



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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# Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 105**

Thursday, December 14, 2023

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Chair: The Honourable Hedy Fry





## Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

Thursday, December 14, 2023

• (0815)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the 105th meeting of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I'm going to go over the usual messaging.

You are not mandated to wear masks, but please wear one because it helps to protect you and your colleagues. You're not allowed to take any photographs of your meeting on the net. You can find it later on; it will be posted.

When you speak, address yourself through the chair. Also remember that the audio system is very sensitive, so please ensure you don't have other devices sitting next to your computer so we get feedback. That's pretty hard on the ears of the interpreters.

We're dealing today with tech giants and their roles in going against government bills, etc. We have six witnesses. One is not here yet, so when he comes on, the clerk will suspend for a minute and we will bring him on and test him.

We will start this morning with Joan Donovan, online disinformation and misinformation expert, Boston University College of Communication.

We also have Georg Riekeles, associate director.

Joining us online, with Corporate Europe Observatory, we have Bram Vranken, researcher.

From Internet Society Canada Chapter, we have Philip Palmer, president, who will be coming on a bit later.

We have, from OpenMedia, Matthew Hatfield, executive director, and from Village Media Inc., Jeff Elgie, chief executive officer.

We will begin, and you each have five minutes as a group, not as a person. If there are two of you, then you will have to split the five minutes. I will give you a 30-second shout-out to wrap it up. Even

if you can't finish what you wanted to say, there's always an opportunity during the question period for you to plug your bit in.

We'll begin now with Ms. Joan Donovan for five minutes, please.

**Dr. Joan Donovan (Online Disinformation and Misinformation Expert, Boston University College of Communication, As an Individual):** Thank you so much for being here and thank you for the invitation to testify at this hearing.

I'm Dr. Joan Donovan, and I've spent my career studying harmful online campaigns, including misinformation, disinformation and media manipulation. I'm an assistant professor at Boston University's College of Communication.

Until recently, I worked for the Harvard Kennedy School of Government as the research director of the Shorenstein Center and the director of the technology and social change research project, also known as TaSC. TaSC focused on online media manipulation campaigns and influence operations by bad actors, including adversarial nations running misinformation and disinformation campaigns, skewing public discourse, seeding hate, violence and incitement online, and, of course, undercutting democracy's free and fair elections.

Before Harvard, I led my research at Data & Society, a non-profit where my team and I mapped how social institutions were intentionally disrupted through online campaigns. I chose to join Harvard after a lengthy recruitment period because they convinced me that they would support this work at scale.

As we know, governments around the world and the public have come to rely on my work, as well as that of many other researchers in this field, but from my work, they have learned who is behind COVID misinformation, especially the calls for hydroxychloroquine. We also learned what domestic and foreign operatives are doing to create division in communities, explaining the behaviour of 81 countries that deploy cyber-troops to manipulate public opinion online. I have worked with the WHO and the CDC on strategies to mitigate medical misinformation, and most recently, I've worked with the Canadian election misinformation project at McGill University.

In my whistle-blower disclosure submitted on my own behalf by Whistleblower Aid, my team's groundbreaking research in this field was ground to a halt in obeisance to Facebook by the dean of Harvard Kennedy School, a man now known for his deference to donor interests.

In short, in October 2021, a well-known Facebook fixer became enraged in a donor meeting when I told the group that I had Frances Haugen's entire cache of internal Facebook documents and that I planned to create a public collaborative archive of that. I said they were the most important documents in Internet history. This donor and Facebook PR executive attacked everything I said at that meeting. He and Facebook-affiliated donors have powerful influence at Harvard, so that was the start of the Kennedy School's campaign to stop my work and create unceasing misery for my research team. When Harvard received a donation of half a billion dollars from The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the fate of my research was sealed. HKS killed the TaSC project and fired me after silencing me and my team for two years.

Courtney Radsch testified here that tech giant intimidation includes researchers and academics and a further weaponization of the big tobacco and big oil playbooks, silencing and skewing research and protecting their profits and lies to the public. However, unlike the censorship campaigns of those before them, tech giants have more tools at their disposal because they control the information landscape and the data about it. For instance, Meta's actions in Canada to fight Bill C-18 have deprived Canadians of more than five million news interactions a day, according to McGill's media ecosystem observatory.

You see the damage of their for-profit motivation acutely in Canada. As Imran Ahmed from the Center for Countering Digital Hate testified to here, we know that bad actors fill the vacuum when credible news and information leave us, with little else to look at. When a school like Harvard is complicit in the corporate direction of research, what can protect those of us who work to document, analyze and share the truth? As others have noted, Facebook's actions to avoid accountability have targeted legislators and regulators in the U.S. and Canada.

● (0820)

I want to close by saying this. I support the online algorithm transparency act, known as Bill C-292 here in Canada, and the similar legislation introduced in New Zealand, the U.K. and the European Union. I was raised with the deepest conviction that I'm responsible for the consequences of my actions, and tech giants must be too. As an academic, I have a moral obligation to tell the truth—then and now.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Donovan.

I did not even go to a party last night, guys, but I forgot what the topic was this morning, so excuse me.

I'm going to say for the record what the topic is. It's tech giants' current and ongoing use of intimidation and subversion tactics to evade regulation in Canada and around the world.

The next witness is from the Corporate Europe Observatory. We have Bram Vranken.

Mr. Vranken, you have five minutes, please.

● (0825)

**Mr. Bram Vranken (Researcher, Corporate Europe Observatory):** Many thanks for the invitation.

My name is Bram Vranken. I'm a researcher and campaigner at the Corporate Europe Observatory, CEO. CEO is a Brussels-based research group working to expose and challenge the privileged access enjoyed by corporations and their lobby groups in EU policy-making. I will be discussing big tech's lobbying power and the tactics it uses in Europe specifically.

Large digital corporations have grown enormous in size, wealth and influence over the past two decades. The more our economies become digitalized, the more power big tech accrues. Big tech has increasingly monopolized our access to the Internet, and it plays a critical role in our online interactions, the way we access information and the way we consume.

However, its business model is problematic. It is based on aggressive surveillance advertising and data extraction, deploying social recommender systems that amplify disinformation and hateful content and promote unaccountable and unfair artificial intelligence programs.

Together with its economic power, big tech's political power has increased as well. The aim of big tech and its allies seems to be to make sure that there are as few hard regulations as possible to preserve the profit margins and business model. If new rules cannot be blocked, then they aim to at least water them down.

I will expand now a bit on the key factors explaining big tech's lobbying power.

First of all, I will look at its lobbying spending, which already gives a first indication. Just to give a quick overview, our research shows that in the EU, 651 groups and business associations are lobbying the EU's digital policies. Together, they spend 113 million euros annually lobbying the European Union, making tech—the digital sector—one of the biggest lobbying sectors in Europe.

However, large tech corporations, such as Google, Amazon and Meta, are primarily responsible for the increase in lobbying spending we've seen in the last couple of years. The top 10 digital corporations alone spend a total of 40 million euros a year on lobbying. To take a specific example, Facebook is now spending eight million euros a year, making it the company with the biggest lobbying budget in the EU. Just 10 years ago, that was only 450,000 euros, so we're speaking about an increase of a factor of 17 in just a decade. These numbers, by the way, only cover EU lobbying. Big tech also has invested heavily in lobbying in the national states for which data is often not accessible.

What does big tech use this money for? It's used this massive funding to build a very extensive network of lobby groups and lobby consultancies, and provide funding to think tanks and universities. This wide network serves as a gigantic lobbying echo chamber that constantly plays a variation of the same tune: Regulation will damage the economy, damage innovation and be bad for small and medium enterprises.

By funding these organizations, big tech buys access to policy-makers, or as an anonymous tech lobbyist recently stated in Politico, "Their official pitch is: 'You sponsor me, I organize an event for you'...The unofficial pitch is: 'You sponsor me, I give you access to this or that MEP'". In 2020, a leaked Google lobby strategy document already highlighted Google's approach, which was, first of all, to mobilize third parties such as think tanks and academics to echo Google's messages, and second, to reframe the political narrative around costs to the economy and consumers.

Recently, there has been increasing attention on an especially insidious way of lobbying whereby big tech has funded organizations claiming to represent SMEs, start-ups and software developers. These organizations' lobbying positions are conspicuously close to those of big tech. In one case, Apple provided more than half of the funding for an organization claiming to represent app developers. In another well-documented case, it was found that many of the member companies of a big tech-funded SME trade association did not know they were a member, and they definitely did not agree with the position of that trade association.

The rising lobby firepower of big tech mirrors the sector's increasing market dominance. It is extremely problematic that these platforms can use their never-ending reserves of funding to ensure that their voices are heard over those of countervailing or critical voices.

● (0830)

However, there are steps we can take. We should protect the decision-making process from privileged access by big tech, for example, by limiting the access these companies have to decision-makers. At the same time, policy-makers should reach out to those who do not have the resources to make themselves heard, such as SMEs, civil society, independent researchers and local groups. I think the panel discussion today is a very good example of that.

I will stop here. Many thanks for your attention.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Vranken.

I will now go to Georg Riekeles, associate director of the European Policy Centre.

Mr. Riekeles, you have five minutes, please.

**Georg Riekeles (Associate Director, European Policy Centre, As an Individual):** Madam Chair and honourable members, thank you for the invitation.

