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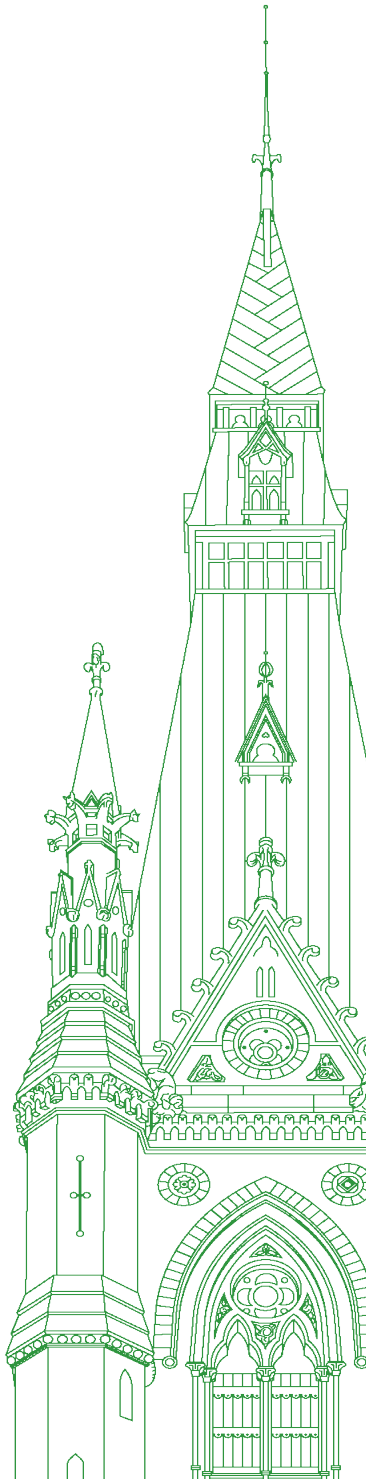

Chair: Chris Bittle

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Thursday, November 27, 2025

● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 15 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), the committee is meeting on its study of foreign election interference. We will go in camera at 12:30 to consider a draft report titled “Forms and Procedural and Interpretative Guidelines from the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner”. It's an excitingly titled report.

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

Before I continue, I would ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines. They are, of course, on the cards on the table. There is a short video; please watch it. All this is for the health and safety of everyone here, especially our interpreters.

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

If there are members on Zoom—which I don't believe there are—please use the “raise hand” function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

I would like to welcome today's panel. We have Charles Burton, senior fellow at Sinopsis; Emerson T. Brooking, director of strategy and resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council; Aaron Shull, managing director and general counsel at the Centre for International Governance Innovation; and Aengus Bridgman, director of the Media Ecosystem Observatory.

Each witness will have five minutes to make their opening statement.

We'll start with Mr. Burton, please.

Charles Burton (Senior Fellow, Sinopsis, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I've been asked to focus my presentation on the implementation of the foreign influence transparency registry. This is a subject I've covered extensively—from my June 2015 Globe and Mail piece, “The murky world of Chinese influence”, to five commissioned reports for global think tanks since 2017. More recently, I've detailed these issues in my book, released last month, entitled *The Beaver and the Dragon: How China Out-Manoeuvred Canada's Diplomacy, Security, and Sovereignty*.

Civil society groups, particularly the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project and the Canada Tibet Committee, have long lobbied for this registry. They viewed Australia's Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act 2018 as the model for what Canada could do, but the stakes are personal. Last December, Beijing sanctioned 20 Canadians associated with these groups, including me.

When Bill C-70 passed in June 2024, our reaction was enthusiastic. The Canadian Coalition on Human Rights in China, chaired by Alex Neve and Cheuk Kwan, and the Canadian coalition for a foreign influence transparency registry, led by Gloria Fung, engaged constructively with Public Safety Canada.

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you. When you're moving your papers, watch that you don't hit the mic. It really affects the interpreters, who are listening.

Thank you so much.

Charles Burton: Early meetings with associate assistant deputy minister Sébastien Aubertin-Giguère regarding the legislation were promising.

We expected a commissioner to be appointed rapidly via an order in council to begin the work of interpretation and implementation. We thought this would happen in the fall of 2024. Public Safety assured us that the registry would be operational by June 2025, a year after the law was passed unanimously in the House of Commons.

Instead, no commissioner was named in the fall of 2024. A year later, in August 2025, the Minister of Public Safety indicated that an appointment would be announced in September. That didn't happen either. We're now hearing that an appointment may occur before Parliament's winter break.

