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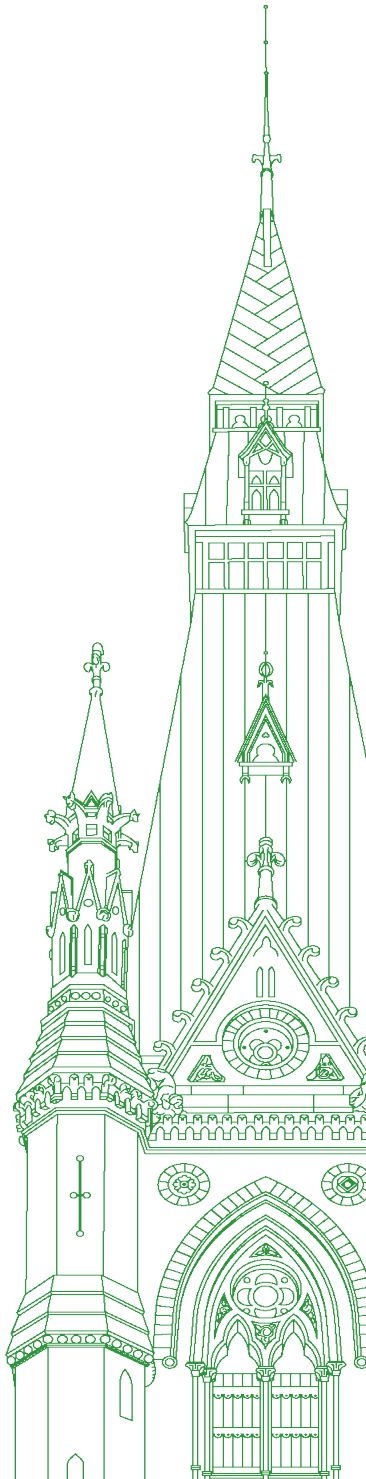

Chair: Mr. John Brassard

Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

Tuesday, May 7, 2024

● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC)): I'm going to call the meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 116 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h), the committee is resuming its study of the impact of information and of misinformation on the work of parliamentarians.

I'm going to remind everybody about the audio issues. Make sure that when you're not using your earpiece, it's placed on the sticker that's on the desk. Please try to avoid hitting the microphones and try to avoid any feedback, because it does cause damage to our interpreters.

I'm going to call on our witnesses today.

I would like to welcome first, as an individual, Mr. Ahmed Al-Rawi, who is the director of the Disinformation Project at Simon Fraser University.

We also have Richard Frank, who is a professor in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University.

As well, we have Mr. Peter Loewen, who is the director of the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy.

I want to welcome all three of you to our committee today on this important study.

We are going to start with Mr. Al-Rawi.

You have up to five minutes to address the committee, sir. Please go ahead.

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi (Director, The Disinformation Project, Simon Fraser University, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Dear honourable MPs and committee members, thank you for the invitation to address the committee and talk about the impact of disinformation on the work of parliamentarians. I will rely here on my previous academic research on the topic.

I think there are different internal and external challenges.

First, in connection to internal challenges, there is no doubt that Canadian politicians need to be continuously and factually informed about many national and international events and issues. The belief and spread of disinformation could create a serious obstacle in understanding these events. The result could ultimately influence democracy in a negative way.

It's important here to develop adequate verification skills and methods that largely rely on scientific consensus and collective intelligence about various issues. This is a fluid issue, because such consensus could change with time, depending on the emerging empirical evidence. Parliamentarians have to feel more comfortable navigating uncertainty.

Of course, there need to be thorough efforts to find factual pieces of information by examining different and alternative credible sources, assessing a variety of angles and reading beyond the news reports themselves. This verification needs to be done even if the information comes from Canada's allies, such as the Five Eyes.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq is just one example of how disinformation about Iraq's alleged link to al Qaeda or possession of weapons of mass destruction led to disastrous outcomes, not only to this country's infrastructure but also to millions of people.

More importantly, disinformation today has become a highly politicized and weaponized issue. Media literacy is not the magic key to counter it. This is because some very media-literate political actors have themselves a vested interest in spreading disinformation to serve their own political agenda.

In addition, there are external challenges when it comes to disinformation targeting parliamentarians. In my research about foreign actors targeting Canada on social media, for example, I found ample evidence of many foreign states' disinformation campaigns that were especially directed at Canadian politicians.

For example, the Saudi actors were slightly more active and negative, followed by Russian, Iranian and Chinese actors, when it comes to targeting parliamentarians. As for the overall amount of disinformation targeting Canadians in general, the Russian actors were more interested in spreading disinformation, followed by Iran, China and Saudi Arabia.

Ideologically, Russian-affiliated actors continuously attacked Mr. Justin Trudeau and his Liberal Party, focusing specifically on MPs from Muslim backgrounds. These actors mostly aligned themselves with the far right in Canada in terms of attacking minorities, especially Muslims and, to a lesser degree, LGBT communities.

As for Iranian actors, they focused their attacks on the Conservative Party, as well as Canadian MPs from Iranian origins who are critical of the regime.

The Saudi and Chinese trolls also attacked Mr. Trudeau, mainly due to the presence and activities of some critical human rights activists in Canada.

Other actors that are involved in spreading disinformation and that often target Canadians in general include extremist groups and wealthy elites, some of whom employ front groups and organizations to cause confusion about how we perceive reality.

For example, the oil and gas industry and the vaping industry in Canada are active in doing so.

The polarized public can also be part of these information activities. In my research, I often saw that they target the intersectional identities of racialized Canadian politicians, especially from minority backgrounds.

To mitigate the problem with disinformation, I suggest creating a non-partisan fact-checking initiative at the House of Commons, consisting of a variety of experts. The initiative needs to exclusively focus on fact-checking the evidence provided that is making different claims, rather than assessing opinions.

Thank you very much.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Al-Rawi.

I understand that you shared with the clerk some examples of what you deem misinformation and disinformation. I'm just letting you know that the information has been sent to translation. I expect that we could have it by the end of today's meeting. I'll certainly share that information.

Go ahead, sir. I see your hand is up.

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: These are just a few examples for the committee to look at.

The Chair: Yes. I appreciate that. They're in translation.

Mr. Frank, we will go to you next. You have up to five minutes to address the committee.

Go ahead, sir.

Dr. Richard Frank (Professor, School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, As an Individual): Thank you very much for the chance to be involved in this. We've been doing lots of research on this. I find it to be a very, very serious threat.

Over the years, information has been used as a weapon to target whoever the opponent is, but we used to call it propaganda. Disinformation I perceive as digital propaganda that reaches us digitally through SMS, text, blog, Twitter and Facebook, etc., but very much unlike propaganda, where counter-propaganda has been deployed, right now I think we essentially don't have any defences or any equivalent counter-disinformation to defend us.

Up until very recently, disinformation was seen as “just posts on social media”, and as quite harmless. Any general user reading it would not see the coordinated effort behind disinformation or the specific intent behind it. This makes it really difficult and tricky to identify. At least with propaganda, we saw the leaflets being dropped from the sky or the messages being broadcast through megaphones. We could recognize it as propaganda, or we would have an idea of the source and the intent, whereas with online information, the source and the intent are quite often hidden and obfuscated.

It does have real-world consequences. The Trump election was shown to have Russian influence. Brexit also allegedly had foreign influence. These are humongously big, drastic changes.

I'll pick on Russia for a bit. Russia did this through troll farms, creating thousands of social media accounts that looked to be ordinary users. These accounts supported radical political groups with specific political reasons. They fabricated articles, invented stories and posted nonsense. Quite often they even posted the truth but with a twist, aiming at vulnerable groups who then got riled up. These fake users can have very many followers. They look established and real.

This was done in an organized fashion in a state-run campaign. Internet Research Agency, as an example, had hundreds of employees. They had 12-hour shifts, from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. These shifts overlapped with U.S. holidays and working hours, so they looked real. With a budget of about $600,000 Canadian a month, which might seem like a lot, they were able to achieve real impact abroad. Compared with a military intervention, $600,000 a month is negligible.

Disinformation or any such content is designed to spread. A study in 2016 showed that this content does spread six times faster than real news. There's an old proverb that says a lie goes halfway around the world before the truth gets its boots on. That's very much true here as well.

Another study in 2019 showed that over 70 countries had such disinformation campaigns. Facebook was the number one platform for this. Canada is not immune to any of this. We've had election interference. One MP in B.C. lost an election specifically because of disinformation. We are under attack. Disinformation is promoting the superiority of foreign countries and undermining confidence in our democracies, etc.

It's now been six years since we started working on disinformation detection, specifically looking at training computer models to detect this type of content. We've done about four or five projects specifically on this, funded by the Government of Canada. The end goal is to detect this disinformation campaign with artificial intelligence. Our models show that with about 90% accuracy, we can detect this content, so we know that this is doable.

Back in January of 2022, we were asked by our project funders—the Canadian Armed Forces, at that point—to study Russian online activity to see what their stance was with respect to Ukraine.

● (1115)

We submitted our findings on February 13, 11 days before the war started, essentially saying that Russia is painting itself as the victim and that it's taking steps to defend itself, and that NATO, the European Union, the U.S. and other western nations are aggressors against Russia. Eleven days later they attacked Ukraine.

This plan to attack—not this specific plan, but the intent to attack—was seen online beforehand.

The Chair: Mr. Frank, I'm sorry, sir—

Dr. Richard Frank: All of this content is hidden in a lot of innocuous information—soccer scores, TV shows—so it is hard to detect.

The solutions have to be community-specific. The exact same message can be safe in one community but a trigger in another.

The Chair: Sir, I'm going to have to cut you off there. You're over five minutes.

I'm sure members will have lots of questions to ask.

I really hate this part of my job. I really was enjoying what you were saying, but we have to stay on time.

Mr. Loewen, you have up to five minutes to address the committee. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Peter Loewen (Director, Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, As an Individual): Thank you very much to the committee for this invitation to appear, and thank you, each and every one of you, for the irreplaceable work you do as members of Parliament.

It is a real pleasure, and it's an honour as well, to be with you today to talk about the role of misinformation and disinformation in your work as members of Parliament.

I know you will hear from a large number of witnesses, so I hope that I can make a few helpful observations in addition to what's been said and what will be said.

I come at this question, I'll just say, with two relevant sets of knowledge.

I'm first and foremost a professor. I have, for several Canadian elections, been conducting large-scale surveys to enable academic studies of how our democracy functions. Along with partners at McGill University, my lab at the U of T has been a leading collector of data on the media ecosystem or the information ecosystem in Canada, which is that combination of what's being said and what's being believed, and what exists in the media and in the minds of Canadians. We've also recently conducted a global study on attitudes towards artificial intelligence, which is relevant for the management of misinformation and for platform governance.