My name is Georg Riekeles. I worked at the European Commission for 11 years, notably on digital regulation and trade files. My current position is associate director of the European Policy Centre, one of Brussels' leading think tanks, but I emphasize that I am testifying entirely in a personal capacity.

In this introductory statement I would like to make three points: one, what I have observed; two, how I think we must understand it; and three, what I recommend.

My first point is what I have observed. My experience and encounters with the big tech platforms from inside the EU over the past 14 to 15 years suggest that EU policy-making is and has been in the grip of big tech platforms and their networks of influence.

I have sought to document this with regard to the EU's legislative debates on the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, the DSA and DMA. As references, I've written a piece publicly about this in The Guardian called "I saw first-hand how US tech giants seduced the EU—and undermined democracy", and then a longer piece in Medium called "TEKNOPOLIS: How Big Tech frauds EU democracy".

It is true that the DSA and DMA will allow Europe, for the first time, to neutralize some of the harms caused by Internet platforms. However, it's also very important to be attentive that the compromises made in getting there in the end also reflect the extraordinary powers of tech companies to influence decision-making. We saw, under these legislative processes, campaigns of direct and hidden lobbying of a brazenness and scale that one should be very attentive to, and which in my view are totally out of line with the applicable codes of conduct for interest representation and the most basic behavioural principles in society.

As much of the debate in Canada has been on the Online News Act, I thought I should take two examples of such tech tactics from equivalent discussions in the EU in the context of the copyright reform directives from a few years back.

These relate, first of all, to the use of front groups and alliances. One example under the copyright debates deals with one of the most vocal stakeholder coalitions in Brussels, called C4C, the Coalition for Creativity, which represented all from public libraries to digital rights organizations. It turned out *ex post* that this coalition was financed by the Computer & Communications Industry Association, that is, financed indirectly by Google and other platforms. The coordinator was, by chance, also a consultant for Google.

Another example is an organization that is still active. It's called the European Independent Media Publishers. If you go to their website, it says that their platform that represents over 1,000 media outlets across Europe. What this website did not say when it was created was that this is entirely set up and financed by Google. I discovered this when a consultancy company reached out to me and asked whether I wanted to do some hidden lobbying and think tanking for them. Since this has been called out, they have now added on their website that the European Independent Media Publishers is partnering with and is sponsored by Google.

Those are two examples of the use of front groups, alliances, and astroturfing.

The second major way of leveraging their power and gaining influence is, of course, using the powers that the platforms have directly. When the EU was trying to regulate user-generated content and confer ancillary copyrights on press publishers in 2018 and 19, big tech was directly corralling protesters to the barricades.

I can give you one example. YouTube's chief executive, Susan Wojcicki, crassly told YouTube creators in a letter that the legislation posed a threat to both their livelihoods and their ability to share their voices, threatening hundreds of thousands of jobs and threatening the freedom of expression and the web as we know it. Of course, as we know, in the end the European Commission prevailed. The copyright directive took effect across Europe two years ago. I leave it to everyone to judge the substantiation of Google's dramatic warning that it would change the web as we know it.

How should we understand this? My own experience that I am pointing to here shines very well on what Bram was referring to in the Google memo leaked in November 2020 containing a list of tactics for undermining EU legislation. As the previous speaker also mentioned, it parallels big tobacco. As public scrutiny and research have uncovered in the case of big tobacco, outside vested interests create whole ecosystems of thought, influence and subversion to manipulate society and policy-makers.

● (0835)

I think it's very interesting to go back to the landmark study of the World Health Organization, "Tobacco industry interference with tobacco control", which summarizes what these tactics can look like. We also see this in the area of big tech. It's about lobbying. It's about framing the narrative. It's about creating alliances and setting up front groups and astroturfing campaigns. It's about influencing or buying think tanks and academics. It's about hospitality. It's about political support and funding. It's using philanthropy. It's also about litigation and intimidation, and about the use of international pressure.

I see that the time is up, so I will end there. I can possibly come back to what I recommend in the questions and answers.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Riekeles.

Now we'll go to Matthew Hatfield, executive director of OpenMedia.

Mr. Hatfield, you have five minutes, please.

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield (Executive Director, OpenMedia):** Good morning. I'm Matt Hatfield. I'm the executive director of OpenMedia, a grassroots community of nearly 280,000 people in Canada who work together for an open, accessible and surveillance-free Internet.

I am speaking to you today from the unceded territory of the Tsawout First Nation.

This hearing came from Bill C-18's hearing. I'm happy to answer questions about how that bill has landed and what must come next, but in listening to the exchanges you've had with witnesses before today, it seems to me that—

**The Chair:** Excuse me. Could you please slow down for the interpreters? Thank you.

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** Certainly. My apologies.

To me, this hearing's topic seems to be pinning down what's wrong with tech platforms and what our government can do about it. I'll try to answer that question very precisely for you.

What's wrong with tech platforms and their influence on society? It's three things: their size, their vast asymmetrical data compared to regulators and citizens, and the engagement algorithms that drive their business model.

Let's talk size. Platforms like Amazon and Google have a stranglehold on a huge share of Internet commerce, app purchases, advertising and more. They often use that power to set unfair terms vis-à-vis smaller businesses and consumers. I'll note, though, that Bill C-18 misunderstood the specific dynamic around news. It assumes that news has inherent value to platforms that, for Meta at least, it does not.

The good news about the size problem is that Canada is opening new possibilities to do something about it through competition reform in Bill C-56 and Bill C-59. In the U.S., several bills were proposed last year aimed at regulating how tech giants treat small businesses and consumers. They include the American innovation and choice online act and the open app markets act, both of which OpenMedia campaigned for. In Canada, the Competition Bureau has never had the legal basis to study platform power effectively, let alone change it. Soon they will.

My second point is about data asymmetry and privacy. Platforms like Meta and YouTube have an endless volume of sensitive data about each and every one of us. They use it for advertising and to feed recommendations, but not for much else. Partly that's to respect our privacy, which is a very good thing. Their data in the hands of a spy agency or law enforcement would be a dystopic surveillance nightmare and one that we must guard against. However, that lack of curiosity on the platforms' part is also self-serving. It makes it easy to bury accurate study of what may be going wrong for some of their users and, in the worst case, lead that minority to harm themselves or others. The limited research that exists on how platform models may sometimes amplify harms is done with very incomplete data or with crumbs of researcher data access, which platforms are quick to withdraw if their interests are threatened.

Here we need both an individual and structural remedy. The strongest possible privacy bill, Bill C-27, giving Canadians meaningful and unalienable control of our personal data, is one solution, but another must be a very strong provision for both regulator and approved academic researcher access to perform studies on platform data in our upcoming online harms bill. We can't intelligently regulate platforms if we don't understand how any harms they help produce actually occur.

Last but not least, let's talk about the algorithm. Without even noticing it, we've become a society in which most information we get is delivered because it keeps us scrolling and clicking, not because it is nuanced, well researched or true. For music or hobbies, that can be a wonderful tool of self-exploration. People are not passive consumers of our feed. We curate it heavily, pruning the algorithm to serve us what we like most. However, for facts and reporting, that same process is making us a less-informed, angrier and more polarized society. We all feel the impact and very few of us like it. That doesn't make solutions easy, although I would say that Bill C-292, Peter Julian's bill, is something worth considering here.

I'll give a couple of signposts for what might help. We welcome this committee's interest in a dedicated study of how to create a viable news sector in Canada that continues producing vetted information. There's a case that Canadian news needs permanent government support, but the more involved government becomes, the more urgent it is that funds move through a system that is fully transparent to the public, has clear and fair criteria for who gets what support and prioritizes funds where they're most needed, in local news deserts and public accountability journalism, not shoveling funds indifferently toward Bell or the CBC. The alternative of stacking complex funding band-aids one on top of the other until they represent the majority of news funding is not going to build public trust in truthful journalism.

We would also welcome a Canadian study of how social media algorithms are impacting society. However, regulating the algorithm, if it comes, must be aimed at expanding transparency and personal control over how it works for Canadian Internet users, not manipulating it for what the government thinks is best for us.

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds.

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** Over 12,000 members of our community asked you for fixes to Bill C-18, and over 20,000 of us raised concerns around the government's first online harms proposal, but that's far from the extent of our community's interest in tech platforms. Over 9,000 OpenMedia community members have demanded more anti-harassment tools and control of our data on online platforms. Nearly 34,000 of us have signed actions demanding data protections and regulating the data broker industry.

I look forward to discussing any of these important platform issues with you. Thanks.

• (0840)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hatfield.

I'll go to Jeff Elgie, the chief executive officer of Village Media.

**Mr. Jeff Elgie (Chief Executive Officer, Village Media Inc.):** Good morning, everyone, and thank you for having me today.

I apologize if my comments are not directly aligned with the title of this session, but I was asked specifically to come today to provide our perspective on Bill C-18 and the Online News Act.

As a brief introduction, I am the CEO of Village Media, which is headquartered in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. We began with one local news publication and two journalists 10 years ago. Today we own and operate 25 news publications in Ontario and employ approximately 150 Canadians, 90 of whom are journalists.

Beyond operating local sites, Village has developed made-in-Canada technology for the publishing sector. This technology now runs our own publications along with those of Glacier Media, Dougall Media, Great West newspapers, Black Press Media and others. As of now, we power almost 150 news websites across Canada.