Recent briefings by Public Safety suggest a troubling shift. The commissioner may not have the kind of independence from the minister described in the legislation, Bill C-70, that would make it fully effective. We fear that the government will avoid making the strong senior appointment this role demands. I hope I'm proven wrong about that.

For the coalitions I work with, these unexplained delays feel like cynical stakeholder management rather than sincere consultation with Canadian Chinese and other stakeholders. There is growing sentiment in these groups and in the Chinese Canadian community in general that the government is cavalier about the impact of foreign interference on diaspora communities. The concern is that institutional resistance—or murky forces within the establishment—is stalling the registry. It appears that some current and former members of Canada's political elite fear transparency, lest it expose how they've been induced to serve a foreign state's agenda against the interests of Canada.

● (1105)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go to Mr. Shull next.

Aaron Shull (Managing Director and General Counsel, Centre for International Governance Innovation): Thank you, Chair, and members of the committee.

I'm going to focus my remarks on three things: first, the threat environment that led us to this moment and discussion; second, the core features of the made-in-Canada registry model; and third—probably most important for what I'm going to recommend that you focus on—key considerations for an effective, fair and timely implementation of the registry.

What led us here? I don't need to tell anyone in this room that there's mounting evidence of foreign interference, covert efforts to influence elections, intimidation and harassment of members of Parliament and diaspora communities, and covert funding networks and pressure campaigns. These are deceptive, coercive and covert activities done by foreign states and their proxies in Canada. To be clear, this is distinct from legitimate and open engagement, normal diplomacy, transparent lobbying and advocacy that's identified and accountable.

The central problem is not, therefore, foreign engagement per se, but foreign engagement that is covert, deceptive or coercive, and this is what the registry is designed to catch. The point is this: If you are acting in Canada at the direction of a foreign state to influence our political or government processes, the public has a right to know.

What are the core features of the made-in-Canada model? You addressed this in Bill C-70, and I thought you did a good job. There are three important features that I would call your attention to: one, a broad scope; two, an independent commissioner; and three, strong penalties.

The broad scope is that, if a person or entity in Canada enters into an arrangement with a foreign principal and carries out specified activities, they have to register. This is intended to capture both direct lobbying of public officials and indirect influence campaigns, which Justice Hogue specified, in her lengthy report, as one of the big areas. It's about closing gaps in Canadian law, so that's great.

The independent commissioner would administer the registry, issue guidance, conduct investigations, impose administrative monetary penalties and refer serious matters for criminal enforcement. This arm's-length model is a good one, and I testified on Bill C-70 a couple of times.

The strong compliance tools are administrative monetary penalties and criminal offences. The penalties for the criminal offences are no joke. They're not symbolic. The registry is designed to have real consequences for those who deliberately conceal foreign interference.

Now I'll go to the important parts for this committee: the implementation status and the practical challenges. Parliament provided a strong legislative framework, but the challenge is this: How do you implement it effectively?

I think there are a couple of key tasks you should focus on. Watch the establishment of the office of the commissioner to make sure they have sufficient resources, investigative capacity and technical support, and to make sure the regulations are finalized. How will things be reported? What exemptions exist? How will penalties operate in practice? Build a secure and user-friendly online registry for filing and public search, and then develop information-sharing practices among the commissioner, intelligence agencies and law enforcement.

I would recommend that you, first, clarify and make sure there's simplicity of obligations. Potential registrants need to understand, in super plain language, who has to register, what counts as an arrangement, what activities trigger registration and when and how to file. There must be clear statutory guidance, detailed regulation and practical examples.

Second, protect rights and avoid stigmatization. Many diaspora communities are both targets and victims of foreign interference, so make sure the registry is implemented in a way that focuses on behaviour and transparency, not ethnicity or origin, includes ongoing outreach to affected communities and provides clear avenues for questions, corrections and redress if people feel they've been treated unfairly.

Third, a big one, is to make sure there are adequate resources, staffing and investigative expertise; the ability to work closely—within legal constraints, of course—with CSIS and the RCMP; and clear policies for when to use administrative monetary penalties and when to do criminal referrals.

Last, but certainly not least, monitor the regime. Parliament should treat this regime as a living instrument and review it periodically, adjust the regulations if needed and, if necessary, amend the law to close any loopholes or to respond to evolving foreign threats and interference tactics.

I'd be pleased to answer any of the committee's questions or to assist in any way that supports the effective implementation of this regime.

● (1110)

The Chair: We'll now turn to Mr. Brooking for five minutes, please.

Emerson T. Brooking (Director of Strategy and Resident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council): Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today regarding the threat of foreign interference in the 2025 federal election. I'm especially pleased to offer my perspective as director of a U.S.-based research centre that counters online foreign interference and someone who has spent years working to uphold Canada's digital sovereignty, most recently as an associate member of the Canadian Digital Media Research Network.