Second, in addition to my academic work, I have worked as an expert witness for the Government of Canada in its unsuccessful attempts to defend changes to the Canada Elections Act that would prohibit the spreading of falsehoods about candidates' biographies. You may recall that this case was heard in 2020.

I'd like to draw from these two sets of experiences to make five brief points about the relationship between misinformation and disinformation and your work as members of Parliament.

The first point is that misinformation and disinformation have always been a part of our elections. For as long as we've been having elections, individuals and groups have been spreading falsehoods about candidates, about parties, about what they believe and about what they'll do in office.

Second, we know very little about the actual effects of misinformation and disinformation, so it becomes very hard to make concrete, empirical claims about it, but even if misinformation and disinformation have little potential effect, they still matter normatively to the quality of our elections.

Third—and this is to that point—we need to separate the effects of disinformation on voters from its effect on the integrity of our elections. Elections are largely about giving voters reasons for their decisions. If voters are voting based on misinformation, it is damaging, even if it doesn't change the way they would have voted absent that disinformation.

For example, if a voter comes to the view that they are going to vote for the government for reasons that aren't true, that decision by the voter is arguably of less democratic quality than if they're voting for the government for reasons that are true, and likewise for a vote for any other party.

Similarly, if MPs believe that they've won on the backs of misinformation or if they believe that other MPs have won on the backs of misinformation and disinformation, especially that which may have come from foreign governments, then that can seriously erode not only trust in our democracy but also trust between MPs. I presume, though I've never been inside a caucus, that it can erode the functioning of caucuses.

Fourth, Canada is perhaps uniquely poorly positioned to address the online spreading of misinformation and disinformation. It's quite clear that our legal regime makes it very difficult to prohibit the spreading of falsehoods during elections, absent an explicit demonstration of intent and knowledge that the information is false. Also, we don't have a sufficiently high amount of public trust to address platform regulation. Canadians, when you compare them with other citizens globally, don't view technology companies as partners in addressing these problems, and they are at the same time skeptical of government's capacity to regulate them, as well.

Fifth—and I say this with some sensitivity—members of Parliament and candidates' offices can be sources of misinformation and disinformation. It's important, then, to make sure we have norms, practices and standards that make this unacceptable. Election candidates have incentives to spread misinformation and disinformation about their opponents and about the electoral process. We have to look inside to ask what we can do to stop that as well.

If there are two takeaways from all of this, it's that we first need to understand the extent and the effects of misinformation and disinformation much more carefully, and that it is on Canadians, and especially our political actors, to take seriously the maintenance of the integrity of our elections.

Thank you very much.

● (1120)

The Chair: I want to thank all three of you for your opening statements.

We're going to go to our six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Barrett.

Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): My questions are for you, Mr. Loewen.

In what ways does the Communist dictatorship in Beijing use misinformation to influence the Chinese diaspora community here in Canada?

Mr. Peter Loewen: This is not an area in which I have precise expertise, so I'm not going to take long to say it.

The most effective way that this can happen, as I've seen it, is by inserting into the ecosystem ideas about what political candidates would do or what parties would do. Then it allows individuals who are interested in politics and like to talk about it to spread those ideas. Think about it as an infection and a virus that spreads. That's an effective mental model for understanding how the CCP wants to influence voters' views during elections.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Based on that prescription, do you believe that the dictatorship in Beijing has been successful in their misinformation campaigns in Canada?

Mr. Peter Loewen: This is a very difficult question to answer, in my view, Mr. Barrett,. I appreciate your asking it.

I'll just say it quickly on two levels.

Suppose that the Communist Party of China has spread misinformation about the positions of parties or voters in ways that are untrue and that are damaging. Perhaps they are true about positions, but they've spread those ideas and amplified them. That may have had the effect of changing voters' views and changing the views of Chinese-Canadian voters. It's very hard empirically to say so.

Even if it didn't, Mr. Barrett, the potentially equal effect is that we've spent all of this time wondering if the integrity of our elections has been disrupted. That is something that non-democratic regimes want us to do. They want us to wonder whether the integrity of our elections has been corrupted. The only thing to do then is take that possibility very seriously.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Along with misinformation, we heard in testimony at this committee from the Chinese diaspora community that Beijing's campaign of influence and interference goes beyond disinformation. It extends to threats targeting the well-being of members of that community, especially of family members who might be in mainland China.

Is that tactic something that's typical of foreign state actors—pairing their online campaigns with real-world threats and targeting?

● (1125)

Mr. Peter Loewen: I don't have the expertise to comment on that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Are you familiar with Justice Hogue's report, the interim report that was published?

Mr. Peter Loewen: I am.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have a couple of quick questions with respect to that.

On April 11, the Prime Minister said that “It wasn't simply that overall the election was free and fair”, but that in “every single constituency election...the election integrity held, and it was free and fair.”

Justice Hogue's conclusions indicated otherwise. She concluded that there was well-grounded suspicion about the PRC interference in, for example, Don Valley North, and “It could...have impacted who was elected to Parliament. This is significant.”

Justice Hogue further concluded that in Steveston—Richmond East, “there are strong indicators of PRC involvement and there is a reasonable possibility that these narratives could have impacted the result in this riding.”

We have an independent justice who has issued an interim report and pronounced on this issue, and we have the head of government, the Prime Minister, saying something different. What are we to take from that when we're looking at the upside for one individual, in this case the Prime Minister, to take an interpretation that we would say is far too generous? It could be perceived as being misinformation.

Mr. Peter Loewen: Mr. Barrett, I read the Prime Minister's statement as definitive. I read the statement of Justice Hogue as being one with uncertainty, one in which she's saying that we don't know, but it's possible.

As a person who's spent the better part of 15 years as a practising academic studying elections very closely and trying to figure out why some ridings are won and some ridings are lost, I'll tell you that Justice Hogue has the correct position. We cannot be sure that each and every riding in Canada in the 2021 election was not influenced by China. For the Prime Minister to say that he's absolutely certain that Chinese influence had no effect is not a sustainable position.

Mr. Michael Barrett: What does that say, then, to Canadians who are members of certain diaspora communities, but also to Canadians writ large, when the head of government is asserting something that there is no certainty about, as you inferred from Justice Hogue's interim report?

The Chair: You have a 30-second response, Mr. Loewen.

Mr. Peter Loewen: I think that's largely a political question. I don't mean to dodge it, but what that says about the Prime Minister and his judgment is for Canadians to decide.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'd say, with the remaining 15 seconds, that it's a political decision and not one that's in the best interest of Canadians.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Ms. Damoff, I have you next. Go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today.

I want to talk a little bit about the way that online disinformation gets turned into real-world experiences for politicians—in particular, the role that politicians themselves play in that.

I've decided not to run in the next election largely because of the atmosphere that has developed here in Canada. When we were studying Bill C-21 at committee, I recall that the non-partisan officials were receiving threats, and the chair repeatedly had to warn Conservative Party members about the tone they were using with the witnesses.

Back in March at this committee, I brought up that when Mr. Barrett and Conservatives were bringing up words like “cover-up” and “corruption”, it ended up leading to my inbox filling up with just horrible messages, and I was called a “pearl clutcher”, yet last week, when Mr. Chiu was here talking about his experience on social media, I think Mr. Kurek called him a hero.

It speaks to the obvious views that politicians hold of, perhaps, women in politics, but I can't count the number of times I've been called a pearl clutcher. The new one is a “cry-bully” from the gun lobby, which seems to have spread repeatedly.

I wonder what responsibility you think politicians have to ensure they're not fanning the flames that lead to threats and real-world violence against politicians. I'd like to hear from all three of you on this.

Mr. Loewen, you can start.

● (1130)

Mr. Peter Loewen: I'm happy to say two things very quickly, Madam Damoff.

The first is that, personally—if I could say this—I was sad to see that you have decided not to re-offer; and the reasons you've given are, I know, very real, genuine and serious.

I think we're arriving at a place where the disinhibition that social media allows in turn allows people to come to views about politicians that are unfair and incorrect. Our House of Commons is not filled with people who are corrupt, looking for personal enrichment and set on selling out the country; and yet people in the public often hold that belief.

This rising cynicism and a lack of trust in government is a very serious problem, and it's a serious problem that's going to hurt any party when it is in government.

How you fix it is a whole other matter, and one on which I'd love to hear other people's views.

The Chair: I'll go to Mr. Frank and then Mr. Al-Rawi, if that's okay.

Dr. Richard Frank: I'm very sorry that this circumstance has occurred; and the reactions to it by others, including other MPs, is not fair.

Given the situation and the ability for social media to spread information and give rise to voices that are untrue and have malicious intent, foreign or domestic, I don't know what the solution is.

I think this is going to become increasingly worse as our trust in government and the MPs is undermined. It could be foreign or it could be not; and that's one of the problems we won't know unless we really dig into it and develop some defences against this.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Al-Rawi.

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am very sorry, MP, for your decision, and I understand that this is a problem we are facing in Canada. In the research I have conducted with my team about the Canadian public's interactions with Canadian politicians, we've seen a lot of these examples. Whatever happens in Parliament will be directly echoed on social media and other sites.

Unfortunately, some politicians use what we call “edutainment”. They try to educate the public with entertainment. The result will be a lot of memes directed at a lot of politicians, unfortunately. The purpose, of course, is to belittle them with little respect, and maybe make fun of them. However, at the same time, it creates more divisions, unfortunately.

I believe there is a need for a more civil discourse, especially for you and the like, in representing all of Canada and the Parliament. This is the case.

Thank you.

Ms. Pam Damoff: How much time do I have, Chair? I forgot to set my timer.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay. I didn't ask the question to....

I appreciate the kind comments from all three witnesses. I wasn't trying to make this about me. I'm one example of many, and I'm actually saddened by how many of my colleagues have come up to me since I did say this to share their own experiences in the public, and I do worry that we're dehumanizing politicians in a way that puts us all in danger.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

Next we will go to Monsieur Villemure.

To the witnesses, please make sure that you are on the English interpretation channel if you don't understand French.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Frank, you said that disinformation is a sort of digital propaganda, which we completely agree with.

Since Mr. Bernays' time, a lot has happened.

You also mentioned that we do not know the purpose of propaganda.

When I look at the situation, it seems to me that the purpose of propaganda is to create chaos.

Do you agree with that?

● (1135)

[*English*]

Dr. Richard Frank: It's not necessarily to create chaos, but to undermine the trust of the recipient in their higher authority.

I'm reminded of the efforts by the U.S. government to drop leaflets onto army soldiers in Germany to—what's the word I'm looking for?—disenfranchise them of the war and make them give up more easily. It's not necessarily to create chaos, but there's a specific purpose to it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

You also said that propaganda has a purpose and that disinformation does not seem to have a purpose. So it is difficult to defend against it.

What would you suggest to us as a defence based on the information you have at the moment?

[*English*]

Dr. Richard Frank: That's an excellent question, and I think that's the goal for the next couple of years: to figure this out in a lot of detail. We need to recognize that this is happening and develop counter-narratives against it.