As you may know, I spoke in front of the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications with respect to Bill C-18 back in May. My position since has not materially changed.

To briefly summarize, we believe the bill and the Online News Act were flawed from the get-go. It was suggested that platforms such as Google and Meta steal our content and provide no meaningful value in exchange. We argued this couldn't be further from the truth. The truth is that we, including news publishers, willingly play to allow for snippets of our content to appear on the platforms, because we benefit tremendously from the traffic we get from them. For Village Media, this helped us grow and launch 25 publications and develop a profitable and sustainable model for local news.

I'm here today to speak about some of the impacts of the Online News Act. It is my belief that we have now created a number of scenarios where, in many cases, news publishers may come out behind. For large publishers, particularly those that had deals with Google and Meta, including Village Media, I expect some of us will be ahead and some of us will be behind financially. While these deals are covered under non-disclosure agreements, it seems apparent that, by having a smaller pool of expected funds from Google—\$100 million—and by adding zero funds available from Meta, it is quite possible the ultimate value of the Google deal may in fact be less than the prior deals with both platforms.

For small publishers—including start-up and independent publishers—that did not have deals with either platform, there is still much to be determined as we wait for the final regulations to be released. First, will they qualify? Second, how much will they receive, if so? If you ask many of those small publishers if they would prefer to receive some amount per journalist, which may theoretically equate to approximately \$10,000 per year, or have their Meta traffic back, I expect many would prefer to have their Meta traffic back.

This is the scenario for Village Media. Even the best-case scenario for the Google deal likely does not make up for the value of lost Meta traffic. That traffic allowed us to monetize our publications more effectively and to develop new audiences, subscribers and followers we would otherwise be challenged to reach. Facebook in particular was one of the best on-ramps to new publications we have found, and we have tested many. In the absence of Meta, sustainably launching news sites, or even sustaining recently launched sites, might no longer be possible.

This problem goes beyond my own self-interest. As an even worse outcome, Canadians are now no longer exposed to news on Facebook and Instagram. At a time when voter turnout is at record lows and we can expect to be flooded with disinformation through technologies such as generative AI, the missing voices of Canadian journalists in these environments will no doubt be damaging to our society.

Over our 10 years of operation, Village has gone into each year with an expectation of growth and continued sustainability. We're profitable and we reinvest our profits by expanding into new communities and growing our newsrooms. However, as of April of this year, in anticipation of the outcome of the Online News Act, and for the first time ever, our company has paused almost all new hirings and suspended new community launch plans. The potential

outcome of the Online News Act has substantially impacted our progress.

Thank you for having me.

• (0845)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll now suspend for a short time to get Mr. Palmer online.

Thank you.

• (845)

(Pause)

• (845)

**The Chair:** We're back to the meeting.

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

**Mr. Philip Palmer (President, Internet Society Canada Chapter):** Thank you, Madam Chair and honourable members, for this opportunity to address you this morning.

The Internet Society Canada Chapter is an independent not-for-profit corporation that advocates for an open, accessible, safe and affordable Internet. We accept that some regulation of the Internet and its participants is necessary, and it is welcome. We have heard nothing this morning that we disagree with from the various panelists who have spoken.

However, extreme care has to be taken in formulating regulatory policies in order to obtain the best results for Canadians. The Internet is the most revolutionary societal disrupter since the invention of printing, and those disruptions are occurring at warp speed. Its reach is global, as are its impacts.

The Internet features both beacons of light and cesspools of depravity. Its more positive aspects further the goals of an enlightened humanity. Its worst aspects are a challenge to liberal democratic values and to all societal and legal norms.

Social media is often marred by shockingly bad behaviour. It can transmit misinformation and disinformation, discourage reasoned debate and constrain the participation of members of civil society as a result of racism, misogyny, threats and intimidation.

Where is Canada as the world confronts the many challenges that arise from the Internet?

Canada is a small country, economically open to the world and dependent on its relations with its peer countries. The Internet and Internet-based services are the key to Canada's continued integration into the global economy. For Canada to thrive and for her citizens to prosper, it is critical that Canada approach the Internet and its regulation with some humility.



Canada is too small in population and in wealth to establish the norms by which the Internet will be regulated or how Internet service providers will govern themselves. If Canada overreaches and imposes unrealistic economic and social costs on Internet services, it may find its businesses and its citizens cut off from the services and knowledge that are available to its peers.

Canada has already proposed or adopted counterproductive Internet-related measures, two of which were studied by this committee. The Online Streaming Act, rather than bringing Canada's Broadcasting Act in line with the world of Internet-based services, attempts to bring the Internet into the walled garden of the Canadian broadcasting regulatory system. The Online News Act attempts to extort payments from Internet platforms to subsidize news producers.

This committee's present study was inspired by its work on Bill C-18 and Google and Facebook's reactions to it. We maintain that Bill C-18 is deeply flawed. It has already had foreseeably negative impacts on Canadian news businesses and on Canadian consumers of news.

The choice of whether to provide Canadians with access to news and be subject to the act or to withdraw from the Canadian news ecosystem comes down to a business decision. Meta announced early that it would withdraw from the Canadian news market if Bill C-18 was adopted. This was not intimidation; it was a lawful and rational business decision.

The withdrawal of Meta from the Canadian news space has proven to be a hardship for Canadian news producers. If Meta's withdrawal is a hardship, Google's withdrawal from the Canadian news ecosystem would be catastrophic for Canadian news businesses and for the Canadian public.

We welcome the agreement reached between Google and Canadian Heritage. It promises to avoid that catastrophe. Nothing we say here today should be construed as approving the activities of tech giants, a term that encompasses not only the large international behemoths but also our domestic giants—Bell, Rogers and Telus—which dominate domestic markets and extract casino profits from Canadian consumers. It is good to see that Canada is focused on competition law reform.

● (0850)

There are a number of experiments under way in democratic societies that deal with Internet and tech regulation that Canada can learn from, emulate or co-operate with. It is critical that thoughtful policies be crafted that recognize the unique characteristics of the Internet and that they put up the full value of Internet-based services for Canadians. Poor regulatory policies will harm Canada and Canadians.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Palmer.

Now we're going to the question-and-answer part of this committee.

The first round will be six minutes. It includes questions and answers, so please be as terse as you possibly can be.

We will now begin with the Conservatives.

Rachael Thomas, you have six minutes.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas (Lethbridge, CPC):** Thank you.

Thank you to each of the witnesses for taking time out of your morning and providing us with important information today.

My first question is for you, Mr. Palmer.

We had the Heritage Minister here at committee a couple of weeks ago. She stated that the CBC currently employs one-third of all journalists in Canada. Based on the regulatory framework being outlined for the Google deal of \$100 million, that money will be divvied up based on the number of journalists a company or news outlet employs.

Do you believe that the CBC should be included in this deal?

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** Frankly, I think that the most important thing that can come out of this is an examination of the role of the CBC in news. The CBC's mandate is now nearly 100 years old and it has not changed significantly over time. The CBC's role in Canadian news is obviously significant, but how it relates to other Canadian news partners is critical to the future of the news business in Canada.

From my perspective, and I think that of our society, we do not favour the Google funds going to the CBC at this time. We think the mandate review is essential to carrying forward in a balanced manner, given the challenges that the news industry faces in Canada.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Thank you, Mr. Palmer.

Mr. Elgie, I'll ask you the same question.

I'm curious. Should the CBC be included in this deal and therefore receive about a third of all funding?

● (0855)

**Mr. Jeff Elgie:** Thank you for the question.

I was asked that question by the CBC on *Power & Politics* and I said that I didn't think it seemed reasonable.

The CBC currently receives a generous contribution from the federal government of approximately \$1.2 billion. If you break that down and distill it, it's equal to almost \$150,000 for each of the 3,000 journalists of the 8,000 staff they have. It seems they have a massive advantage. The CBC also competes with the private sector, for digital advertising in particular.

We feel that this money is best directed to the private sector.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Thank you.

Mr. Hatfield, in one of the articles you wrote, you said that Bill C-18 "puts media under the thumb of government and platforms, encourages the spread of poor quality journalism, and does nothing to rejuvenate local media." Do you care to expand on that statement?

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** Certainly.

I think some of those concerns are what we're going to be looking for when we assess the final regulatory agreements that Heritage reaches with Google. I'm concerned that the government has essentially tried to create public support for news on the cheap without doing some of the work of establishing a truly transparent, open system to provide that support. Strong-arming platforms into forming agreements with news was an attempt to create the system without going through the hard transparency work.

I'm very concerned that in the final agreement, a group like Google will have considerable discretion over who is getting support and who isn't. It's either that Google will have a lot of discretion or a government-appointed body will have a lot of discretion, or both. I think Canadians deserve better. I think we need a system where it's very clear on what terms support is being allocated and who's getting it.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Mr. Hatfield, on that note, then, in your estimation, what would be the best way to restore news media to a place where it's producing diverse news, independent news, in a place of healthy thriving? What would that look like in the nation of Canada? What would it take to restore media to that place?

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** I welcome this committee doing a study because I think it's an open question whether we need some dedicated government support. I think there's a strong case that some types of journalism we need are not commercially viable, but I don't think the CBC should be cannibalizing the funding we need for a diversity of sources.

