ones, seeing on television or on their phones? They see celebrities or people with money, driving some car or other or flying to get somewhere. They don't want to learn.

Mr. René Villemure: They prefer to be entertained rather than educated.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: That's right.

Mr. René Villemure: Okay.

If I look at what is happening on X these days, I see that the whole world seems to be at war with one another. The atmosphere is negative.

The Chair: Mr. Villemure—

Mr. René Villemure: It will be very short.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead.

Mr. René Villemure: All this negativity is not disinformation in itself, but the effect is to make us want to give up on the news.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: That is absolutely correct. If you compared Canada to countries like China or even India, would you say they are abandoning education?

Mr. René Villemure: No, I wouldn't say that.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Green, you have six minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My questions are going to be for Professor McAndrews.

Welcome to committee. Obviously, as a Hamilton MP, I think it's always good to have our best and brightest before parliamentary committees offering subject matter expertise.

My question for you is really trying to get back to your opening statement, which was around recommendations. You spoke of rules, and I believe it was in the context of algorithmic transparency. You talked about having that enforced under appropriate conditions. Is that correct?

Mr. John McAndrews: I was referring to rules that would require, with appropriate permissions and conditions, platforms to share information with researchers that would allow them to deepen their study of misinformation and possible tools to address it.

Mr. Matthew Green: What rules might you suggest? Has there been any substantive work from the digital society lab with specificity on which rules would be required?

Mr. John McAndrews: The short answer is no. The longer answer is that I would commend to the committee the EU's Digital Services Act as a possible model for how very large platforms are required to share their data with European-based researchers. The ability of researchers to access the data of very large platforms is becoming harder and harder, which makes our ability to inform parliamentarians harder and harder.

Mr. Matthew Green: Under what "appropriate conditions"? Is that something you've contemplated?

Mr. John McAndrews: I can offer some initial thoughts that researchers should not be doing it for a commercial benefit and that they maintain adequate protections of privacy where it is pertinent. For some platforms, the data would be public. For other platforms, it is not, so very careful consideration of user privacy will be important here. Then I think there needs to be some degree of auditing to ensure that we are receiving the appropriate data with enforcement mechanisms to follow.

Mr. Matthew Green: In previous testimony we talked a little bit about the commodification of information, the way in which it's sold—kind of data capitalism. I think about Clearview AI and the way in which like people can be profiled online using technology. I think about Cambridge Analytica and the way that it was used in 2016. We're now hearing about Russian connections to Canadian social media influencers.

In your view, as a political scientist, what are the greatest risks related to misinformation and disinformation that might not only affect the work of Parliament and parliamentarians but also future elections?

• (17:15)

Mr. John McAndrews: I appreciate the question. It's a big one and a difficult one.

As I mentioned a few minutes ago, I think it's the ability for Canadians to make judgments about what's true and false and for them to make informed decisions. Canadians benefit from good information and make good decisions based on that. Likewise, in my view, no political party is disadvantaged by polluting the information space in the medium term. I think there is a common cause to be built around—

Mr. Matthew Green: If I could—sorry—I heard what you said, but I'm sure you're familiar with Steve Bannon. Steve Bannon has very publicly talked about flooding the zone with a word that would be unparliamentary. They talk very openly on the far right about cognitive warfare. There seems to be, at least in the political spectrum, some advantage to having a post-truth environment where facts don't actually matter and political parties get to make it up as they go along. Is that not the case?

Have you found any correlation or causation theory as it relates to the rise of right-wing populism and misinformation? I know you've done work on COVID and vaccine hesitancy. Is there a correlation there between political ideology and partisan gain to be had?

Mr. John McAndrews: I don't think we want to pretend that there are no politics in misinformation. What I want to underscore to the committee is that there is a public interest that is served, and indeed the interests of major political parties in the medium term, in

building a resilient ecosystem. It is entirely appropriate for this committee to spend time learning about specific examples and how they can derive lessons from those examples.

However, when the committee turns around to make recommendations, when there are laws proposed and rules proposed, we don't, I think, want to give the impression to Canadians that those are designed to advantage a particular political party.

Mr. Matthew Green: I agree.

To the point here, your digital society lab has done some work on regulating digital election advertisements. From that work in 2019 and 2021, do you have specific recommendations you'd like to present to this committee for our consideration, given that we potentially have an election looming and are seemingly pretty far behind on having any real oversight?