This is an information-based war. We have an aggressor. We need to defend ourselves against it. The attack is information-based. The defence should be information-based.

When I say “we”, I mean that Canadians need to go into these communities and identify this content and counter it. If there is an effort to, say, attack an MP, we need people to come to their defence and say, “This is not true. This is not how it is”, and de-escalate the situation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: It used to be that the propaganda would come with a narrative. Then you could build a counter-narrative to somewhat replace it.

In recent years, however, we have observed that the era has tended to be one of violent disagreement. We see intemperate statements, often meaningless slogans as a substitute for policies, which is not effective in regaining public trust.

What can we do in the face of that?

[*English*]

Dr. Richard Frank: I recognize that there are communities that actively look for conspiracy theories and distrust government, and those people are going to be really difficult to reach, but for most people I would say that's not the case. They are reachable, and if we develop similar, very simplistic slogans and campaigns, I think we can reach them and counter that narrative that they are under attack from.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Would you go so far as to say that disinformation is a form of cognitive warfare?

[*English*]

Dr. Richard Frank: Yes, it's a war of ideas.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Okay.

Mr. Loewen, do you think it is possible for certain political parties to use disinformation for partisan purposes in Canada?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Loewen: I think it's a story as old as time. Politicians, even in Canada, have said things about what their opponents will do in office and what the consequences of their being in office will be that they either know to be untrue or could not know to be true.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: I could not agree with you more.

However, do you think that, with modern means of communication, it can get much worse and that the damage is greater than it used to be?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Loewen: That is possible.

The other serious related threat is that we don't know what's being said. With the way communication happens now, which is often over apps and other ways that don't allow us to keep track of what's being said, we have less of a window into what's being said. Related to this, there is less of an accountability mechanism, in that we have less journalism than we had in the past. We particularly have less local journalism, which follows what local candidates are saying.

Our capacity to see the whole conversation that's going on during elections and to see how much mistruth is present is more limited than it has been in the past. Even if politicians are no less dishonest and even if the share of the spread of misinformation is the same, our capacity to see it is arguably lower than it was before.

● (1140)

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Commissioner Hogue said that there was foreign interference in the last election. It would not have changed the party that formed the government, but it might still have had an impact on the results in some ridings.

Do you agree that this interference, which had some effect but did not really work, is a major source of concern for parliamentarians?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Loewen: It should be deeply so. No parliamentarian should have to wonder whether one of their colleagues was elected with the support of a foreign government.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Loewen.

Mr. Green, I believe that's you at the end of the table, way back there. You have six minutes. Go ahead.

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

I'm going to spend the bulk of my time centring in on and trying to get the best recommendations we can from the witnesses. I'm going to be putting some questions to the witnesses.

I'll ask that you try to answer in a succinct way in order to allow for other witnesses to opine as well. If I ask the questions in a rapid-fire way, it's not me being curt; it's just me being judicious with my time.

I want to begin with you, Mr. Al-Rawi. You proposed a non-partisan fact-checking commission or body that might be able to separate out facts from opinions when it comes to misinformation and disinformation from MPs. Is that correct?

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: That's correct.

Mr. Matthew Green: We heard in subsequent testimony that there is the ability—through both Mr. Loewen's media ecosystem, which collects data, and Mr. Frank's work around the dark crawler and the dark web....

Could you see this being taken up in an effective way by AI tools, or is this something that you would see simply as being professional people and subject matter experts in a human context, trying to keep up with the scale of all the misinformation and disinformation?

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: Thank you very much for the question.

From my somewhat limited experience working with AI tools—even the new ones—I can be certain saying we haven't reached that stage yet. We still need humans to qualitatively assess pieces of information. There are cues that could be easily detected with AI tools—for example, if an image is created by AI technology—we call them deepfakes—or a video is being deepfaked. However, there must be some kind of qualitative assessment done by humans.

Thank you.

Mr. Matthew Green: To round it up with you, sir, do you have other recommendations for legislation?

If you were AI, I'd prompt you by saying, “Pretend you're an MP. Give us the best recommendations you can to help counter some of the gaps and some of the threats you've identified.”

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: I think this is a collective effort. I don't want to say that parliamentarians should do all the work alone. Everyone should be involved. I know that some NGOs were invited to this committee. I think they should also be involved in this work.

We need to fact-check each other, actually, including myself.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'll re-ask the question. I'll re-prompt you.

We're here as members of Parliament. At the end of this study, we're going to be examining the testimony. The testimony will not consist only of just what's wrong—we've spent a lot of time talking about what's wrong, and we're probably still only scraping the surface—but what we have to get from the testimony are recommendations.

Understanding what our powers are, what our mandate is as a committee, what would you recommend to us that we adopt in our final report to help offset—certainly not to solve; I'm not talking about a silver bullet—some of the challenges that you've outlined?

Then I'll put that question to the two other witnesses.

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: I'm not sure what to say here, but I believe the fact-checking initiative could be very useful because—

Mr. Matthew Green: Okay. I will take back my time and I will go on to Mr. Frank. I do appreciate somebody who says they don't have the answer. I have to say that all the time.

Mr. Frank, from your perspective, what is it you would recommend to us for consideration in a final report on this topic?

Dr. Richard Frank: I have lots to say, a lot more than the amount of time here, but there are a couple of main points.

This has to be done with the help of AI. What we're seeing right now is just a preview. This is going to get significantly worse as the disinformation is going to be AI-generated. The use of AI eventually will have to be done to detect this content, to de-escalate it and to intervene.

During our studies, we've always employed humans, domain experts, people of specific communities in which we wanted to detect disinformation. The approach we've used, I think successfully, was to get members of the community to point out examples of disinformation topics and then use that to start to train an AI model, which then can pick up on this and continue detecting new sources.

● (1145)

Mr. Matthew Green: With that model, if I'm to understand—and you can just say yes or no—is this the dark crawler model that you put into the dark web?

Dr. Richard Frank: It's within that context, yes.

Mr. Matthew Green: Given the vastness of that, could an application not be set upon us, as the 343 seats that will happen in the next election, including political parties? It seems like a much smaller digital ecosystem than the dark web.

Dr. Richard Frank: It has to be done within each community. If it is the members of Parliament, that would be one community. We would need experts who know what's going on, who would be able to start pointing to the initial disinformation.

Mr. Matthew Green: I have 30 seconds left.

Professor Loewen, could you pontificate on recommendations?

Mr. Peter Loewen: I would say, Mr. Green, we've decided in our country, through a lot of legal wrangling, to allow the limiting of speech during elections. We limit it to politicians largely and to parties, and we limit how much third parties can speak. That opens a legislative door for you to decide on what the arena will look like during elections.

The challenge is that generating speech through AI is virtually costless, and it can be done by people who are not people. The legislative framework that tries to limit which people can speak and limits how much they can speak through money is not fit for purpose for the world that Mr. Frank in particular is describing. You need to find a way legislatively to try to maintain the equilibrium that we have now in this new environment.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Loewen, I will be coming back to you in my second round. I look forward to more insight on that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

That concludes our our first six-minute round.

We're going to move to five-minute interventions.

I have Mr. Brock, followed by Mr. Bains, and then two and a half minutes for Mr. Villemure and two and a half minutes for Mr. Green.

Mr. Brock, you have five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their attendance today. This is interesting information.

Before I get into my questions, Mr. Frank, in particular, I noted you ran out of time during your opening remarks. I'm willing to give you as much time as necessary. Do you think you could wrap things up in under a minute?

Dr. Richard Frank: Thank you.

I was going to suggest a couple of positives for what we should be doing. Again, I do appreciate the time.

My first suggestion would be to establish trust in journalistic sources, or somehow help establish trust. I think we're losing it. A lot of people are getting their news on social media. We need to pull them back into trusted sources. Once we do that, I think people will be more robust in standing up against disinformation, but that needs proper funding. At the same time, the government can't be seen as the arbiter of truth, so this has to be positioned carefully.

I've developed courses on my own for educational campaigns. We just need to make people question more what they're seeing to make sure it is real.

The government pledged a lot of money for research. That's excellent. We need that. I think we need to bring AI into the discussion.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you for that.

I'm going to stick with you, Mr. Frank, because my colleague Mr. Barrett sought remarks from Mr. Loewen with respect to his perceptions of Justice Hogue's interim report on foreign interference.

I think all three of you will agree that the misinformation and disinformation campaign, which has been happening for several years now, and at least throughout the 2019 and 2021 elections and currently in this country, has substantially impacted Canadians' confidence in our democratic institutions. That is something that we all, as parliamentarians, have to work on.

I will quote a couple of paragraphs from Justice Hogue's report and, Mr. Frank, I'd like to get your commentary on it.

In your opening remarks, you spoke specifically about the candidate Kenny Chiu and the impact of the disinformation and misinformation campaign, not only from Communist China but as well as the Liberal candidate who ultimately won the election and his participation in the process. I believe you also made reference to the fact that you are aware of Kenny Chiu's testimony at this committee. Is that correct?

● (1150)

Dr. Richard Frank: I know some of it, yes.

Mr. Larry Brock: I'm going to quote a couple of paragraphs from an article. In the case of former Conservative MP Kenny Chiu, the commissioner identifies that there were "strong indicators" of Beijing's interference campaign and that there was a "reasonable possibility" that this resulted in the defeat of Mr. Chiu and the election of his Liberal opponent.

The article states:

> It is also clear that as Canadians judge the actions of the Trudeau Government and its failure to prevent this interference, that we must consider Commissioner Hogue's conclusion that the interference that was allowed to occur undermined public confidence in our elections. She notes that the risk of foreign interference in our elections will increase as long as the Liberal Government fails to take "sufficient protective measures to guard against it."

What are your comments, Mr. Frank?

Dr. Richard Frank: I'm not a politician. I'm a Canadian. I'm happy if any government is able to implement a solution to this, but our trust is being attacked. Our trust in the election process is being attacked. We need to somehow fix this.

Mr. Larry Brock: During the Prime Minister's appearance at the inquiry on foreign interference, he voiced frustration over intelligence leaks to the media, which he felt were sensationalized and taken out of context. He claimed that his government had implemented—his words—robust mechanisms to detect and combat interference, but that the government was "painted as negligent in the media".

Do you believe this critique is justified, and do you think the government's efforts are sufficient? I put that to you, Mr. Frank, and I put the same question to the other two participants.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds to do that.

Dr. Richard Frank: Given that there were leaks, whatever measures were put in place obviously weren't enough. I'm not privy to the details of what was implemented, but I trust that they did the best they could.

Mr. Peter Loewen: I think there's an inherent challenge, Mr. Brock, in that there's a mechanism set up for very good public servants to have a finger on the alarm bell, so to speak, but the politicians to whom they report have conflicts of interest. In the heat of an election it's very hard for a party leader to say, "I want to tell everyone that my candidate has benefited from foreign interference." I think fixing that conflict of interest is of serious concern.