I think one logical conclusion of that study is going to be that we need to address areas that don't just have struggling news organizations but may have no news organizations now. We need to ensure that any dedicated support is reaching those kinds of areas. Under Bill C-18, we get precisely the opposite. The funding is going primarily to news organizations that, to some degree, are already succeeding and still exist.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Mr. Hatfield, when the money continues to flow to legacy media instead of supporting independent, local or ethnic media, what does that do to diversity in our country?

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** I think it reduces it. It reduces both the innovation and representation of different voices in Canada.

Obviously, the CBC has made diversity a huge priority of its own. That's probably good. The CBC can't fully represent that by itself. We need to see a genuine diversity of viewpoints beyond just the editorial line.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Mr. Palmer, I have the same question for you. What would it take to level the playing field and actually make news independent and healthy in the nation of Canada?

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** I think the primary tool that's necessary is a truly independent fund that would allocate resources as necessary, especially to the news deserts out there and to support frontline journalism rather than top-level organizations.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to the Liberals.

Michael Coteau, you have six minutes, please.

**Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much to all of our witnesses today. I found the testimony quite interesting. I appreciate your time.

I often think about the big tech companies. I know they can be placed into many different categories. We're talking a lot about on-line platforms, but there's a lot of big tech out there today.

I was reading in the Toronto Star today that Apple just reached the \$3-trillion mark. That's a third larger than the GDP of Canada. That's just to put Apple into perspective. These companies are very powerful. They're bigger than some G20 countries with regard to their value. They are major players.

When I was a member of provincial Parliament in Ontario, I moved a bill on the right to repair. It was the first one of its kind in Canada. Apple executives and their lawyers came to my constituency office to see me. I was shocked. I had never engaged in an international multinational corporation because of a bill I put forward in the Ontario legislature. I got a bit of a feel for how powerful these companies are.

Back in the late 1700s, Benjamin Franklin became the postmaster general. It placed him at a huge advantage. If you were a publisher, the best job you could have was to control the mail. He became a publisher and was able, I think in 1774, to start to distribute his paper. Before that, he wasn't allowed to distribute it because the previous postmaster general wouldn't allow him to distribute his newspaper. Platforms today get to pick and choose what they distribute, in many ways. There was a new regulation put forward during Benjamin Franklin's time to remove those conditions and open up the mail system to create fair competition.

We're at a stage right now where we need to make sure that, as the Internet grows.... I think a couple of people mentioned that there are some good and bad sides to the Internet. We see it as something that can be used for the betterment of society, and we need to put in place the right types of rules to ensure that Canadians are getting a fair deal from this ever-changing technology.

I'd like to ask Ms. Donovan a question with regard to higher education in general. I know you had an experience with Harvard. In general in America today, how powerful is big tech when it comes to controlling the voice of research?

● (0900)

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** Thank you so much for the question.

I think it needs to be investigated across the board. It's not just the case that Facebook is funding research. They are also providing contracts to researchers, not just at universities but also in civil society. It's an attempt to make academia and research into a wing of their own PR.

What they have in these contracts, which I think is awful, are kill clauses or veto clauses that say Facebook has the right to read your research prior to publication and to decide if they think it has met their privacy standards. Privacy isn't just about users; it's also about the corporate products themselves. If you're a researcher and you want to study the algorithmic impact of Facebook's products, you have to be very careful that you're not also sharing what Facebook would consider trade secrets, or they could shut your research down if they were funding you.

This experience isn't just my own. There were two other whistleblowers—one at McGill and another at Berkeley—who came forward in the Washington Post just after I did. One of the researchers at Berkeley had a grant from Facebook, and they called him after he said something critical and said, “You shouldn't be doing this; we're friends.”

I think it's really important to understand that Facebook has executives who have taken up positions on advisory boards at universities across the U.S. and Canada. They use that soft power and influence to direct research agendas.

We need a full court press from governments across the globe to understand the web of influence that Facebook has created across academia.

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** I like the basketball analogy you just used.

Considering the scale of these companies—again going back to the fact that some of them are bigger than some G20 countries in regard to their value in comparison to GDP—if they wanted to intimidate, they would have the power to do so. Is that correct?

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** They're already behaving like nation-states in their negotiations on Bill C-18. If you're a business that services the public interest and you understand that your role in society, especially for Facebook, is to share information with the world, then you have a public obligation to serve the people. That is the greatest thing your technology could do. I do think, though, that Facebook behaving as a state-like entity, such that they feel they should negotiate at this top level, is abhorrent.

The last thing I would say is that there is a \$1-billion subsidy from the Canadian government going to Facebook. I think that needs to be addressed.

● (0905)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

I'm going to the Bloc Québécois and Martin Champoux.

Martin, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being with us this morning.

Ms. Donovan, I will continue with you, if I may.

I want to talk about the social media business model, particularly Meta and its Facebook and Instagram platforms. These platforms are profitable as long as they let people speak freely as much as possible. Am I mistaken when I say that the less they regulate speech on these platforms, the more they are in a way able to benefit from it?

I'd like to hear your comments. Do you agree with that statement?

[*English*]

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** Was that addressed to me? I'm sorry. I'm having trouble with the interpretation.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Martin Champoux:** Yes.

[*English*]

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** In terms of the profitability of these platforms, they are in the fastest-growing industry. Once Facebook and others figured out that you could monetize the residue or data trails of users, they turned them into enormous profits. They have also developed strategies to undermine different nation-states—and the laws in these nation-states—which have different obligations to ensure that people are well educated and have access to the truth.

What I'm arguing is that Facebook has a duty to prioritize accurate, truthful information. We cannot achieve that if it is blocking all reputable news organizations. What we also know from research is that when news isn't available, something else fills the void. In that void, we know there's much more information and different kinds of information, particularly information from bad actors.

The last thing I'll say is that technology is the policy. It's not that we have an absence of regulation, but the technology arrives in the world, and if we fail to regulate it, it exists and makes its own policy. Facebook, for instance, decided that you were going to be able to target individuals with bespoke advertising, which, importantly, meant that civil rights were going to be violated if you could target certain age groups and earning brackets in order to get your messages across for things like credit and purchasing health insurance or other kinds of insurance. We know there are broad civil rights effects of the way technology, like Facebook, is designed and then what kinds of services people get down the pipeline.

Importantly, technology becomes the policy. As a result, it becomes very hard for regulators to come in a year, two years or 10 years after a product has been on the market and say, “Wait. Now we understand the harms and we want to do something about them.”

[Translation]

**Mr. Martin Champoux:** Thank you.

Mr. Palmer, according to what you said earlier in your presentation, Canada is too small to impose its legislation in the face of these giants. I'm paraphrasing a little, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you meant to say that we can't overflex our muscles with these companies, because there could be consequences. For example, they could simply stop offering their services on Canadian soil, which I highly doubt they will do.

I do, however, hear your comment that we are too small to play hardball with these large companies. Nevertheless, I think we still have to find a way to be "*maîtres chez nous*" or masters in our own home, to translate a good old expression we Quebecers are fond of.

How far do you think we can go to get respect from the companies that come to do business with us? Do you think it's normal to regulate at full capacity companies that come to dominate a market like news and culture in Quebec and Canada?

• (0910)

[English]

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** Thank you for the question.

I've said that Canada is too small to drive the regulation of the largest of the tech platforms. When you look at the capitalization of the large tech enterprises, it's evident that some of them exceed Canada's GDP.

As a small country, I think we have to very much keep in mind international and democratic norms. When we stray from those norms by any great amount, we're liable to run into problems that will see Canadians not able to benefit from services.

We already have Meta withdrawing from the Canadian market with negative impacts for Canadians. It hasn't yet happened, but it can happen in broadcasting that we're attempting to regulate and extract payments from online streaming services, some of which have very little to gain from continuing in the Canadian market under certain circumstances—

**The Chair:** Wrap up, please, Mr. Palmer.

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** We have to be careful. We have to work with our partners. That's the prime thing.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Next we have Peter Julian for the New Democrats.

You have six minutes, please, Peter.

**Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for very powerful testimony.

Ms. Donovan, you are a folk hero right across North America for the stands you've taken. Thank you so much for stepping up at a time that is quite frightening, when the web giants are producing so many negative impacts.

I wanted to ask you, Ms. Donovan, about a specific case. Isabella lives in Langley, British Columbia. Her son Jaden committed suicide after being engulfed in an online website run by a man name

Kenneth Law that was preying on people who were vulnerable and provoking them to self-harm and to suicide. Jaden is dead.

Kenneth Law has now been charged with numerous counts of second-degree murder and counselling in suicide. Despite Isabella's best efforts, Google continues to promote the site.

I will also reference the case of Molly Russell, who killed herself at the age of 14. Her father, Ian Russell, said that she was subjected through algorithms to a constant barrage of videos and information encouraging her to self-harm and to suicide.

Are the corporate executives who allow this and who refuse to crack down on the most egregious predatory behaviours liable in some way for the incredible harm that comes as a result of their negligence or, one would say, as a result of their deliberate search for profits at the expense of these victims?

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** Wow. I'm just taking it all in here. I'm taking a moment to reflect on Jaden and Molly. I'm so sorry for what has happened to them.

If we think back 15 or so years to some of the problems we had with early social media, they revolved around what we now call cyber-bullying, or online predators who were asking young teenagers for different kinds of gross material.