Mr. John McAndrews: Thank you again for the question.

I was not directly involved in that research project, but I'd be happy to follow up with the committee on behalf of those researchers.

As I said in the opening statements, the importance of civil society and academia being empowered to undertake the detection of misinformation and being able to provide that to the public in an accessible way is critical. I commend the work of my colleagues in the Canadian Digital Media Research Network. You heard earlier from Aengus Bridgman, of the Media Ecosystem Observatory. They are doing excellent work in serving Canadians in terms of the health of the media ecosystem.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. McAndrews, based on Mr. Green's request, the clerk has made a note to get back to you about providing some of that information to the committee for consideration as we draft our report. The clerk will follow up with you on behalf of Mr. Green and the committee as well.

We've concluded our first round. It's a very interesting discussion, gentlemen. Thank you for that.

We're going to Mr. Cooper now for five minutes.

Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kushwaha, you spoke about Beijing's interference and how its tactics, in many instances, are intricate. To that end, it's difficult to address by way of law enforcement tools the laying of criminal charges, for instance.

We saw in the 2019 and 2021 elections a concerted effort by Beijing to interfere. In the 2021 election, it's now well-established that there was a fairly sophisticated campaign to re-elect the Liberals and defeat certain Conservative candidates, including MPs Kenny Chiu and Alice Wong.

We could be heading into an election any time now. In your opinion, are we at greater risk, lesser risk or as great of a risk of seeing such interference activities on the part of Beijing or other hostile foreign states as we head into the next election?

• (1720)

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: I think foreign state adversaries are going to play their game. They're going to do it for their personal gains and for their own reasons—whether they're a politician doing it for personal gain or a group of individuals doing it for personal gain, or whether it's for the betterment of their country and their perspective.

There's really no escaping that reality. It's going to happen. It's how we can handle it. How can we do things to possibly change that?

I think it's important to note that we do about \$3.4 billion a day in trade with the United States. That's about 66% of our entire trade. That's around the figures when last I was checking on Global Affairs.

If you want to influence another country into doing what you need them to do—whether it be following norms or “knocking it off”, if I may say, in terms of foreign interference—you need something to push them with. We don't have good trade capacity to do that.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's interesting that you spoke about disinformation on the part of politicians because we saw a very recent example of that when the parliamentary secretary to the government House leader, Liberal MP Mark Gerretsen, spread blatant disinformation. He did so willfully, for his political advantage and he—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I have a point of order, Chair.

Mr. Frank Caputo: The truth hurts.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I don't think this is the time or place to have personal attacks on other parliamentarians. It's unparliamentary language.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's a matter of public record.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: You said yourself that we were having a good series of testimonies here. I think we need to keep it clean.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

I'm going to allow Mr. Cooper to continue with his questions.

You have two minutes and 35 seconds, Mr. Cooper.

This is a study on disinformation and misinformation and the impact that has on the work of parliamentarians. There is a broad range that members can go to in their line of questioning on this.

Mr. Cooper, you have the floor. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Well, I guess—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, may I continue—

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's my time. It's my time.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: —just on that point?

If a member is questioning another member's speech in the House, that could be a question of privilege.

An hon. member: No—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'm just saying.

The Chair: On the point of order, Mrs. Shanahan, I mean, it's a matter of public record. Mr. Cooper is not making anything up here, so I'll ask him to continue.

That addresses your point of order.

Mr. Barrett, go ahead on this point of order.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On that point of order with respect to whether or not a member's speech in the House is being questioned, Mr. Cooper is very clearly staying relevant to exactly the subject we're dealing with, Chair. His question with respect to Mr. Gerretsen deals with an admission of the intentional spreading of false information by the member that he named, something that the member admitted doing under threat of litigation.

This is important, Chair. He should be afforded some time to restate his question.

The Chair: I'm pretty sure I addressed that in the context of what this study is all about. There have been very specific examples cited on both sides of disinformation and misinformation—or, as I like to call it, lying—being spread.

I will continue with Mr. Cooper for two minutes and 35 seconds, given the fact that we've granted that latitude and those specific examples to all members of this committee.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I guess the truth hurts for the Liberals, because Mr. Gerretsen—

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): I have a point of order again, Mr. Chair.