The Chair: Thank you. Perhaps you can get to Mr. Al-Rawi in the next round, Mr. Brock.

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

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

Thank you to our guests for joining us today.

I go first to Mr. Frank.

On the defence piece, can you elaborate a bit more? You talked about no defence. You talked about introducing AI. How would that work? What kind of framework would be put in place? Can you also talk about your tool and how that can help in some way?

Dr. Richard Frank: In the world I foresee in the next couple of years, whatever disinformation content we've seen so far would become AI-generated and would escalate by a factor of 10 or 100, so the solution I foresee is something similar, using humans: Domain experts in whatever community would start to identify disinformation attacks and from that, within that one specific community, AI could be trained to detect such content. That's the research and that's the model we've been working with, through different grants and funding opportunities.

I think this solution will help us detect and model what is happening. We were able to create charts saying, "This person is very heavily linked to another. Disinformation is coming from this person, but these people are also linked." That helps us figure out where the disinformation is coming from, for example.

Mr. Parm Bains: Are you able to detect what region disinformation is coming from? Can you get as far as that?

Dr. Richard Frank: We can infer the actor behind it, the government, based on the messaging, but sometimes Canadians themselves will be either tricked or paid to disseminate messages. An idea takes place in a conspiracy community, and they start parroting the same message, which is disinformation.

● (1155)

Mr. Parm Bains: As candidates, we're all subjected to misinformation and disinformation, whether it's flyers or candidates going door to door and trying to influence people in that manner.

What about domestically? How do you see misinformation and disinformation? Is it on the rise domestically here?

Dr. Richard Frank: We know of some groups that do spread disinformation domestically. They are very likely linked to foreign actors, though.

Mr. Parm Bains: Who is that?

Dr. Richard Frank: I can look it up for you. I don't have names handy.

Mr. Parm Bains: Maybe I will go to Mr. Loewen as well.

I know you talked a little bit about AI maybe not being the best approach. What sort of alternative means do you think are appropriate?

Mr. Peter Loewen: It depends on what problem we're trying to solve, Mr. Bains. AI and high-dimensional data tools are going to be very useful for figuring out the ecosystem and understanding how much misinformation and disinformation is spreading, but I think we have to recognize that at the core of this are human beings who want to spread disinformation. When people hear something that is salacious and perhaps untrue, but also very damaging to their political opponents or politicians they don't like, if they're citizens, they have incentives to spread it.

The problem here is we overweight the degree to which this problem is foreign. This problem is as domestic as it is foreign, in that the technologies we have allow people to spread lies in ways that are hard to detect but are easy to spread, and that old analogy that Mr. Frank alluded to is correct. Before we can catch up with these lies, they have made their way halfway around the world.

Mr. Parm Bains: Yes. There's so much information out there. We heard from an expert, Ben Nimmo. He's a threat investigator. He talked about how certain Russian campaigns were extremely effective, but there was another one that had put out hundreds of thousands of messages but didn't really make an impact.

How can we detect how messages are being received and what the impact is in terms of how they're being received?

Mr. Peter Loewen: I would say there are methods for doing this, and academics have spent a long time thinking about how to measure the effects of information. I wish I could tell you that it's easy to say definitively whether a message has worked or not, but really, to Justice Hogue's point in her report, it's hard to know precisely what effect a message has had because we're not running large-scale controlled experiments.

All of these campaigns and these instances of misinformation are happening in the context of very noisy campaigns, so in some ways I think the way to think about this is not to think about effects but to think about how much you can inoculate your system from it, because if you're concerned about foreign interference, then even if it had no effect, it's still a bad thing if Beijing thinks it had an effect, and it's a bad thing if MPs think that foreign actors had an effect.

In terms of what effect it actually had on Mr. Chiu, it's hard to know precisely what happened, but there's reason to believe something bad happened. That reason is enough to try to inoculate ourselves against foreign interference as much as possible. It's not that if there was no effect, there's no problem.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Bains.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

I am going to start with Mr. Loewen.

It is often said that the decline in local journalism promotes disinformation because people are seeking information elsewhere. A number of witnesses regularly tell us that we need education to counter the effects of disinformation, but when a large segment of society finds their information on TikTok, what can we do as parliamentarians to provide that education?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Loewen: Part of what you're identifying is a huge credibility problem, which is that we don't know who's an expert anymore. We don't know who's credible anymore. I would just say very respectfully that members of Parliament don't help themselves in this process, because voters have come largely to the conclusion that they cannot believe what members of Parliament say.

I think that one way of starting to re-establish that credibility is to be very clear about why you disagree with your opponents, but to very explicitly shy away from the spreading of rumours or falsehoods, or the suggestion of falsehoods, and bad intentions of reporters, and spend some time over the next couple of elections trying to elevate the way that politicians engage in discourse. That might give politicians a bit more credibility against a plethora of sources that are trying to claim that their credibility or authority equals that of politicians and other experts.

● (1200)

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Mr. Frank, go ahead.

[*English*]

Dr. Richard Frank: Aside from educating students in school, some aspects of the disinformation campaigns that I've alluded to would imply going into TikTok and other sources where people are getting disinformation and specifically countering it somehow through the same style of messaging, same style of videos, et cetera.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Okay.

I lost my train of thought.

Mr. Chair, that will be enough for me.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Green, you have two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

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

Professor Loewen, I'm going back to you on recommendations to this committee on the mandate of this topic. Do you have additional recommendations that we should be considering?

Mr. Peter Loewen: I think you should consider whether you want to vigorously restrict the spreading of known falsehoods during elections. I don't have an opinion on that per se, but I know that there is some work.

Mr. Matthew Green: Why do you have no opinion, sir?

Mr. Peter Loewen: It's kind of a political question in some sense, Mr. Green. That question does balance out the rights of free speech against other considerations, and where you strike that balance is a political question.

Mr. Matthew Green: I would put this back to you. Given your subject matter expertise, do you believe that there is a reasonable limitation of expression that would outweigh the potential harms that you've identified in your work?

Mr. Peter Loewen: I think it's worth exploring whether political candidates should be banned from spreading falsehoods about other candidates' biographies, yes.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Frank, do you share that assertion, or do you have a different one?

Dr. Richard Frank: I'm still collecting my thoughts. I apologize.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Al-Rawi, do you think that there should be a prohibition of propagating falsehoods during elections by politicians and political parties?

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: I don't think that's possible. I agree with Professor Loewen on this. It might infringe on freedom of expression. You are free to say whatever you want, but of course, there should be some kind of repercussions if you are telling lies.

To address your question, what I suggest is that there needs to be more transparency from the MPs about what they are claiming to say and also—

Mr. Matthew Green: I'm going to end there.

I would say for your consideration, with my 30 seconds left, that for the good and welfare of the committee, we're calling on you as subject matter experts to help us contemplate these issues. You will have a week, likely, when this is done, to reflect on what's just been said and the testimony that you've provided.

I will share with you that we have codes of conduct. I will share with you that if a minister came to this committee and lied, we would have the ability to provide accountability in that regard to safeguard the information that we have in order to make informed decisions.

I'm going to put this on the table to you in a very clear and candid way. I need you to consider this question with seriousness, and I'm going to request that you consider submitting back to this committee in writing recommendations explicitly stating what you would do in this situation. Otherwise, we're just identifying what we already know to be true.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

We'll take that as a formal request of Mr. Green to our witnesses to submit some solutions. I like putting timelines on it. If you do feel the need and want to respond to Mr. Green's request, I will ask you to submit your recommendations in writing to the clerk by a week from today at five o'clock, if you don't mind, gentlemen. I would appreciate that.

We're going to go to two five-minute rounds. I have a question for Mr. Frank that I am going to ask at the end of these interventions.

Mr. Kurek, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thanks very much, Chair. I appreciate the conversation that we've been able to have here today, dealing with big issues. I'll offer a reflection before I jump into a few specific questions.

I find it a shame sometimes that we don't have newspapers anymore, because at least when somebody would open a newspaper, they'd be confronted with columns they might agree with and columns they might disagree with and everything in between. I think that sometimes that need for critical thought and evaluation is lost in political discourse. I offer that as an observation from somebody who's passionate about not just politics but the political process and what that means to our democracy.

Mr. Loewen, you said that there are challenges. Your wording, I believe, was “poorly positioned” to respond to some of these things. Quite often, when we are talking about dealing with misinformation, disinformation and balancing the need to protect freedom of expression, especially because I don't think anybody around this committee would want to limit a free and open political discourse.... You used the term “poorly positioned”. Can you expand on that to explain exactly what you meant, and how we strike that right balance to ensure that we're not limiting political discourse but at the same time encouraging honest and thoughtful debates?

● (1205)

Mr. Peter Loewen: Thank you for the question. I appreciate the chance to clarify.

I would say three things very rapidly.

One is that when I look at the opinions of Canadians versus people in other countries, there's just less political room in terms of support from Canadians for government to regulate or try to regulate the online space. There is also less trust that Canadians have in other actors to regulate, whether it's the tech companies or whether it's civil society groups that take part in that regulation.

It's like we're in a little bit of muck here, trying to figure out, if we want to regulate online platforms, how we're going to do it, Mr. Kurek. That's the first point.

The second one is that it took us a long time to get to the place where we are in terms of campaign finance, where we limit donations pretty severely, we limit the spending and we try to constrain debates and elections largely to parties and candidates. I think most MPs would agree that this works, in that it allows for a focused conversation during elections, if you will.

We have legal precedent to do that, but that model is not going to work in a world in which a lot of speech can be generated by nonhumans and be generated very cheaply. The two mechanisms you use, via money—who can speak and how much they can speak—don't apply in the online space. I think that's a difficult position.

I think, just candidly.... This is a political comment, which I'm a bit reluctant to make, but why not? I'll make it.

I think it's difficult to deal with these issues when the.... It's not the legitimacy of an election, because our election was legitimate, but the question about why the last one or two elections turned out the way they did is itself contested by the subject matter. It makes it hard for all of you as parliamentarians to sort through this.

Mr. Damien Kurek: I appreciate that.

I have one final question, if I could, for Mr. Loewen and Mr. Frank. Hopefully, there's time here.

We saw two examples and, of course, everything is political around here. One is Justice Hogue's report, and we've talked a lot about that.

Also, the Deputy Prime Minister posted a video that end up being flagged on Twitter as being edited. It was a montage, basically, of former Conservative leader Erin O'Toole and a few different things he had said over the course of a more extensive conversation about health care. It was posted as if it was saying something that certainly was not what was intended and certainly not what was said in the context of the larger sentence.

Just quickly, how do we make this balance? Often when somebody disagrees with you, they say that it's misinformation, disinformation or hatred, yet when it comes to their opinion, if you oppose that, the whole conversation gets über-torqued and emphasized to the 10th degree.