What we know from Arturo Béjar, who was the whistle-blower on Instagram and who recently testified in front of Congress in the U.S., is that Instagram knew, according to his own internal research. He was working at Instagram and he looked at how often children were shown different kinds of material. It was mostly that they were being advanced on sexually and they didn't like how open the platform was in allowing people to get to them.

He really wanted to change Facebook. When he realized that the upper echelons of Facebook and Instagram were not going to change the product because it was going to effect the bottom line, he had to accept some responsibility as a quality control engineer for not addressing the problems.

I think right now what we're looking at in terms of content related to suicide and self-harm is that, while the platforms do try to tamp it down, it is a major issue. Once you start to look at self-harm content and learn the keywords and the tricks of the trade, you can get into that world and the algorithm will continue to send you more of that content.

In the case of Jaden, when it comes to a website that is encouraging self-harm and suicide, we've seen this before with a website in the U.S. called Kiwi Farms, where people would not just encourage it but harass trans people into isolation. Once they felt very isolated, some people did commit suicide.

I think there are moral and ethical responsibilities for platforms to build and design better. There's also a customer service opportunity to ensure that parents know that the place their children are going online is safe and there are some adults in the room. Unfortunately, though, we have this perception that somehow moderation on platforms is censorship. It's not true. Moderation is what keeps spam out of your inbox and these bad actors from proliferating online.

● (0915)

**Mr. Peter Julian:** I want to follow up on that. As you mentioned, Mr. Ahmed talked about “malgorithms”. These are algorithms that deliberately stoke hatred. We saw last year that every single ideologically motivated mass killing in North America came from the far right. We saw a homophobic attack in Colorado Springs, racist attacks in Charleston and Buffalo, anti-Semitic attacks in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life synagogue, Islamophobic attacks in Quebec City and London, and misogynistic attacks in Toronto. All of them were provoked by this extensive network of encouraging hate in all its toxic forms.

What responsibility do the executives at these companies carry when their malgorithms deliberately bring people to these toxic forms of hate?

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds, please.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** That was to Ms. Donovan.

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** I think it's really important that we hold these companies to account and make sure they understand that the consequences of deploying technology don't just come with the PR of innovation, but that the public and government are going to look deeply at these algorithms or malgorithms and try to make sense of them. That doesn't mean you put the algorithms into the world and the 200 data scientists and computer programmers who understand them can look at them. It means that we have to invest deeply in transparency and auditing systems that allow for us to really understand what it means to serve information online and why they prefer different kinds of information at different times.

What we know about virality online is that novel and outrageous things go furthest and fastest. That tends to be conspiracies—

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Ms. Donovan. We're about a minute over time. You can expand on that with another question later on. Thank you.

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We'll now go to the second round of questions, and it's a five-minute round. Once again, that's five minutes for questions and answers.

We'll begin with the Conservatives and Kevin Waugh.

Kevin, you have five minutes, please.

● (0920)

**Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

For disclosure, I was part of legacy media for over 40 years, and I sat here for Bill C-18 listening to their hardships and to them bashing Meta. Many of them had agreements behind the scenes that they said little about, non-disclosure agreements, and then when

Bill C-18 was passed in the House, one of the biggest media giants in this country, Bell, decided to blow off 1,300 of their employees. Again, there was nothing said. CRTC, with its lax regulations, said little, and it was just kind of swept under the carpet. Then when CBC—a broadcaster and digital network—made cuts, everybody was up in arms, yet it's the taxpayer who pays most if not all the bill for CBC.

Mr. Palmer, you mentioned before that there was hardship when Meta withdrew, but I sat around this table listening to these companies and they had certain agreements. Then, of course, when Meta withdrew, they said nobody was going to their websites and this and that. You can't have it both ways. These companies, when they sat here, were in hardship complaining about Meta, so Meta withdrew and they're still complaining today.

You don't think this is constitutional. I did hear you a year ago around this table. What are your thoughts today? Is online news constitutional or not?

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** Frankly, no, it's not constitutional. There's no provision in the Canadian Constitution that gives federal Parliament the authority to regulate online platforms, and none of the legislation is constructed in a manner that would grant that power. Frankly, it is not constitutional.

**Mr. Kevin Waugh:** Mr. Elgie, I give you credit for your 10 years building Village Media. You've done very well over the last 10 years. However, when we say “level playing field”.... When I was in the media, it was never a level playing field against the CBC. I see that their digital news network is now destroying local news in this country everywhere because, let's face it, they have the resources that other media don't in this country.

I'm just wondering what “level playing field” looks like in your view.

**Mr. Jeff Elgie:** Thank you for the question.

With respect to the CBC, while there are some roles that are important for the CBC to play, certainly having a commercial role is not one. When they're primarily funded by the government, the loophole they found to compete in particular in the digital advertising space seems unreasonable.

With respect to a level playing field, if the goal was to support journalism, whether that be through the government or through the platforms, the hope was always that it be focused on that proportionally and that all players, big or small, could participate in it. We find ourselves in a world where, since the passing of the Online News Act, Meta abandoning the industry does in fact disadvantage small players and start-up publishers in particular. There is no longer a level playing field, including us to some extent, such that mature publications are now advantaged in markets over anyone who might seek to build new businesses in what I consider to still be a very entrepreneurial pursuit today, which is digital publishing.

**Mr. Kevin Waugh:** I don't where the budget officer got the figure \$329 million. They pulled that out as the number Google and Meta were going to give news organizations, and now we're down to \$100 million.

For that \$100 million from Google, who is going to determine where it goes? I think a big concern we have around this table is, with only \$100 million of Google's skin in the game, who gets the money and who determines who gets the money? That's the big question here.

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds left.

**Mr. Kevin Waugh:** I will give that one to Jeff.

Jeff, you're an entrepreneur. Is it a concern to you where the \$100 million from Google goes and who determines where it goes?

**Mr. Jeff Elgie:** We're highly interested in the outcome. We expect the final regulations may prescribe some division of that. Certainly, if the full scope of the CBC and the full scope of private broadcasting is in, including Bell and Rogers, then it obviously dilutes what is already an undervalued pot of funds, which originally, at least I believe, was intended to support the traditional digital and print news industry. It's hard to say, but certainly if the full scope is in, then that pool will be highly diluted.

● (0925)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Kevin. Your time is up.

I will now go to the Liberals, with Mr. Noormohamed for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed (Vancouver Granville, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here.

I would like to start with Ms. Donovan.

One of the prevailing concerns in many communities, particularly among Muslims, Jews and communities of colour, has been the way online platforms, particularly X, Facebook, Instagram and others, have been used as breeding grounds or an amplification force for extreme hateful views. Given the size of these platforms and the limited places online where folks go to access created content—I'm not talking about news here—and access engagement, how do you see the risk profile growing over the course of the next little while for these communities, particularly given the way we've seen bots, foreign governments and others try to foment discord and hate on these large platforms?

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** I began my research on the Internet, networks and social movements looking at the Occupy movement pri-

marily. As my attention turned to white supremacist groups online, I was able to use the same methods I used to look at online social movements in order to think about the formation of movements and of what later became known as the alt-right—the networked social movement of certain charismatic individuals and money players who were funding this. It culminated in what my research looks at particularly, which is the “wires to the weeds” effect: What gets said online then ends up in public spaces.

I know that in Canada, numerous organizations like the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys were active, which formed through their own inertia and were also aided by platform companies allowing them a place to germinate and grow. Since then, a lot of the research in this field has been about removing these bad actors from main-stage platforms. I'm particularly unnerved that Musk returned Alex Jones, who I think has a nearly \$2-billion fine ahead of him for having maligned and harassed the families of the victims of Sandy Hook. This is scary because this person, along with many others, organized the January 6 riots at the Capitol. What we understand is that platforms aren't just a space for speech. They're also a networking and organizing space for action. That includes surfacing resources for far-right extremist groups.

I've been very pleased with groups like the American organization Color of Change, which launched a blood money campaign in an effort to get places like Mastercard and PayPal not to serve payment to extremist groups and known white supremacist groups. What we know about platform companies is that for a long time they ignored the problem. Then, when we got them to take responsibility for it, they hired people to do that work. However, now, as public opinion of these platforms has shifted, they're not getting any rewards for putting out information about their transparency related to extremist groups on their platform, so they stopped investigating.

This is what's at stake for 2024. If we can't depend on platforms to understand and moderate their own territories, governments like Canada's will have to step up, step in and say, “This is a serious problem.”

● (0930)

**Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed:** I'd like to pick up on what you've been talking about here. I'd like to now talk about YouTube.

We have had political leaders in this country use hashtags in their own search criteria for their videos. One of them used a hashtag that was misogynistic. It was intended to build out a certain viewer base. This was used by the current Leader of the Opposition.

I'm curious as to whether or not you can talk to us a little about the implications of what algorithms start to do and how. When you start to use those hashtags, what kind of rabbit holes do they take viewers down? What are some of the consequences of them?

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** I have been researching YouTube for a decade now.

**The Chair:** Thank you for the question, but we've run out of time. You can answer it in another round.

We will now go to the Bloc Québécois for two and a half minutes, please.

Martin, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Martin Champoux:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Riekeles, I'm going to go to you. Two and a half minutes goes by very fast, so I'll try to ask my question quickly.

Long ago, all countries saw the damage that social media can cause with content that's so easily discoverable on platforms, including hateful content, which incites to various hateful trends.