As you've rightly said, Chair—

The Chair: Just because you don't like what somebody's saying doesn't make it a relevant point of order.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: No, no, absolutely not. I love everything that's been said today. I really appreciate the testimony of our witnesses.

If we're going to have an honest, solid study out of this—

The Chair: We are.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: —let's keep the partisanship and the hacks out of it, please.

The Chair: I've heard partisanship on all sides today, Ms. Khalid.

I'll continue with Mr. Cooper. If anybody has a point of order, cite under the rules and regulations what that point of order is and I'll consider it. Just because anyone doesn't like what somebody says, it doesn't mean that it's a relevant point of order.

Mr. Cooper, go ahead for two minutes and 35 seconds, please.

• (1725)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

It is my time and I can use it as I wish. I noted that the truth hurts for the Liberals. Mr. Gerretsen spread blatant disinformation for his political gain. As a result, he had to settle in a legal action that was taken against him.

We saw further disinformation from none other than a network that claims that it is the most trusted news network in Canada, which fraudulently doctored a video of Pierre Poilievre. We had ministers in this government, including Minister St-Onge and MP Noormohamed actually defend the doctoring of that video. It just goes to show that, when it comes to the Liberals, they're very much in favour of disinformation just so long as it isn't against them. In any event, the point is made.

Mr. Kushwaha, you spoke a little bit about Bill C-70. One of the tools in Bill C-70 is a foreign influence registry. Is that something that you see as being a useful tool to counter misinformation and disinformation from hostile foreign states?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: Is that onto parliamentarians or in general?

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's in general.

Perhaps I can provide you with some context.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: Please.

Mr. Michael Cooper: When we look at the interference activities that occurred in the 2021 election by the Beijing regime, there were certain Canadian-owned Chinese-language media outlets that amplified this disinformation and that had links and partnership agreements with the PRC. They would now have to register.

It's in that context that I raised the foreign influence registry.

The Chair: I'll have to ask you for a quick response, if you can, in 20 or 30 seconds.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: My short response is that I don't think it will make any difference. I don't think a registry will make any difference, because you'll just use somebody else. If it were my team doing it, let's say, behaving this way, and three of my team of people were on a registry, I wouldn't use them. It's very simple. I would still perform the action. I would still get my results.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mrs. Romanado for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Through you, I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I want to start first with Mr. Kushwaha. I'm going to put these in three buckets: the consumers of information, the creators of information and, of course, the channels of communication.

You were talking a little bit about being an average person who is out there looking at the media. We know that there have been cases, and we just heard in the previous panel of instances, where main street media have erroneously put out information, so more and more people are turning to different platforms to get their information.

How would an average person—and you talked a little bit about the Finland model—distinguish whether what they're reading is factual or not? For instance, my mom would share stuff that she saw on Facebook about an actor passing away. It's been three times that poor actor has passed away, but she keeps sharing the information thinking it's true. How does a person distinguish between what is real and what is not without sharing it?

They keep sharing the same misinformation, and they take it as true. What would you recommend to us?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: It's an interesting thing. Does it really matter if somebody shared it three or four times? I kind of look at that and think, okay, so they shared it a few times. It's interesting to them. It's meaningful to them. Does it matter if they think that the person has died again and again and again?

I think what matters is real disinformation that misleads you to believe something extremely harmful, especially at a societal level or a political level, and cause you to behave or react in a certain way that could be either changing your decision in how you intend to vote or, if it was a political scientist, changing their behaviour and what they're intending to write in terms of advice, or, if it was a person who was on the edge, maybe getting them to do something violent.

• (1730)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: On that note, now I'm turning to the creator of the information. I want to focus on parliamentarians or political candidates.

I would assume that we have a responsibility to put out accurate information. There may be no rules preventing us from putting out misinformation, but I would assume that there should be some ethical or at least internal gauge on what we put out there.

I'll give the example from south of the border, where we had a presidential candidate sending misinformation about FEMA during the hurricane. There is a responsibility as parliamentarians, as political candidates, to not put out misinformation that could endanger people. Would you agree with that?