How do we make sure that we bring it down to say, “How do we deal with the facts?”

Could both of you take maybe 15 seconds?

Mr. Peter Loewen: Very quickly, Mr. Kurek, I think that example is a good one about the system working in some sense.

Politicians frequently torque what their opponents have said. They'll take little turns of phrase. In that case, the Deputy Prime Minister was sort of caught out, in a sense, for having put out a video that I think probably unfairly pieced those words together. She had to spend some time explaining that.

In some sense, I think that's how you want the system to work. If you're going to not truly represent what your opponent said or stands for, you get caught out for it and then you have to explain why you did it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Loewen.

I'm sorry, Mr. Kurek, but we have to move on.

I'm allowing a little extra time here because this is an interesting conversation.

Mr. Fisher and Ms. Khalid, I understand you're going to be splitting your time. I'll give you a two-and-a-half minute warning.

● (1210)

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

I appreciate all our witnesses and our subject matter experts being here.

I probably only have time for one question.

I just want to say, Mr. Frank, that you commented that misinformation is designed to spread, and very quickly. We're seeing that every single day.

Mr. Al-Rawi, I love the idea of this non-partisan initiative you have. I seem to recall, back in the day—in 2017 maybe—we had a thing called the “baloney meter”. As unscientific as that might have been, it was a really great, non-partisan explanation of what politicians said and whether it was partially full of baloney or completely full of baloney. I tell you, I miss the baloney meter

You had the word of the day, Mr. Al-Rawi—“edutainment”. There are all of these little things going off in my head when you use that term.

My question is going to be for Mr. Loewen. You are a subject matter expert on partisanship. I wonder if you could comment on the current climate of partisanship in Canada.

In Canada, it seems to be mostly focused through social media, but maybe compare it to.... I was in Washington in the United States a couple of years ago during mid-term elections and I had a chance to see what they have on their TV as advertisements during mid-terms. I will tell you that I hope and pray that we never, ever get there, but I see us sliding very quickly towards that example.

Could you talk a little bit about partisanship in Canada and maybe compare it with what we see in the U.S.?

Could you be somewhat brief, so that we can share time with MP Khalid?

Mr. Peter Loewen: Yes, I would refer you to work by my colleague Eric Merkley at the University of Toronto, who studies affective polarization, which is how people feel about each other. While we don't have issue polarization in Canada—we still largely agree on most stuff, actually, when you get down to it—we are seeing increasing degrees of affective polarization, which means that people have bad feelings for other people because of what their political views are.

To me, that's not a very good outcome for a society.

The Chair: You have three minutes, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I really appreciate the testimony today. We heard today that disinformation propaganda has always existed, and we realize that social media have given actors the ability to spread their messages at lightning speed, and it gets harder and harder to bring those messages back.

I'll share with you what the implications of that have been for me.

In 2017, I became the victim of a disinformation campaign among the Conservatives during their leadership campaign. They were sending out fundraising emails asking people to give them five dollars to stop MP Iqra Khalid from bringing sharia law into Canada. That spiralled into a massive social media campaign against me, to the point where I had police patrolling my residence, because somebody had released my address and people were being encouraged to kill me. I had right-wing extremists hanging out at my constituency office, terrorizing my community staff, and 90,000 emails in my inbox, etc.

It took a very long time, and I still to this day deal with lots of the consequences of that fundraising campaign that the Conservative leadership in 2017 had led to.

I really am curious to know where the responsibility lies here. Was it the Conservative candidates raising money off my personal safety and security by spreading disinformation? Was it social media platforms that allowed this to happen without removing it, without fact-checking, or is it media, in general, that are not playing the role of the watchdog that they perhaps used to in the past?

I'll start with Professor Loewen and then go on to Mr. Al-Rawi.

The Chair: You have a minute.

Mr. Peter Loewen: I'll say that's a very hard question to answer, Madam Khalid, about who is responsible for spreading a lie and for the downstream effects of it. That doesn't mean it's not serious, but I think it's probably a responsibility that's shared among people all the way down that chain.

However, if politicians are spreading active falsehoods about other people, they have some responsibility for what people do with that information politically.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Al-Rawi, would you comment?

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: Thank you.

I'm very sorry to hear about this. I actually wrote two peer-reviewed research studies mentioning you.

I believe that social media is to blame partly, but also people's ideological beliefs that would prompt them to do so. Unfortunately, this is the case. There is a lot of polarization happening, and some political parties use what I call disruptive identity politics, so they work on that issue in order to mobilize some segments of the communities to probably win votes or create tighter communities, unfortunately.

● (1215)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Khalid.

Gentlemen, thank you for being here today.

Before I let you go, I do have a question. I'm going to pose this question to all three of you, but I'm going to direct it first at Mr. Frank. It dealt with your comment earlier in your testimony about trusted, credible sources of news being lost.

There was a time, Mr. Frank—and all of you know—that trusted news sources, whether it was anchor people or news people, were the go-to places for trusted sources. Now with social media, the difficulty is in finding those trusted sources.

It's even more difficult now, because there's a standoff going on right now—I'm sure you're all aware—between Facebook and the government as it relates to Bill C-18. Facebook, for many Canadians, is a source of information, but they have made the decision that they're not going to allow the sharing of links on their platform from dailies like The Globe and Mail and others. Paywall notwithstanding, I'm interested in hearing from each of you how this situation is playing out to allow further disinformation or misinformation—I call it lies—to be propagated on social media without access to these credible sources for all this information that is clearly fact-checked, that is clearly vetted through legal departments. If that information is not available on Facebook, how much impact does that have on people's abilities to get the right information?

I'll start with you, Mr. Frank, and then I will work around to Mr. Loewen and Mr. Al-Rawi.

Dr. Richard Frank: This is a serious question. A lot of people think that anything they see on social media is true and trustworthy. I think that educating them and saying that this is not a vetted, independent, neutral source is one of the solutions to this.

Newspapers are edited. They are fact-checked. We need to highlight other sources that are also neutral, fact-checked and edited, and we need to know that people understand the difference between the two.

The Chair: Thank you.

Again, I'm talking specifically as it relates to Facebook's decision to not allow links to these sources of information on their platform, so maybe think about that.

I'm going to go to Mr. Loewen next and ask if he can answer the question for me.

Mr. Peter Loewen: Yes, Mr. Brassard. Our research group has a little paper on this, which I'll send to the committee, on what happened after the Facebook link ban.

The one consequence to this is that people still feel like they're getting their news on Facebook when you ask them about this. They're not accessing news stories, but they are learning about politics from Facebook. Some news stories do creep through, but they're really learning about politics from there, so they're learning about it, then, logically, in a more content-free way.

If I could say one more thing, Mr. Brassard, it is that the biggest and most important loss in journalism in our country has been the loss of local newspapers. I think all of you who are members of long standing would know that what was reported on you in your local paper really mattered, because people in the constituency would read about what you did. In the Toronto Star, nobody writes about what you do back in your constituency. That loss of local journalism is the thing that in the long term will be devastating to our democracy.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Loewen.

Go ahead, Mr. Al-Rawi.

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi: Thank you, MP Brassard, for the question.

I think that if we look at the previous surveys and studies, we see a very clear decline in trust in mainstream media. There are many reasons for that, including the failings of some reporting about events around the world.

Of course, we had social media emerging about a decade ago and prompting people to consume more news from there, and people got used to that. It's a big challenge that we have today following Facebook's decision to ban news outlets on this platform, because people got used to the news from Facebook, but now suddenly they are exposed to other sources. That's the main challenge that we have today.

If I may just mention one thing, exposure doesn't mean impact or effect, and it doesn't mean that if I am exposed to misinformation I will be directly impacted by it. It's really important to make that distinction. We are not like sponges, just observing everything we get and immediately being influenced by it. We have different backgrounds, different ideologies, and of course different thoughts, so it's really useful to be more nuanced when we talk about this.

Finally, I don't think TikTok is the problem. I think we have other major problems that we face today when it comes to the information ecosystem.

Thank you.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Al-Rawi.

Lastly, Mr. Frank, do you have anything you'd like to add, or did you say what you needed to say?

Dr. Richard Frank: I did, more or less, but I completely agree with others that trusting social media as a viable news source is what is causing the problem.

The Chair: Thank you, gentlemen.

On behalf of the committee and on behalf of Canadians, I want to thank you for your testimony before the committee in this very important study. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to share your expertise and your information with the committee members.

I'm going to dismiss the witnesses.

We are going to move into some committee business. There are a few items that I need to discuss, and I apologize.

First of all, some of the witnesses we had scheduled for today had to cancel. That's the reason we had only one hour with witnesses today. Invitations to reschedule the other witnesses' appearances have been sent for May 21. We're working on that. Unless members have a desire to extend this study on disinformation and misinformation, we can do that, but I know we have our final hour set up on Thursday afternoon. We have a witness list, and the notice of the meeting will be sent out after this meeting.

Ms. Damoff, I saw your hand. Go ahead, but I have some other things that I have to discuss as well.

Ms. Pam Damoff: It is on the comment about extending the study, because I was actually going to make that suggestion today, Chair. You have mentioned a number of the witnesses who have come forward with with information for us and how interesting it is and that we just don't have enough time. I do think we should spend more time on this. I think it's an important study that we're doing.

If you need a motion for it, I would do that, however you would like to proceed, but I do think it makes sense to extend it.

The Chair: Can I get you to hold off on that thought for a second?

The scheduling of our committee meetings is really tight right now. Let me explain why.

As I mentioned last week, we received a letter from the RCMP with respect to SNC-Lavalin. The information that was supplied by Mr. Wernick has now been received. It was left was for the committee to determine whether we were going to have an additional meeting based on the information we received from the RCMP or Mr. Wernick, as well as perhaps asking the Privy Council Office for more information if there wasn't satisfaction with the information provided by Mr. Wernick.

We decided in the motion that we were going to deal with that within 14 days of receiving that information, and we're in that period right now. We don't have to think about it and we don't have to determine it right now, because I realize the information was just recently passed on to committee members, but I want you to think about where we'll go with this, if anywhere. We have to have that discussion at some point within 14 days.

The other thing that's happening is that because of the 23rd and the plan to visit the RCMP, we're not going to have a meeting. That takes away one meeting for us.

Those are some of the challenges we're having with scheduling.

The other thing we have to deal with is the study on the use of technological tools and data. It's been indicated by the analysts that you will receive the draft a week from Friday, so we are going to have to make time for that. The report, as it stands in draft right now, is about 50 pages long, and there are roughly 14 recommendations. That may take some time to deal with.

I have asked the clerk to look at some deviation opportunities for us to have additional meetings. In order for us to conclude our work before the session ends, we may have to do that.

I just want you to keep that in mind, because after Thursday, we're starting our study on the Winnipeg lab and Mr. Villemure's motion that was passed by the committee. I want you to keep that in mind, Ms. Damoff.