Why is it taking so long for countries to put laws in place? Where the European Union is concerned, the digital services legislation will come into force in a few weeks, in January, but it has taken time to put it in place. In the United Kingdom, the Online Safety Act was passed in October. Here in Canada, no bill has been introduced yet, even though we've been told for years that they are working on it.

In your opinion, why is it taking so long to develop legislation on a subject that is so critical, urgent and necessary?

[*English*]

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** Thank you very much.

I think it's an excellent question. In reality, what you're pointing to is that, over the two decades during which we should have been regulating these platforms, the biggest corporates and the monopolies in particular, public action has consistently been too little and too late.

I think the fundamental explanation of that is what I was pointing to, which is that big outside vested interests create whole ecosystems of thought influence and subversion that, in the end, manipulate society and policy-making. One gets to the realization of what is happening too late, and when one comes to take action, there are very important counterforces that are at play counteracting the capacity of legislating and regulating.

These actors are so big and, as was said earlier in the hearing, of such a size today—bigger than the GDPs of many G20 countries. Of course, when money is not a limiting factor, you buy or you try to buy everything. That is what we are seeing in terms of lobbying and framing the narrative, but also, as I was pointing to, creating alliances, setting up front groups and astroturfing campaigns. To say it also very frankly, they are influencing or buying think tanks and academics.

We have a very big problem across the western world, not only in Europe, not only in Canada but in the U.S., in Australia and so

on and so forth, dealing adequately with the scale of challenge we are facing.

One point was referred to earlier about the independence of academia. I think we are facing a big challenge in terms of having independent academic scrutiny of this. This is a point that has been raised by somebody called Meredith Whittaker, amongst others. She worked for 13 years at Google as head of their open research efforts, and then she left to work on AI ethics. When she was pushed out of the centre where she was working, essentially what she said was that there is virtually no independent academic research on AI ethics across the world.

I think these are examples of the scale of the difficulties we are facing. These companies are systematically, effectively and extensively using their power and their leverage across the policy debate, and that renders regulatory action very difficult.

• (0935)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Riekeles.

Martin, you have gone over, but that's okay.

Peter, you have two and a half minutes, please.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I wanted to come back to Mr. Hatfield and Ms. Donovan. You're both kind enough to mention and support Bill C-292 on algorithm transparency, which is before the House of Commons under my name. There is similar legislation before the U.S. Congress under the sponsorship of Senator Ed Markey.

How important is it to have that algorithm transparency? Do you feel that the push-back that we're getting from these massive big tech companies is because they realize that if the algorithms are transparent, liability then comes for some of the malgorithms that have led people to commit real-world acts of violence?

I will start with Mr. Hatfield.

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** It's critical to get more transparency into how algorithms are working. I don't know if they would face legal liability, but certainly they would face bad press in some cases. Frankly, we're regulating in the dark on a lot of these issues. We truly don't always understand what is occurring on platforms and why. We need that researcher access to understand it better.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you.

Ms. Donovan.

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** I think it's really important that we get these bills passed. Senator Ed Markey lives in my hometown, so I'm happy to be aligned in that way.

What's concerning about transparency and algorithms isn't just that they can dump a bunch of code and you can parse it for years, but really that we set up a transparency and auditing agency whose role is to look at these algorithms and take in changes to the algorithm, ask questions and query these large companies about what is being served.

We also need panel data, which means that we need data that is not about users but more about the links and the kind of information that is circulating online. This would be a way to audit algorithms in terms of what kind of news the algorithms are making popular.

Again, it goes back to this finding from MIT many years ago about how lies travel online, which is that novel and outrageous content moves further and faster online, not just because of what the content is but because of the way algorithms mediate our experience with the information we're seeking.

Google ranking matters if you want to understand a certain issue. We need to know how those things work, and how it decides something very banal like whether, when I type in "salsa" on Google, it's going to give me recipes or dance classes. We need to know why it's making these decisions and how.

When it comes to people—and our names are all we have—it's really important that we have a way of auditing how our own names and identities are shaped online.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now we go to the Conservatives and Martin Shields.

You have five minutes, please.

**Mr. Martin Shields (Bow River, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today. We appreciate your input as we study this issue.

In a sense, we had 1774 brought up earlier. I go back to what's called the yellow journalism era. When newsprint became very cheap and it was yellow, the proliferation of newspapers and the territorial wars to get coverage on the newspaper stands were huge. I think we're in a similar time frame. We're in a totally rapid change, so I'm going to go to OpenMedia and talk to Mr. Hatfield.

Will rural, small media survive in whatever form? Can it survive?

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** It's not looking very good right now. I don't think it is. I live in a small, rural community in Canada called Salt Spring Island, and we're very blessed to still have a local paper. It makes a huge difference to the way the community understands and relates to each other.

There needs to be a very serious study on whether some level of public support is needed, but we need to take that problem head-on as a single, coherent problem. Some of my concern is how news has been supported to date. There are a lot of small, piecemeal and

quite complicated programs all adding up to a pretty significant level of funding that doesn't necessarily go where it's needed and doesn't necessarily close the news gap, but is very non-transparent to ordinary Canadians.

So many people in our country are starting to worry that the news is fundamentally beholden to the federal government or to tech platforms, and we need to make it extremely clear that's not the case through a single system that anyone can audit for themselves.

• (0940)

**Mr. Martin Shields:** Thank you. I appreciate that the voice of authenticity in our rural communication is important.

Mr. Palmer, what is your opinion on that same question?

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** I think it's critical that transparency be at the forefront, as well as independence from government. I'm not sure how one does that, but that is the objective here. The present mechanisms deny that. They do not permit it with any ease, and it's the big players, rather than the print journalists, that are going to benefit from what we now know about the Google fund for Canadian media.

**Mr. Martin Shields:** Thank you.

Going to Village Media and expanding a bit on that, in a sense it's not just those small ones that may have been there for 100 years, but we're talking about new ones, as well, that are small.

Do you see that there's...? Can it survive in the structure of government-funded, big tech running, basically, what we see and read?

**Mr. Jeff Elgie:** Obviously, I hope we're proof that local media can survive and thrive in this environment. When we speak to rural, our smallest community would be about 10,000 people, and we go up to communities with about 150,000 to 200,000 people.



Certainly, we are able to access some government funding programs, which help with our expansion, but I think in the world where we find ourselves now—in particular with Meta out of the industry—the ability to accelerate the launch of a new digital community publication has been significantly set back. I fear that, while I expect we will see more local rural newspaper print closures, the business model now of starting up a digital publication is going to be more difficult.

Obviously, we are living proof that it is possible to create these kinds of publications and be sustainable.

**Mr. Martin Shields:** If you had one recommendation for the committee that you would like us to see, what would it be?

**Mr. Jeff Elgie:** Get Meta back.

**Mr. Martin Shields:** Mr. Palmer.

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** I would endorse that. Get Meta back.

**Mr. Martin Shields:** Mr. Hatfield.

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** Don't make news production follow the algorithm. We don't need news that is viral and emotionally activating. We need quality journalism.

**Mr. Martin Shields:** Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Martin.

I now go to the Liberals and Pam Damoff.

You have five minutes, please.

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

Ms. Donovan, my colleague Mr. Noormohamed asked you about the misogynistic hashtags that the Leader of the Opposition used, and you didn't get an opportunity to respond to that. I'd like to give you a chance to respond.

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** I had been researching Facebook for a very long time, and YouTube as well. When it comes to the misogynistic hashtags, it's not just that someone is using a hashtag. What a hashtag represents is a content tag that allows the algorithms to connect different pieces of content with each other. Anybody who is using that hashtag might get recommended to you as the next video op. Particularly, what we know about misogyny is that it's alive and well online.

The harassment of women, women of colour and women who are journalists is almost of an epidemic proportion. This is all about silencing women in their online fields. We have seen misogynistic attacks, and not just political ones. We do know that women and women of colour experience disproportionate harassment. It can also be a way to foment rage against women. We know that has happened numerous times through these misogynistic hashtags that create these online communities.

I want to take one second to address something that hasn't come up related to getting Meta back. Canada should be looking at rewarding non-profit news. In the U.S., if we were to turn many local publications into non-profits, they would stand a much better chance of sustaining their businesses if they were operating in that

model—and not just in the tax model but also in the model of what news is for, which is to serve democracies.

Thank you for allowing me to make that comment.

● (0945)

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** Thank you for your comments.

Mr. Riekeles, you talked about the funding that big tech is doing that is disguised as something quite innocuous. It really reflects similar tactics used by big tobacco in funding research on smoking and vaping. The anti-abortion movement also appeared to be funding innocuous organizations and crisis pregnancy centres.

Do you think there should be more transparency and disclosure in what big tech is funding?

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** Absolutely. Those parallels you point to are absolutely correct. This is about doing business in darkness. Democracy hurts in darkness, as we heard before.

First of all, I want to commend the House for doing this study. You are picking up a task where other parliaments have failed, notably, the European Parliament. Much of what is going on is the capture of our democratic processes and, to some extent, the corruption of our democratic processes. Corruption has a legal meaning and requires substantiating evidence for that. It also has other meanings, if you look at the dictionary, which are about manipulating processes, creating difficulties, etc. That's the way I'm using that word.

What we've seen in the EU are the unacceptable practices of subversion and influence over what is supposed to be democratic decision-making. This has been highlighted by the leading lawmakers involved. That is based on my own, but also on a Corporate Europe Observatory report on this. For instance, the Digital Services Act rapporteur wrote to the President of the European Parliament asking for action to be taken.