How can we make sure that folks who are in these positions of influence understand that the ramifications of what is being put out there have real-world consequences?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: When you ask someone a question at a political level, rarely do they say, “I’m really sorry. I don’t know.” There is humility in just saying, “You know, let me look into that. I’ll get back to you. I really don’t know.” You rarely hear that, and I feel like it should be okay. You can’t remember everything. You can’t have somebody whispering in your ear every moment to have it perfect. You will mess up my name; it is complicated. It’s okay to say, “I don’t know.”

I think if we promote that kind of idea, it will also help promote the concept of it being okay not to know right away—“Let me look into that. You gave that to me. That’s very interesting. Let me look into that”—and not to react. You don’t have to. It’s okay.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: In terms of the channel, when you have social media platforms that are—and I’ll give the example of X, previously Twitter—allowing misinformation and disinformation to be propagated, what role do social media giants have in terms of their responsibility to fact-check information?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: I feel like Canada tried really hard to push that pressure upon media giants to get them to fact-check, and what happened is that they back-pedalled, obviously, as you know, and removed all access. Unfortunately, that harms Canadians in a different way.

I don’t know if there’s really any real good answer to this from my side, so I apologize. I don’t think I have a solution to that of any kind or even thoughts. I have, unfortunately, negative thoughts on that. I think it will be abused.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Mr. McAndrews, I didn’t have a chance and I have no more time, but I just wanted to thank you for giving us that information regarding the June edition of Nature. I will read it. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Romanado.

[Translation]

The floor is now yours for two and a half minutes, Mr. Villemure.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kushwaha, I am going to ask you a tough question. For the last 20 years, we have been watching news agencies like Agence France-Presse disappear. There actually are fewer than there were before. So the media are drawing on the few remaining sources.

Personally, I remember that when I was in Africa in 2012—I was in Libya—the assassination of Muammar Gaddafi was reported differently in America and Africa.

With few news sources to draw on, and with countless social media sites putting out information, how do we know what is going on today with the situation in Israel and Palestine?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: There are a number of sources today. I know people who get information on Telegram or Signal. In small WhatsApp groups, for example, there are a few videos or—

Mr. René Villemure: That is not for the average person.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: True. It’s difficult.

[English]

I really don’t think people care as much about human life and human dignity as we think they should. If we did, we would stop death and dismemberment immediately, and then you wouldn’t need to share videos of horrific events or of children washing up on shores, which we’ve seen, and be reminded that happened nine or 10 years ago, “Oh, yeah, I remember that.” What do we do about it?

If you really care about human life and human dignity, do something.

• (1735)

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Mr. McAndrews, I am going to ask you the same question: How can the average person know what is going on with the situation in Israel and Palestine, given the lack of credible sources like news agencies, and given everything that is out there to read?

[English]

Mr. John McAndrews: The Israel-Palestine conflict is not my area of expertise, but I’m happy to speak more generally. I think that different actors need to be empowered to detect, rapidly, misinformation in a flexible way, and that this can be shared publicly or on platforms in order to take potential mitigating action.

Civic and scientific media literacy is critical. This committee heard from MediaSmarts and from civics experts in this field and should continue to learn and to support efforts to promote media and scientific literacy. These things need to be evidence-based and up-to-date, and researchers can play a role in helping those materials stay up to date with changing technology.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: The public do not know whether sources are based on fact or fiction. I think the problem is that the media’s credibility has been tarnished. Today, someone with an opinion about something, vaccines for example, can say whatever they want, and people have no way of knowing what is true. Earlier, Mr. Kushwaha said the truth doesn’t matter. Say your elderly aunt wants to find out about something: She will never know whether the information is true or false.

The Chair: It is a real problem, as I said to Mr. Kushwaha before the meeting today.

Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[English]

Mr. Green, you have two and a half minutes, sir. Go ahead.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much.

Professor McAndrews, can you provide examples—I know you referenced the European example—of other jurisdictions' best practices for countering the impacts of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation in the work of parliamentarians?

Mr. John McAndrews: That is a great question and one that I ask to be able to return to the committee with a further brief on the subject.

Mr. Matthew Green: That would be very helpful, and we encourage you to get that in. As you know, your testimony forms the recommendations of the substantive work. We don't get to do it in these studies. It really does come from subject matter experts.

Perhaps you can share a bit about some misconceptions about misinformation, disinformation and malinformation that you might have come across in your research, that might be generally accepted but might not actually be the truth when it comes to those subjects.