We're going to have to find time for more meetings. We can certainly hold off until the fall if we need to, or we can do that now. That's up to the committee.

Mr. Barrett, go ahead, sir.

● (1225)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, I'll give notice of a motion that I'd like to move.

It reads, “That pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and in light of new media reports, the committee undertake an immediate study into Minister Randy Boissonnault’s allegations of fraud and contravention of ethics and lobbying laws; that the committee invite Minister Randy Boissonnault for three hours; Kirsten Poon, Stephen Anderson of Global Health Imports, and the Ethics Commissioner to testify individually, in addition to any other relevant witnesses; and that the committee report its findings to the House.”

If I may, Chair, I'll speak to it.

The Chair: You have the floor. You moved the motion, and the motion's in order. Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

I have Mr. Fisher right after you.

Mr. Matthew Green: I have a point of order. I'm only saying this out of procedural fairness.

Ms. Damoff moved a motion that you asked to set aside. We then went into a roundabout discussion about the schedule, and now we're sitting here with a motion that you've considered to be duly put by the Conservative side.

I don't have a horse in this game, but I'm just saying that from the outside looking in, it looks a bit suspect, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Well, it wasn't suspect.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'm just saying what it looks like.

The Chair: I saw Mr. Barrett's hand up.

Mr. Matthew Green: You know it could come off—

The Chair: Yes, we were discussing it. You're quite right. I thought I'd explain, but I didn't see any indication that Ms. Damoff wanted to go again.

You know what? You're quite right, Mr. Green, so I am going to go back.

I'm going to come back to you right afterward, Mr. Barrett, but I'm going to go to Ms. Damoff right now.

Go ahead.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I appreciate the context you gave. I was hoping committee members might want to have some discussion.

As I said to you, I'll put a motion on the floor, if we want to officially do it that way. I thought it would be more of a casual conversation, but I'll put a motion on the floor: I move that we extend the current misinformation and disinformation study by three meetings.

I will say, Chair, I appreciate your laying out what we have before us, but having said that, I think the Canada-China committee finished a study on the Winnipeg lab, so I don't know if that's a high priority for us to get to before the end of June. I don't see any reason, when we've started this study on misinformation and disinformation, that we can't add those extra meetings to our schedule before we move on to something else.

I will formally put that motion on the floor, Chair.

The Chair: The motion is to extend by three meetings. Is that correct?

Ms. Pam Damoff: That's correct.

The Chair: Okay. That's fine.

I will go to Ms. Damoff's motion to extend it to three meetings.

Go ahead—

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: There's a motion on the floor. Are you receiving additional motions while the committee is considering a motion?

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, I did go back to Ms. Damoff on this. I will come back to you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: No, Chair, there's a motion on the floor. It's been put. You ruled it in order and notice was given. Notice was not given for the motion that you're now going to accept.

Further, I had the floor, and you gave Mr. Green the floor on a point of order. Unless we're—

Mr. Matthew Green: He gave me the floor when he accepted the point of order.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Is it your ruling, then, that my motion is out of order?

I'll await your ruling.

The Chair: Just hang on a sec, Mr. Barrett.

After clarifying with the clerk, Mr. Barrett, here's what happened. We were discussing, under committee business, the misinformation and disinformation study. You moved your motion, and I agreed with that.

Mr. Green raised a point of order. I accepted his point of order, because we were still discussing what Ms. Damoff had brought up.

Unfortunately, the decision I made dealt with Mr. Green's valid point of order, so the motion we'll be dealing with right now—I will come back to you on this other one—will be Ms. Damoff's motion on extending the meeting study.

Unfortunately, that's what occurred, Mr. Barrett.

● (1230)

Mr. Michael Barrett: What is the...? She didn't move a motion.

The Chair: We were still in discussion. She effectively still had the floor on what Mr. Green had brought up, so—

Mr. Michael Barrett: But she actually did not have the floor.

Mr. Matthew Green: Just challenge him, do the vote, and you can go back to your whip's office and [*Inaudible—Editor*] do the work.

The Chair: I made the decision, Mr. Barrett. If you don't agree with it, I will have to ask that you challenge it, because unfortunately for you, the decision was made.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's brutal.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Damoff, go ahead, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Chair, it's unfortunate that Mr. Barrett is so opposed to even having a discussion about continuing this study.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Hang on, Ms. Damoff. There's a point of order.

I think what Mr. Barrett was talking about was the procedural aspect of what had occurred. I've explained that already.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Correct, but if we're just accepting interventions when other people have the floor, let me make one.

Chair, it's not the substance of what Ms. Damoff is offering—

Mr. Matthew Green: That's debate, Michael. That's not a point of order.

Mr. Michael Barrett: But we're doing that now.

Mr. Matthew Green: No, we're not. Mine was a legitimate point of order, bro.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, I will have to challenge your ruling. There's no standing order that you're using to dismiss the motion that was duly moved and ruled in order. It's not an acceptable precedent to set once a member is given the floor. There were no other speakers ahead of me. I was given the floor. I moved a motion for which notice had been given. If someone might maybe move a motion sometime in the future—well, they can't move that motion. It's dismissed. We're going to deal with someone else.

Therefore yes, I challenge your ruling.

The Chair: I'm going to accept the challenge, Mr. Barrett.

We will call the vote on my decision.

Go ahead, Madam Clerk.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Just before we go to the vote, could the clerk explain exactly what the motion is?

I know when it's challenging the chair, the yes-and-no voting can.... What exactly is the wording we're voting on?

The Chair: The point we're voting on is Mr. Barrett challenging my decision as chair and my ruling on Mr. Green's point of order, which allowed the discussion to continue so that you could move your motion, Ms. Damoff.

That's what we're doing. If you don't agree with my ruling, you vote no. If you agree with my ruling, you vote yes.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Nancy Vohl): As Mr. Chair explained, it's a vote on the ruling by the chair.

The question is, shall the decision of the chair be sustained?

(Ruling of the chair sustained: yeas 7; nays 3)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Clerk. The decision of the chair has been sustained.

We are now on the motion that Ms. Damoff has moved.

Monsieur Villemure, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: While I may agree that we are studying a very important subject, perhaps even more important than we originally thought, there are two issues I would like to raise.

One is that we seem to have a bit of a problem getting witnesses, at least at the right time. The second thing is on the Winnipeg study. Having previously participated in the proceedings of the Special Committee on the Canada–People's Republic of China Relationship, I can attest that the motion passed here does not aim for the same objective as that other committee. I do not think we need to go further because of the study by that other committee, but rather because there are grounds for investigation.

That said, I am concerned about the availability of witnesses.

● (1235)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

Mr. Barrett.

[*English*]

Mr. Barrett, go ahead, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I move to adjourn debate.

The Chair: We have a motion to adjourn debate. It's non-debatable.

Do we have consensus to adjourn debate?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Clerk. Take the roll.

(Motion negatived: nays 7; yeas 3)

The Chair: The motion to adjourn the debate has been defeated, so I have Mr. Green and then Monsieur Villemure.

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

As I, with good intentions, mangled the analogy about not having a horse in the race, I think that as a committee we have to get to the completion of some of our studies. I'm very aware of the timelines until the end of the session. I am not interested in going down every rabbit hole that comes before this committee. I'm also not of the mind that there's such an urgency on this particular study that it must be completed in sequence right now. I say that to say that I do think that this is a study that requires greater depth and longer analysis.

I will share with you—and it's not to the detriment or to the character of the witnesses who were present—that we need to get to a place where subject matter experts are willing to provide us with recommendations. We need to start to find the types of people who will take political positions on providing recommendations, whether it's using global comparators or academic research or whether it's using subject matter expertise from the industry, because I think that as a committee, in light of an election, we need to get this right.

I'm even willing—and I share this with my Conservative counterparts so that they understand where I'm coming from—to say that this needs to be extended. I don't necessarily agree that it has to be next week. I don't agree that it has to take the order of precedence, but I think that we do have to get to better results, better recommendations and better clarity.

Mr. Chair, I'm not a huge fan of chasing a new thing and a new headline every week and doing the same thing in three or four committees. I say, only partially in jest, that having the same people at the same committees saying the same thing is not a great use of our time. Taxpayer resources are our mandate within the course of this committee.

With that said, vote by vote on all the issues that are brought before this committee, I will determine my vote based on that, knowing that regardless of whatever decision I make, some folks are going to say I'm complicit here, I'm there or I'm going to end up on somebody's fundraiser. I don't care. I just know that what we're trying to do in this committee is the right thing for the good and welfare of people.

I will say that yes, I support an extended version. I would also say that if that happened in September, I would be okay with that. If that meant we went out and got the world's best subject matter experts on this issue who could come in, educate us, inform the general public and provide strong recommendations that we could report, that's where I would go. I'm not doing this so that we're bumping off other things that could be dealt with at this committee between now and the summer.

That's the context in which I'll be making all my decisions on a move-forward basis, vote by vote.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

Just to remind you, there have been some motions that have been adopted by this committee that need to be dealt with.

Mr. Matthew Green: Yes, there have been lots.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Villemure, you have the floor.

Mr. René Villemure: I agree with my honourable colleague. I think we need to move forward, but I do not think there is any urgency.

I have a suggestion. Given the limited availability of witnesses, we could set aside two or three hours and choose the best time so that we can hear from those experts. We cannot have an unlimited number of witnesses, but we must work very hard to have the best possible witnesses, given the importance of the topic.

Last week, Mr. Joel Finkelstein's testimony was compelling. Having been the one who proposed the study, I knew that the situation was serious, but I realized that it was even more serious than I thought. So it is certainly very interesting to hear from this type of witness.

We cannot start 12 projects at a time, but we have to give ourselves a deadline to hear from quality witnesses and perhaps also give ourselves a time limit.

If we put all that together, I think we can do a good job in the public interest.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

We have a bit of a problem with expanding the current witness list, because there are only a few witnesses who are able to appear before us for the study we are doing.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Ms. Damoff. Then we'll go to Mr. Green.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

I have no problem with what Mr. Green and Mr. Villemure are proposing, in the sense that it doesn't necessarily have to be consecutive.

I might even suggest that our analysts in their spare time—which I know they have none of—might be able to do some digging to see if there are some witnesses. I know we submitted quite a few. I don't remember exactly how many. I have no issue whatsoever with it, even if it goes into the fall if that's what's required.

In fairness, I think what we're saying is that this is a study that has actually sparked more interest than we initially determined, so giving it the proper time and attention, and with so much focus on what's going on in society in particular, what's going on with us as politicians and the impact that it's having on our lives and on our work as politicians, I do think it merits a proper study.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

Mr. Green, go ahead.

Mr. Matthew Green: You'll note that in my recent interventions I always go right to the point. What are your recommendations?