In earnest, nothing of consequence has happened. The real reason for that is that, due to a lot of this policy-making in the wider expert community, big tech's influences and subversion practices are in a sense *une histoire qui dérange*, an inconvenient story to avoid dealing with.

In my view, what needs to be done is to go much further in terms of transparency. Tech regulations today are often understood in terms of enforcing a strict competition regime or rules to keep privacy invading platforms in check. That is not enough. Regulations also need to be against the tech sector's capacity to influence private institutions, civil society and policy discourse.

This is what I call building an effective tech control system. For instance, in terms of transparency registers, one needs reporting. I would say reporting project by project, euro by euro. Interference strategies need to be systematically monitored and counted.

That's what happened, again, with the push-back against big tobacco. It wasn't—

**The Chair:** I must ask you to wrap up, please. We are well over time for this particular round.

Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

● (0950)

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** —just big tobacco. That involved public research programs and peer-reviewed journals and—

**The Chair:** Mr. Riekeles, I'm afraid that we are well over time for your answer. Thank you.

I'll go over to the Bloc for two and a half minutes, please.

Martin.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Martin Champoux:** Madam Chair, are we not at the beginning of the third round?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. We're going to a new round.

Rachael, you have five minutes, please.

I'm sorry about that. That was just a—

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Peter Julian:** On a point of order. I believe Mr. Champoux was mistaken, and it's his turn, and then mine.

[*English*]

I am challenging the chair.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** Who is challenging the chair? Is Martin challenging the chair?

**Mr. Martin Champoux:** No, no.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** I'm not really, but I wish that he hadn't corrected you.

**The Chair:** Okay. That means you do not have a two-and-a-half-minute round, Mr. Julian.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** Rachael, you have five minutes, please.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Thank you.

Mr. Palmer, in your opening remarks, you talked about the dangers of getting it wrong and the dramatic impact this could have on Canadians.

I'm wondering whether you could expand on that a little bit further.

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** Yes. The danger is that Canada is not an essential market. It's a good market for the major tech platforms—

however you describe them—but it's not critical. It's perfectly possible for platforms to simply not serve the Canadian market.

It's a bit of a danger with the really big platforms, such as Netflix, for instance, in the streaming sector, but I think it's really critical with the smaller and innovative services that are coming along. If the price of entry to the Canadian market becomes too steep for new services or for minority services, Canadians will suffer, because those will not align and act in Canada. If they're not available in Canada, then Canadians are losing out.

The primary purpose of the Internet is to be demand-driven and not supply-driven. The Canadian system is designed to be supply-driven rather than demand-driven. When that's applied in various sectors, one can see that Canada can lose out—and individual Canadians lose—from the lack of access to new products and innovation.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Mr. Palmer, I want to tap into this a bit further.

You said that choice needs to be preserved for Canadians in terms of their use of the Internet, but you also talked about its needing to be demand-driven. Do you want to explain a little bit more about what you mean by “demand-driven”?

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** The Internet makes the individual the curator of his experience. They can choose to watch videos on Instagram or TikTok. They can watch streaming services like Netflix. They can look for free. They can go for a paid subscription, etc. These are all possible. The critical fact is that it is the individual who chooses what they are going to see.

The traditional model of both print and broadcast programming or content is that it's a push. You get what they're offering, and that's all you get. You can switch from channel A to channel B, but you cannot choose what's going to be on channel A.

We get to choose now. We have a vast choice of products and services. We get to choose what we want to watch, when we want to watch it, how we're going to consume it and on what platform, etc. These are hugely freeing and liberating and individual self-realization steps that are critical, I think, to the kind of society we want to eventually have.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Mr. Palmer, in the nation of Canada, of course, within our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, section 2(b), freedom of speech is protected, which of course is the exchange of information. At the same time, it would seem that there's some appetite in the country for greater regulation among tech giants.

How do you balance that? How do you balance between the Internet being this vast and magical space where people have access to information and can curate that according to their desire and where the exchange of ideas can take place freely, and also wanting to make sure that people are able to do that in a way that is...? I don't know. Should they want to do that in a way that is safe?

● (0955)

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** I mean, “safe” has a number of definitions here. It is very difficult to be able to say when you shouldn't be able to access certain information or certain services. This is a dilemma that lawmakers and individuals are going to face constantly and chronically in this space.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Palmer.

I will now go to the Liberals with Anna Gainey.

Anna, you have five minutes, please.

**Ms. Anna Gainey (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.):** I'll cede my time. I really have no voice.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. You're still having problems with your laryngitis.

Go ahead, Michael Coteau.

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to go to you, Mr. Riekeles, for a perspective or maybe a bit of a brief on the history of what's taken place in Europe to combat intimidation, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and the promotion of hate through the different platforms.

Can you give us any advice from the successes and failures from Europe? What should Canada really be looking at to learn from what's taken place in Europe?

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** I think the headline reflection I have relating to advice is this: The idea that dealing with these issues has to be voluntary needs to be fought back against. I think this is very much the story of tech regulation since its inception, in a way.

In the case of platforms, we have in fact been leaving it in as a regulatory anomaly. If you go all the way back to the liability exemptions in the U.S. communications act, in section 230, and the corresponding rules in the e-commerce directive in Europe, this was an anomaly. If you go to the history of how one has been regulating communication, there have been two fundamental principles. One has been to protect the secrecy of one-to-one communications. The other principle has been to do public interest regulation of one-to-many communications.

There have always been battles around this, but that has been—

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** I'm sorry. Can you explain that further? I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I didn't understand that part. Can you explain that?

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** All right. I can try to explain it.

If you send a letter through the post office, that is private. It's one-to-one communication. Nobody has the right to open it. You can write whatever you want.

If you are broadcasting something on the radio, TV or Internet, then in principle, one should think, that's one-to-many communication. There is very strong public interest in setting the rules. While of course allowing for freedom of expression, which is constitutionally central in all our societies, still, the history of our society has been that one sets rules for the regulation of one-to-many communications.

When the Internet came, when you got the communications act and you got the e-commerce directive, one started to create exceptions from this, liability exceptions. This is the basic framework that has made it so that, if you are a press publisher, you have very strict rules that you need to abide by. If you are an Internet platform, where you are communicating information to perhaps many more people and making much more money from it, you have been largely exempted from this. I am—

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** I'm sorry to interrupt you.

Is that because regulators have failed to keep up with the technology, or has there been a conscious decision to ignore it?

● (1000)

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** I think it's very much a mix of that.

The Internet came to us with the idea that Internet equals democracy. Let it happen and it will do all kinds of good for our society. Of course, the benefits have been amassed in a number of areas, but clearly there are also things that haven't been that good.

I think that a lot of the ideology that accompanies it has been very strong in convincing lawmakers and policy-makers that one could live by a self-regulatory model. This is what you have seen being perpetuated throughout the history of tech regulation all the way to this day.

Just last week we got an agreement on the AI act in the EU. The reality of the matter is that most jurisdictions are going for voluntary solutions. That, of course, is what tech is pushing for all the time in its lobbying and in its efforts.

If there is any lesson, I would say that, on the EU side, we have two formidable pieces of legislation now, which are the DSA and DMA, but they're coming 10 years late. That is because when the issues of duty of care, for instance, with relation to information or commercial transactions online started being discussed, the answer was always, let's make this—

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** I think you're going to get cut off in a second, so I just want to say thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We were going to Mr. Champoux, but a vote is being called.

I would ask the committee if there is unanimous consent to go another 15 minutes.

**Mr. Kevin Waugh:** It's just the House resuming.

**The Chair:** Okay.

I'm sorry, Martin.

Go ahead. You have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Martin Champoux:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Listening to the answers, testimony and presentations of the witnesses today, and further to the discussions the committee began some time ago, I think that the idea of a fund, as we proposed back in 2019, was perhaps a better idea.

Perhaps it would have been more urgent to regulate hate content, the proliferation and freedom of movement of hate content, disinformation and misinformation on online platforms. We may have come at the issue the wrong way around, and now here we are with companies that are armed for combat, to say the least. The digital giants don't want to be regulated, and they have organized their opposition.

I feel an extremely difficult challenge lies ahead, and that is to adopt hate content regulations. It's crucial, but I think we're getting into something that's going to be extremely difficult.

Mr. Palmer, earlier you mentioned a fund that could ensure the viability of news in the regions, in media wastelands where coverage is very hard to maintain. How do you see this fund being established? Who's going to pay into it?

Yesterday, at another committee meeting, Rachel Curran of Meta said that news could come back on Meta's platforms as long as there's no regulation. I think that's not really acceptable, unless Meta makes a significant financial contribution.

Do you agree that online undertakings that share news content should contribute to the fund you mentioned to preserve news in the regions?

[*English*]

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** Frankly, I think you're right that the fund would be the best way to deal with the problems that Canadian journalism has at the moment. I think the most significant point is that it needs to be funded across the board.

Why did we focus only on Google and Facebook? Why did we ignore other platforms? Why did we not require that the levy be broader?

I think the whole business of privately negotiated deals fell apart on scrutiny. I think there needs to be a legally imposed levy on those who propagate further news access in Canada, and it should go into an independent fund.