Mr. John McAndrews: I'll make two observations.

Again, from a recent issue of *Nature*, we may be misperceiving the volume of misinformation on social media. We may be overestimating it. This is why it's important for researchers to have access to these data to maintain the ability to detect flexibly mis- and disinformation, but we may be overestimating the prevalence of misinformation. My colleagues at the Media Ecosystem Observatory measure the prevalence of misinformation in a certain way, and that estimate strikes me as rather low. That's available in their monthly situation reports. That's one area.

The second is the causal relationship. We might imagine or fear, indeed, that social media misinformation is polarizing people, but the alternative possibility is that people with extreme views are exposed to social media misinformation. That kind of uncertainty is important to address through high-quality, public, scientific research on an ongoing basis, because it is a moving target. This technology is changing, so sustained attention is required in Canada. A lot of this research is in the United States, and Canada is not the United States. Research in Canada is very much necessary here as well.

Mr. Matthew Green: I would tend to agree.

Thank you so much to both witnesses for joining us here today.

Those are my questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

I have time for two two-and-a-half-minute rounds, and then I need a little bit of time at the end in regard to the correspondence that was shared with committee members today from X. We just need to discuss that briefly after we're done, and I expect it to be very brief.

Mr. Barrett, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

● (1740)

Mr. Michael Barrett: We've heard reports of hostile foreign entities and foreign regimes that have been funding violence, like the pro-Hamas, pro-terror and anti-Semitic demonstrations that we've been seeing on Canadian streets, without any consequences. This is as a result of a failure by the government to actually designate these

groups as what they are. Samidoun is one; they enjoy non-profit status currently in Canada. The Houthis in Canada are legally allowed to fundraise, recruit and organize. They both should clearly be banned.

What should the government be doing to detect this foreign-backed interference that leads to intimidation, both of political and non-political actors, and the promotion of hatred on our streets? These two are very clear. Using open-source information and simple observation allows people to determine this, but these groups are self-declared in doing what they're doing.

We've made the assertion they should be banned. What should the government be doing to detect these activities in a proactive way?

What you permit, you promote, so Canadians would believe that the information being spread by these bad actors is okay. It's legitimized by the government by virtue of the fact that they failed to take any action to criminalize these groups.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: That's interesting: "What you permit, you promote".

I would hope that the public has the sense to look things up and make educated decisions and formulate their own outcomes, but I see where you're going in terms of what you're attempting to describe. I appreciate it.

What can the government do?

From a policy perspective, there's quite a bit in place already. The challenge is that funds come from many sources. At the centre, we have an entire technology team, and we've been able to track transactions coming from foreign sources into Canada over cryptocurrency, but I also see them leaving Canada. I found organizations in Canada that will say, "Hey, we'll handle your transactions, and we'll funnel them all into this one entity, and then we'll funnel them out," so you can no longer trace source to destination.

While you can see the wallets, you don't know exactly who owns the wallet. Nevertheless, you can see transactions happening, and that complicates things because it looks like we're sending money out as well as receiving. Are we performing some form of influence upon others as much as they're performing on us?

If it's the citizens who are doing this, it could be considered unlawful. You have to have evidence and you have to have intent, in Canada at least. I feel that those are very difficult to capture in the financial realms, even for FINTRAC or the RCMP, because those wallets are meant to be anonymous.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kushwaha.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kushwaha, I am going to speak in French, because this is a subject of considerable interest to my constituents in Châteauguay—Lacolle, soon to be called Châteauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville.

We are big users of platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, for example. We heard testimony about Tenet Media in Montreal, a company that was part of a Russian disinformation campaign.

What would be the best steps to take, the best measures, to protect Canadians, including from themselves, when it comes to that kind of campaign?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: That is interesting. We are doing a study right now on the most heavily used online platforms.

Take the example of TikTok and other services that may be offered in Chinese. There are also Instagram, which is mainly in the United States, and Facebook. Separately, we find that there are far more Instagram users in Canada than TikTok users. Instagram users in general outnumber TikTok users by far. So it is very interesting to see our partners in the United States enacting legislation to regulate the use of TikTok but not really of Instagram.

• (1745)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Right. That is interesting. Why do you think that is? Is it because it is an American company?