I'm wondering if in your communication and invitation to this committee, we could preempt that and ask them to come with opening remarks and any recommendations in advance. It would be so much more helpful for me and, I'm sure, for others—I'm seeing nodding of heads—if we had witness testimony that included their recommendations, which we could then engage with, question, challenge, support and explore. I think it would be better for the analysts.

I'm just wondering, through you, Mr. Chair, if you can answer that. Is there a mechanism by which, in your invitations, you could request that from them?

The Chair: Just looking over at the clerk now and discussing it, there's no question that it's the kind of thing that we can do in the invitation, Mr. Green. We can advise the guests that the committee will be looking for solutions to the challenges that exist right now. We can certainly do that, sir.

Mr. Matthew Green: I think we should do that for all committees, by the way. I mean all studies moving forward.

The Chair: Okay. Good. All right.

I don't see any further discussion.

We are on Ms. Damoff's motion to extend.... I've heard the committee about timelines.

Madam Clerk, what did we discuss this morning?

We have upwards of seven or eight meetings that are left on the schedule to deal with everything. As I've mentioned to committee, I have asked for divergence to find available slots, just so that we can complete our work before the summer break.

Ms. Damoff's motion is to expand it by three, and then we'll figure out the scheduling on that. The only thing I'm going to ask is for more witnesses from committee members as well.

Do we have consensus on that?

Some hon. member: Agreed:

The Chair: Okay, perfect. Thank you. That's noted.

Mr. Barrett, please go ahead.

● (1245)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Are you sure?

The Chair: I am sure, sir. Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I gave proper notice of motion, Chair, and I'd like to move a motion now.

The motion is:

> That pursuant to standing order 108(3)(h) and in light of new media reports, the committee undertake an immediate study into Minister Randy Boissonnault's allegations of fraud and contravention of ethics and lobbying laws; that the committee invite Minister Randy Boissonnault for three hours, Kirsten Poon, Stephen Anderson of Global Health Imports, and the Ethics Commissioner to testify individually in addition to any other relevant witnesses; and that the committee report its findings to the House.

Chair, the motion is incredibly important. We heard from the minister yesterday when he testified at the Standing Committee on Human Resources. He first said he wasn't paid and then he said that he was paid. We know that the minister is having a real tough time keeping his story straight. This speaks to of course questions of the Lobbying Act. It speaks to the Conflict of Interest Act. It speaks to the Conflict of Interest Code for members.

When we're talking about a minister of the Crown, it's incredibly important that Canadians know that they've arranged their private affairs in such a way that they're not furthering their own private interests. We see that in Minister Boissonnault's case there are a whole lot of question marks on whether he did that. In registering one name with the Ethics Commissioner that was not the trading name of the company, it looks like there's some subterfuge happening. It looks like he's trying to hide what he's doing. A company that is paying a minister while they're in cabinet, and that company is simultaneously lobbying that minister's own department and lobbying the government, and his efforts, his company's efforts, did get more than $100 million for his client, in one case a $10-million project. The minister even announced the project while he was collecting cheques from the company that did the lobbying work.

In another case, with Global Health Imports, his other business interest, we of course have the questions raised in Global News about the fact that the minister was listed as a director. This company is getting contracts with municipal and provincial governments, and big players in that space are wondering how it is that this two-man shop that's reselling personal protective equipment is able to land contracts that they're not able to.

Having a federal cabinet minister listed as a director for your company seems to get results. For that company, of course, there have now been allegations of fraud and wire fraud made against the minister's partner there. These are incredibly troubling allegations that have come forward, and it behooves us, based on the mandate of this committee, to of course address that.

This witness list could be addressed over a couple of short meetings and would give us the opportunity to provide transparency to Canadians where that seems to have failed, both in the minister's most recent appearance at committee and also in his disclosures to officers of Parliament.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Fisher, go ahead on the motion.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Yes, on the motion, it's been about a week now that Mr. Barrett has been fishing. Yesterday, the Conservatives disrupted the HUMA committee while they were doing main estimates arguably to get their glorious social media clips and attack the reputation of the minister, but they got the facts wrong about this news story. They were corrected numerous times during the meeting yesterday.

First they claimed that he was in violation of section 4 of the Conflict of Interest Act. As the minister pointed out, in the Global News story itself the Ethics Commissioner's office confirmed that he met all of the requirements of the code. They claimed that the minister inappropriately awarded funds to a company, but as he pointed out, these grants went to the Edmonton International Airport. These grants were awarded by departments that didn't report to the Minister of Transportation and Prairies Canada. They incorrectly stated that the company, Navis Group, received millions in contracts when, in fact, those funds went to the Edmonton International Airport, which is, by the way, the fifth-largest airport in the country.

Mr. Barrett incorrectly stated that the minister was the owner of a company when that wasn't the case. That was pointed out to him. He scrambled and incorrectly said that the minister had an interest in that company. Again, Mr. Chair, I believe this is a fishing expedition by the opposition and by Mr. Barrett specifically. I can only assume that they've read the articles and they know that the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner cleared the minister in this.

I find it a little bit ironic and kind of appropriate that during the study of misinformation and disinformation, we're having a conversation about things that are clearly misinformation and disinformation. Again, it's all for the glorious social media clip.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fisher.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor on the motion.

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

We regularly have before us the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, whom we trust. I find that the motion as proposed somewhat disapproves in advance the future work of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, which has not yet been done.

I would like to move an amendment further to Mr. Barrett's motion. The amendment, as proposed, reads as follows: “Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and in light of recent media reports, the committee…”. That is what is already there. I move that we delete everything else and replace it with this: “call Minister Randy Boissonnault to attend a one-hour meeting, as well as the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, Konrad von Finckenstein, for one hour as well”.

I believe that such meeting will be enough to get answers to Mr. Barrett's questions. That way, it will not obstruct the committee's work, and we will avoid involving the Minister for no reason in our discussion on disinformation. In a way, the Commissioner will be able to tell us whether he has already started an investigation or he will eventually do so. I do not want the committee to do the Commissioner's work for him and undermine his authority. Nevertheless, it is important that we get satisfactory answers to the question asked.

The Chair: In terms of your amendment, Mr. Villemure, I just want to make sure that you are proposing that we call the Minister and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner to appear before the committee for one hour each. Is that correct?

Mr. René Villemure: That is correct. I move that we call each to testify for one hour before the committee.

The Chair: Okay. The amendment is in order.

Do you want to speak to your amendment?

Mr. René Villemure: I will summarize it by saying that I do not want the committee to undermine the Commissioner's authority.

This case deserves to be studied, but we must not exaggerate its importance. It is in the public's interest that we clarify this, since it was reported in newspapers.

On the other hand, I do not think that it is the end of the world. I therefore propose a one-hour meeting with Mr. Boissonnault and one hour with the Commissioner. I think that should be enough.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[*English*]

Mr. Green, you have the floor on the amendment, sir.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

I've had the opportunity to interact with the commissioner enough to know probably what his answers are going to be. I don't think we're going to get much if there's an ongoing investigation. What I would propose—not to muddy this—is that I would like to see the spirit of the original motion reflected with the witness list.

I would like to open this up for discussion prior to moving a subamendment. I do believe that having Kirsten Poon and Stephen Anderson present would be helpful.

Mr. Chair, I would just ask you this question: What is the likelihood of our having the resources for a three-hour meeting? I don't think they should be with the commissioner. I think the commissioner should be stand-alone for a lot of reasons. I do think that they should be included, and I don't want them excluded. Having a professional politician and minister, Mr. Boissonnault, here for an hour and then having a professional bureaucrat and commissioner, Mr. von Finckenstein, here for an hour.... I'm not sure we're going to get much light.

I'm wondering what the resources are and what the possibility is of our having a third hour added to that. I'll just say this now: Given the choice between the commissioner and the new witnesses, I would take the new witnesses if we only have two hours. If we have three, then sure, we can invite the commissioner. I can already assure you of what he's going to say.

● (1255)

The Chair: Mr. Green, as I mentioned at the outset, I have asked for some deviation requests. We could.... Preferably in the afternoons is when that could happen. If that's the direction, then I could ask the clerk to possibly extend by another hour the normal two-hour session. We can do that.

I see the clerk is trying to get my attention, so just hang on a second here.

Mr. Matthew Green: I think we might have a resolution.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: I would propose a subamendment that eliminates the commissioner and puts the witnesses on. I would say that would leave us space, should we have additional questions for the commissioner, so that we can invite the commissioner at a later date. We've had him here numerous times on various topics, and he is very consistent with his answers.

I would propose a subamendment. I put on the floor that we defer the commissioner and in the first opportunity have the minister and the two witnesses.

Now, what I would say to the committee—and open it up for discussion—is that some people might think it's better to have the minister first and the other people second. I actually think it would be better to have the other witnesses first and the minister second, but I'll leave that up to the committee. That would be my subamendment: to defer the commissioner and to include the witnesses as listed in the original motion.

The Chair: The problem with the subamendment is that it's kind of counter to what Mr. Villemure's amendment was. Just so we're all clear on this, what you're saying is eliminate the commissioner but have the other witnesses as proposed by Mr. Barrett and then, as a matter of organization for the clerk and I, have the minister appear after the witnesses who have been proposed by Mr. Barrett. Is that correct?

Mr. Matthew Green: That's correct.

The Chair: Okay, we're all clear on what Mr. Green is proposing. I see some hands, so I just wanted to clarify that with Mr. Green.

I think I had Ms. Damoff first, Mr. Housefather and then Ms. Khalid, and then I have Mr. Villemure. Mr. Villemure was before Ms. Khalid, so go ahead, Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

I worry that on this committee, we do the work that the Ethics Commissioner is supposed to do.

I understand what Mr. Green is saying about knowing what the Ethics Commissioner is going to say, because they don't answer questions about an investigation that's going on. They can provide context on the act itself, but I still worry that there's an assumption from Mr. Barrett of guilt here when the report, even in the news media, said that the the minister met the requirements of the code.

It concerns me when we're superseding anything that the Ethics Commissioner does and saying, “Well, we know better than the Ethics Commissioner does, so we need to do our own investigation.” I'm not saying that we shouldn't do meetings on this, but I don't think it's helpful to get these additional witnesses here.

I'm also concerned about the presumption of guilt here without the Ethics Commissioner being able to do an investigation. An option would be for this committee to refer it to the Ethics Commissioner and ask them to do it.

I'll leave it there, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Mr. Housefather on the subamendment.

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

I don't like to get into procedural stuff, but just procedurally on this subamendment, I think that Mr. Villemure would have to withdraw his amendment and let Mr. Green put an amendment, because the subamendment counters the purpose of the amendment, and it's certainly not receivable in that way. I don't want to be overly picky, but I think you have to do it the other way.

The Chair: I recognized that point earlier, Mr. Housefather. I'm going to continue with the discussion on the basis of what I stated earlier.

Mr. Villemure, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: I have nothing to add, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Khalid, you have the floor.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks, Chair.