• (1005)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Martin Champoux:** Thank you, Mr. Palmer.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Peter, you have two and a half minutes, please.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks to all our witnesses today. You've given us a lot of important material to digest. We greatly appreciate your expertise.

I wanted to go to Mr. Vranken and Mr. Riekeles. I haven't asked you a question yet.

I wanted to ask you two questions.

First off, does it make any sense at all that Canada subsidizes—indirectly—Meta and Google to the tune of over a billion dollars a year? This is something that is inexplicable—that we pay businesses to advertise on these two platforms—given the size and scope of the companies.

Secondly, what are the suggestions that you can give us in terms of tackling online harms legislation? The government has been very slow to introduce it. It is absolutely critical given the outbreak of far-right extremism that we're seeing and the far-right extremist violence provoked often by the algorithms that we're talking about. What are the lessons learned that we can take in Canada to ensure we have legislation that actually combats these online harms?

I'm starting with Mr. Vranken.

**Mr. Bram Vranken:** Many thanks for the questions.

I don't feel very well placed to answer the first question because I'm not familiar with the billion dollars in subsidies going to Meta, as I don't know the Canadian situation.

I will go into the second question on online harms and how to prevent them. The EU has now put a framework in place called the Digital Services Act, where these online platforms should meet a moderation policy and that moderation policy should be transparent. It should be, to a certain extent, accessible by internal independent audits—

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you. I'm sorry to cut you off.

I'm going to have to ask Mr. Riekeles the same question. I only have two and a half minutes.

**The Chair:** Mr. Riekeles, can you please answer what Mr. Julian is asking you?

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** May I simply ask which of the two questions he wants me to answer.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Both.

**The Chair:** You don't have a lot of time to answer both. You only have 30 seconds, so please answer quickly.

Thank you.

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** The quick answer is to say that I don't have detailed knowledge of the funds compensation that's being set up in Canada. It's not for me to comment.

What I can say in terms of payments to publishers in Europe is that it was addressed through copyright reform that created an ancillary right, which was essentially about creating a market. In a sense, if you give a property right to publishers over how content is used online, then you give them a position to negotiate.

How has that worked? I think it has led to negotiations in most cases, but it is also very clear that, in most of these situations, the *rapport de force* or the relative strength is extremely unbalanced. I think what a lot of publishers have come to experience is that they sit down around the table with Google or with Meta and ask, "How are we going to get paid for our content that you are using?" The answer is, "Of course we're going to pay you, but why don't you buy this service, that service and also this service and be part of this ad platform" for all that's worth.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Riekeles. Can you wrap up, please?

**Mr. Georg Riekeles:** In the end, it's a very unbalanced negotiation.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We now go to Mrs. Thomas for five minutes, please.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Mr. Palmer, I want to come back to our earlier conversation. You got cut off, unfortunately, in the questioning.

Then, Mr. Hatfield, I'm going to bring this question over to you with regard to an open Internet.

Mr. Palmer and Mr. Hatfield, there's a lot of conversation with regard to regulation around the Internet, of course, and I think a desire to protect people. My question is, what are the dangers when the government involves itself in protecting people from certain ideologies, certain beliefs, certain values or certain exchanges of information?

When the government determines that it is up to it to "protect" people from these things, what happens to us as a free society and to the exchange of ideas in innovation and creativity going forward?

• (1010)

**Mr. Philip Palmer:** The question you pose is a profound one, and I'm not sure that I can grow to the size and scope of it.

The question really is, what is the boundary between awful and lawful? There's a lot of crap on the Internet. There's a lot of misogyny, etc., but is that speech unlawful? Is it illegal? Should government be suppressing it?

I don't have all the answers on this, but certainly there's always a danger when we suppress speech—and particularly when government, which has an interest in how people speak and, particularly, speak about it, is empowered to suppress elements of speech—and that's regrettable.

It's a tremendously difficult balance to find, but it's a tremendously dangerous line on which government has to be respectful of rights.

Thank you.

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** It's a fair question.

I think lawful but awful speech is a lot of what many people experience daily on platforms that they don't like. There's always going to be quite a bit of that speech, and you really can't regulate away things that are functionally dog whistles, because people will just find new ways of expressing that.

When we're looking at how platforms influence the problem, we need to look at to what extent they reflect society and to what extent they are amplifying or driving some of these things. That's where greater researcher access to figure out the question of that is really important, but it's critical that we don't create a very censorious situation where the government indirectly forces platforms to remove a ton of lawful speech.

There's the potential for really critical social mobilization and conversations to be affected if we set out poorly designed regulation.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Thank you.

Mr. Elgie, I'll return to you here for a moment with regard to Bill C-18 and the impact that it is having. Now, I should clarify, because Bill C-18.... Meta opted out because they're no longer carrying news links. Google had a few demands of the government and, of course, the government entered into a backroom and created a deal with them, so we now have a Google deal. We don't have Bill C-18 being upheld by anyone.

Given the Google deal for \$100 million, how does something like this work to the disadvantage of innovative, new, local, independent or cultural media outlets?

**Mr. Jeff Elgie:** It's difficult to answer that in the absence of final regulations and an understanding of how the funds will be distributed, especially, as mentioned earlier, when you look at the scope of the organizations that are involved.

I would go back to saying that certainly the evacuation of Meta from the industry will, without question, disadvantage many small, start-up and independent publishers, because this was, in many cases, the on-ramp to their developing audiences, and it was a very efficient way in which to do that.

As well, with these kinds of programs and funding, because people have to apply to receive it, it tends to disadvantage, again, the start-ups, because people who have been in the industry, including us, will be advantaged because we get access to those funds very quickly, whereas sometimes the process can otherwise take years, potentially.

I do believe that the outcome will disadvantage start-ups in particular.

**Mrs. Rachael Thomas:** Thank you very much for your response.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We have bells, for the committee's information. I think that we have another 25 minutes before the vote. We have one more questioner, and that's Mr. Noormohamed for five minutes.

Do I have unanimous consent for him to ask his questions?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Mr. Noormohamed, you have five minutes, please.

**Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Again, thank you to the witnesses for being with us.

I want to ask a little bit about online rage farming and the role that platforms can and should or should not play, as the case may be, in trying to figure out how to be helpful.

I'm very reluctant. We've heard Mr. Palmer talk about this issue of how far you go and how far you do not go, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand how easily and quickly misinformation, particularly when it comes to angry misinformation, can spread—with deadly consequences in some cases.

We have seen people on the left and on the right. We have seen Liberal politicians and Conservative politicians in the country whose families are being attacked by folks as a result of what they've read or seen on the Internet as people build this sense of rage and anger.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about where you see it particularly, and maybe we can start with Mr. Hatfield and then move to Ms. Donovan.

Can you talk a little bit about where you see this rage usually coming from? What are the tendencies and the trends? How do the platforms advantage that and why?

Mr. Hatfield, you can start, and then we'll go over to Ms. Donovan.

• (1015)

**Mr. Matthew Hatfield:** It's a great question.

I think, in many cases, it's not that the algorithms are built to amplify rage, necessarily. It's that they're built to amplify engagement, and rage is one of the most powerful drivers of engagement.

I do think we need to look at what might need to change in algorithms to discourage those kinds of dynamics in some cases. I think we need to be very careful about not translating that into censoring people who believe they have a very legitimate social grievance, at this particular period. Having the government in the position of deciding that people shouldn't be expressing themselves that way is actually quite dangerous.

That's why I think having platforms obligated to explain how they manage content and, really, to report to their users and to a regulator what they're doing and the risks they think they're mitigating, and actually seeing some competitive pressure between different platforms to learn how to manage some of this better, would be good.

**Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed:** Ms. Donovan, I'll go over to you.

**Dr. Joan Donovan:** When I think about this, I think about classical social movement theory, where people are only going to be motivated to do something in this world if they feel that there is outrage and they hope for change. Often what we see online with rage baiting is this call to outrage that, in some instances, people are hoping will change ordinary citizens' behaviour.

If we think about the United Nations documentation on the freedom of expression, we have three rights with the freedom of expression. Of course, we have the right to speak; we can say anything whenever we want. We have the right to receive information. Let's say a forest fire is happening. Then we would hope that an information intermediary like Facebook would serve us news about how to be safe.

The last part of freedom of expression that we often forget, and it matters so much for how we understand social media and algorithmic amplification, is that we have the right to seek the truth. We have a right to the truth, and this comes from post-Holocaust political theorizing about what it means to seek the truth, about who has purchase on the truth and about how we arrive at truth.

Algorithms do not care if what you're posting is true or false. They also do not care if what you're posting is incitement to violence, because that's going to drive the rage, which is going to drive, as Matthew just said, the engagement. We have to really concentrate on rewarding platforms, and also journalism, that protect the right to seek information.

The last thing I'll say about that is what we need are roles that make sure people have TALK—which is timely, accurate, local knowledge. Those are the building blocks for democracies. Having an informed citizenry who is educated and who has access to our own heritage and histories is paramount in this moment. What social media has done, really, is inverted that need for society, commodified it and then mixed it with entertainment and rage bait.

• (1020)

**Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed:** In the last—

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Taleeb, I think we've come to the end of this.

I will now thank the witnesses for coming and spending two hours with us.

Thank you very much. You were very informative and insightful.

I would like to entertain a motion to adjourn.

Mr. Shields, do you have a motion to adjourn?

**Mr. Martin Shields:** I have a motion to wish everyone a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

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