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: I don't know why it is, but I think they don't want to set up services that would make it easy for people to pass on information from China or other countries, not from the United States.

We do not have these services in Canada, so it is really hard for Canada to regulate and manage the information that is passed on to people.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: These companies are not based in Canada.

Are you seeing any new trends in this kind of disinformation when it comes to ChatGPT or artificial intelligence? What are you seeing there?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Shanahan, but the witness would have to give a very brief answer.

Mr. Neal Kushwaha: Yes.

I think people who do not use those services will be left behind. They are going to need to be used, even in the schools. It will be standard.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Kushwaha and Mr. McAndrews, I want to thank you for appearing before the committee today. You have provided us with some great information. As chair and on behalf of the committee, I really appreciate the time you've taken with us today.

I'm going to dismiss the witnesses. We do have a little bit of business that we need to discuss.

Earlier today, every member of the committee was sent correspondence that we received from X. As I mentioned to the committee on Tuesday, the plan is to have social media companies come here after the Thanksgiving break. The request from X is to appear in camera. Typically, it hasn't been the process of this committee to have witnesses appear in camera. They stated their reasons. The challenge I have is that I need to know what the committee thinks of this and what it wants. The decision has to be the committee's.

I'll go to you first, Ms. Khalid, and then to Mr. Green.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

As I have said many times, this report, this study, is very important. It would be a massive shame for a company like X, which has all of the privileges of controlling public discourse, I would say, to not be able to come before us and be on the record.

I would like for their testimony to be part of the record, and I think that Canadians need to hear them and what they have to say on the record, in public, because they are accountable at the end of the day.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

That being said, if they come before the committee—and we are going to extend another invitation to them, if it is the will of the committee publicly—they can respond in whatever manner they want. My view is that if they feel that information is too sensitive, then they can just say it's too sensitive. Again, I agree with you. They are under the same privileges and protections that we are as members of Parliament.

We have Mr. Green and then Mrs. Romanado.

Mr. Matthew Green: I find it startling, quite frankly, Mr. Chair, that this is their opening salvo, that in a public forum a platform that claims to be the digital public square is coming, right off the bat, and asking to be in camera. Elon Musk is not special. X is not special. Everybody comes before this committee, and they testify in public.

I would disagree. While it is true that they can say whatever they want, committees have the power to send for people, evidence and documents. If they come to this committee and try to obstruct it in any way, they will be, in my opinion, acting in contempt of this committee. Therefore, we demand and expect fulsome answers and candour.

I don't care what's happening in the United States of America, quite frankly. I want the social media platforms here. I want it in public, and it must be on the record.

• (1750)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

I'm going to go to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I just have a brief repetition of one point Mr. Green made, and it is that it can be offered by any witness that they're not comfortable sharing a piece of information, but, at the end of the day, the information that we ask for is up to us. We've been well served at this committee with your direction to witnesses to advise them of their obligation to provide information.

Look, we meet with witnesses in public. There's no precedent elsewhere and no kid-glove treatment elsewhere for platforms. They frankly get a much better experience and a much softer ride in front of parliamentary committees than they do at congressional hearings.

We can give them a kid-glove response, but you could let them know that we look forward to hearing from them in public. They can attend by invitation or attend under summons, but it will be in public either way.

The Chair: Okay. There are two forms of communication. There's verbal, with witnesses appearing in front of us, and there's written as well, which is an option available to them. We've afforded that option to other witnesses.

Mr. Villemure.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When you call yourself social media, operating in society means you cannot avoid the obligation to be accountable, so they have to come here and testify in public.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. My sense is that it is a unanimous decision of the committee that we extend the invitation for them to appear in public.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I wonder how that's going to impact our Twitter analytics going forward.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We'll see.

A voice: Some will suffer more than others.

The Chair: I appreciate dealing with that quickly.

Look, we've been here for three weeks. We've had an interesting session. Thanksgiving is coming up....

It's been four weeks—yes. I lost count.

I want to wish everybody a happy Thanksgiving. Spend some time with your families.

Mr. Green, when you get back, make sure you take that runner out for a celebratory dinner and Ms. Khalid will pay for it.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Ms. Iqra Khalid: What?

The Chair: Just have a great Thanksgiving break off, and we'll see you all when we get back.

The meeting is adjourned. Thank you.

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