I want to seek a little bit of clarity. I don't have the text of the subamendment in front of me, and I'm wondering if we can—

● (1300)

The Chair: The text of the subamendment is to have the minister appear and have the witnesses who Mr. Barrett had proposed for one meeting. That's one hour for the minister and one hour for the witnesses.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Are we still talking about the witnesses who are listed here, these two witnesses, along with the minister and then the Ethics Commissioner?

The Chair: The Ethics Commissioner has been removed by Mr. Green.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Okay.

Do you agree with that, René?

The Chair: We're on the subamendment, so we can deal with that, and then we can deal with Mr. Villemure afterwards. That's where we're at on the subamendment.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you for clarifying that, Chair; I appreciate it.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: I would just say that from my experience with the commissioner, and I'm sure you can refer to Hansard—I was trying to find it—he makes it very clear that it is not his job to propose any legislative remedies and that he operates only within existing legislation.

I would put to you that three-quarters of the work that we do here is because of the grey areas, and I think it's our committee's opportunity in this to not ambulance chase Mr. Boissonnault. On the face value of it, I accept what's been reported.

I don't think, though, that because it's legislatively compliant it's necessarily ethical, and I think that is the mandate of this committee—to study and examine where we can make progress on our legislation to close loopholes, to have greater clarity and to ensure that there isn't this continued cynicism and erosion in our institutions in this very nefarious world of lobbyists, corporate power and procurement. That's my intention.

My intention is that we have testimony that provides us, hopefully, with some insight that allows us to have recommendations that say, “Here's what the legislation says. This is what happened as a case study, and here's what we propose to eliminate the future opportunity for this.” I'm not presuming any guilt, because I take at face value what has been reported, but I still don't think it was right, and those are two very different things.

Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I'm a little bit confused procedurally here, Chair, but if required, I would move a subamendment that the Ethics Commissioner be added back in, because I do think that we need to hear from the Ethics Commissioner.

The Chair: Yes. Procedurally, we cannot move anything further. We have a subamendment. We cannot move another subamendment.

I hope it's clear among the committee what Mr. Green has proposed in his subamendment, and that is to remove the Ethics Commissioner—or defer—and allow for the other witnesses, including the minister, to appear.

I have Mr. Fisher. Go ahead, Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Yes, I don't think I would support Mr. Green's subamendment, but I would support where René was going with this.

The Chair: Here's what we're going to do. We're going to vote on Mr. Villemure's amendment. Then, if Mr. Green wants to reintroduce an amendment after that, we can do that. I want to clear up the confusion here.

I'm going to call the vote on Mr. Villemure's amendment.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. That's exactly what I was trying to seek clarity on. Are you able to just disregard a subamendment and then go to the amendment? Technically, what Mr. Green has done is subamend Mr. Villemure's amendment.

The Chair: The clean thing to do right now is to not deal with the subamendment but to deal with Mr. Villemure's amendment.

● (1305)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Don't you think Mr. Green should withdraw his amendment?

The Chair: I'll go to you next, Mr. Green. You can withdraw your subamendment.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'll withdraw.

The Chair: Okay.

Now we're dealing with Mr. Villemure's amendment. I'm going to call the vote on—

Go ahead.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. My apologies.

Can we get Mr. Barrett's motion, amended by Mr. Villemure, read into the record so that we know exactly what we're voting on?

Thank you.

The Chair: I can ask the clerk to do that, Mr. Fisher.

Go ahead, Madam Clerk.

The Clerk: Just give me a second. Sorry about that.

The amendment from Mr. Villemure would be.... Okay, this is different from the other version I got.

The amendment from Mr. Villemure would be to keep the beginning that says, “Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h), and in light of new media reports”. Then it would delete everything after, and replace it with “that, in the first place, the committee invite the minister, Randy Boissonnault, for a one-hour meeting and, after, the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner Konrad von Finckenstein, for one hour also”.

The Chair: That was Mr. Villemure's amendment.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks, Chair.

I'm just a little confused, because I think what Mr. Villemure had said is a bit different from what I just heard. I'm trying to make notes here. What is being proposed here is that it will be two meetings or it will be one meeting where the first hour—

The Chair: It's one meeting and one hour for each witness.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Okay. It's not the two witnesses together at the same table.

The Chair: No. They're separate.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Does that also then remove the civilians, Chair?

The Chair: This was Mr. Villemure's amendment—to not have those other witnesses—but Mr. Green had talked about, in his subamendment, to not have the commissioner but also have those witnesses and the minister appear. On Mr. Villemure's amendment, it's the minister and the commissioner, period.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I will add some of my thoughts on this, Chair, if that's okay.

I do find it a little bit strange. I'm not sure if there is a review or an investigation by the Ethics Commissioner going on right now on this specific issue. I know that the minister has appeared at other committees to talk about this exact same issue, so I'm really not understanding what the objective is here in this committee.

If we're trying to explore, as Mr. Green had said, where the grey areas are within the Lobbying Act and the Conflict of Interest Code, etc., how would these two witnesses help us in identifying that at all?

Mr. Green has also indicated that the Ethics Commissioner, as we all know, may not be as forthcoming in a direct kind of scenario in terms of the questions that would be posed to him, so I am questioning....

Also, Chair, we have had the conversation many times about a lot of things on the docket and a lot of things on the go. Effectively triaging the importance would be helpful for the work that we're doing, and I would like to see us come up with some report or some positive impact on how we lobby or are lobbied and how we conduct ourselves as parliamentarians under the code. I'm really not sure how this furthers the objectives of the committee in and of itself.

I will leave that there, Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Damoff, did you have your hand up, or was it Mr. Fisher?

Ms. Pam Damoff: I did quickly just want to ask until what time we have resources. I have a meeting waiting in my office.

The Chair: We're getting close to the end of resources, but I will see how this goes before I make that determination.

Go ahead, Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Larry Brock: I have a point of order, Chair.

There are a few of us on the Conservative team who have very significant commitments at this hour, and I'm wondering what that means in terms of whether we're running out of time.

● (1310)

Mr. Matthew Green: Just call for the adjournment of debate, then. Whatever.

The Chair: The options are either to move to adjourn, or I can probably move it in the next five minutes or so. We have about five minutes' worth of resources left, just to be clear.

I'm going to go to Mr. Fisher.

Go ahead.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I was looking across the room at Mr. Villemure. That's not exactly what I got when the clerk read that off compared with what you said. Can you just chime in as to whether what you heard the clerk read back was indeed what your amendment stated? With our back-and-forth there, you looked like it wasn't, but you might be okay with that.

I'm seeking some clarity, if that's fair, through you, Chair, because I don't think that's exactly what he said.

[*Translation*]

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

In a few words, the purpose of the amendment is to hear from Mr. Boissonnault and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, for one hour each, instead of the people who were mentioned in the original motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: I think I was clear on what Mr. Villemure was proposing.

We're on the amendment. I don't see any further discussion. Do we have consensus on the amendment? No. Okay.

We'll have a recorded vote on the amendment, please, Madam Clerk.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: The amendment carries.

We're now on the main motion, as amended.

Ms. Khalid, go ahead.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you, Chair.

I really do appreciate that the minister and the Ethics Commissioner would both come to one meeting, but I'm wondering—and I'm sure I'll have conversations with my colleagues about this as well—what the objective is here. Are we going for a gotcha moment? Are we looking for objectives for specific areas of the Lobbying Act or the Conflict of Interest Code to see where those gaps are? Are we trying to figure out if there have been violations?

I'm sure the movers of the motion can help us understand, and if Mr. Villemure, through you, Chair, can help us understand that a little bit too, I'd really appreciate it.

The Chair: Mr. Villemure, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

I will gladly answer my colleague.

Since I have been on this committee, I have never tried to catch anyone off guard. I think that the public interest should prevail.

There is a question, and I do not assume that anyone is guilty. However, I think the people who are at the heart of this are Mr. Boissonnault and the Ethics Commissioner.

I know that if the Commissioner has launched an investigation, he will let us know. However, I believe that if we do not want our study to be aimed at catching someone with their hand in the cookie jar, we must shorten our list of witnesses to include only essential ones so as not to assume anyone's guilt. That is why I put forward my amendment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[*English*]

Ms. Damoff, you have your hand up.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

I did watch part of Minister Boissonnault's testimony yesterday. I know he's going to come here and provide us with the facts in the case, which I think is sorely lacking in the social media clips that have been generated. I just want to reiterate that I do think the Ethics Commissioner should be able to do their work on this, if that's the case. I'm concerned that we're constantly going down these rabbit holes of “gotcha” moments to try to derail studies, like the one that we've been doing on misinformation and disinformation.

I know my colleague from the Bloc is an honourable person, and I appreciate where he's going with this, but I do have concerns that we're constantly going down the lobbying.... I have the utmost respect for my NDP colleague, but rather than doing it with different news stories, why don't we just do a study on the act itself instead of trying to tie it to individual situations? I believe his concern is genuine about the grey areas in the act—then that's what we should be looking at, not individual cases.

● (1315)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

I don't see any further discussion on this.

Do we have—

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I'm sorry, Chair, but I just want to pick up on something that Ms. Damoff said about creating a study on this topic. I think that would be a really good idea if we are able to take it back with us to see if we can—

The Chair: I invite you to put a notice of motion, then. If you do want to do a study on this, you can certainly do that.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I don't see any other discussion on this, so do we have consensus on the motion as amended?

An hon. member: No.

The Chair: Then we'll call for a vote.

Go ahead, Madam Clerk.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Can you read the motion, please?

The Chair: Okay.

Can you read the motion, Madam Clerk?

[*English*]

The Clerk: Yes, but just give me a second.

The Chair: Okay. We'll wait and then get it read into the record.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: The motion would read as follows:

> That, pursuant to standing order 108(3)(h) and in light of new media reports, the committee invite, in the first place, the Minister Randy Boissonault for a one-hour meeting, and after, the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, Konrad Winrich von Finckenstein, for an hour.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is that understood? Yes.

Let's call the vote, Madam Clerk.

We have a tie vote.

I vote yes.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 6, nays 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: I have Ms. Khalid. She had her hand up.

Mr. Larry Brock: I thought we had no resources.

The Chair: I'm giving her a quick second.

I have to adjourn the meeting, but go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for giving me the floor really quickly.

I'll just put a motion on notice.

It is that, “Given the comments of the Leader of the Opposition last week, in which he suggested that he would use the notwithstanding clause if given the chance, and previous statements that the Conservative Party of Canada would require a digital ID to access content on the Internet, that the committee report to the House that the committee, (a) recognizes the importance of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to protect the rights of all Canadians, including the right to privacy; and (b), opposes the federal Parliament's use of the notwithstanding clause in all instances.”

The Chair: The motion is on notice. I appreciate that.

Mr. Brock, you had your hand up.

Mr. Larry Brock: I move to adjourn.

The Chair: All those in favour?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.