I've overseen several election defence efforts this past year, including in France, Moldova, Poland and the United States. Canada's was unique. Canada is not the nation most targeted by foreign interference, but it has become a clear test bed for AI-enabled manipulation, and it is especially vulnerable to changes in the policies of large social media companies. Rules set in Silicon Valley have a clear and disproportionate effect on the Canadian public.

Let me give you an example. In July, the DFRLab identified 42 AI-generated YouTube channels posing as Canadian news sources and focusing extensively on allegations of voter fraud and especially on Alberta separatism. These channels used low-quality AI imagery, AI voices and AI scripts. One video, titled “Mark Carney Tears Up As Governor General Makes Shocking Ruling On Election Results”, received 220,000 views—a shocking number given the specificity of the topic.

I cannot say that this was a Russian or Chinese network. In fact, given the adjacency of these assets to Canada-related cryptocurrency scams, it may well have been financially motivated. What I am certain of is that this network—and there are many other examples like it—had more impact on Canadian public perception than activity by the Youli-Youmian WeChat account, which was the largest known state influence effort this election cycle, as attributed to them in April by the SITE task force.

Moreover, YouTube was slow to take action against this election delegitimization network and only did so after revising its policies on AI-generated content. It did not take action against this network because of any violation of its election integrity policies, although such a violation had almost certainly occurred.

Other platform policies compound these issues. If you were browsing Facebook in the lead-up to the election, the so-called Meta news blackout would have kept you from finding useful information from the CBC about election safeguards. Instead, you would have found AI-generated slop from the network I just discussed or even more damaging falsehoods. Our study of the spread of another YouTube video on Facebook, which falsely claimed to show Canadian poll workers stealing ballots, created a narrative that bled into X and generated at least 32,000 mentions and 135 million impressions on X between April 27 and April 30.

These were not exactly foreign influence operations. They were certainly the narratives that foreign actors found most compelling and would therefore amplify. Among foreign observers of the election, they also resonated disproportionately with Canadian election watchers in the United States. As this audience engaged with them, the narratives were amplified by algorithms of predominantly U.S.-based social media companies and served to a Canadian public that, in some cases, had been banned from accessing their own news sources.

Finally, because I've spent years studying U.S. election protection systems and Canada's parallel development of the rapid response mechanism and SITE task force, I want to conclude by acknowledging the judicious approach of Canada's election defenders. Even when you've identified clear state-linked activity, it is often the case that acknowledgement of that activity can have a worse impact on public confidence than the activity itself.

I believe that Canada's approach to public disclosures in 2025 compared favourably to that of the United States in 2024. Emerging election defence efforts in the European Union under the democracy shield would do well to look to Canada's example.

Thank you again for the opportunity. I look forward to your questions.

● (1115)

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. Bridgman, please. You have five minutes.

Aengus Bridgman (Director, Media Ecosystem Observatory): Thank you to the committee for the invitation.

I'm pleased to be here on behalf of the Media Ecosystem Observatory and the Canadian Digital Media Research Network, two entities that monitor the Canadian information environment, with a particular focus on trying to understand overall trends and information manipulation. My remarks are focused on the information environment generally and not on the foreign agent registry more specifically, given my expertise.

My hope is to talk about two things today. My first purpose is to talk about the 2025 election—with the scope and scale of foreign interference, as we typically think about it, and to contextualize it a little bit. My second purpose is to talk more generally about the vulnerabilities in the Canadian information environment—Emerson just alluded to some of them—that make this a pretty important moment for continuing to invest in and focus on protecting the information environment against foreign interference and, more broadly, information manipulation.

During the 2025 election, foreign interference was top of mind for Canadians. This came, of course, out of the commission on foreign interference. Over half of Canadians were particularly concerned about foreign interference—yes, from China, India and Russia, but the number one country was actually the United States. There was real concern.

We documented and catalogued different instances of foreign interference and information manipulation during the campaign. Overall, I would say the impact on the election was minor. There were several efforts, but they were small, sporadic, low-engagement and generally ineffective efforts. There's an important caveat that I'll talk about in a couple of minutes.

Generally speaking, U.S. political content coming from influencers, from officials and from the structure and shape of the information environment was far more impactful in the Canadian political discourse during the election. It was really the U.S. channel, and Canadians can correctly name that and are concerned about it.

That said, there were a number of institutional improvements during this past election, including the SITE task force and the regular communication with Canadians, the work of the research network, and the continuous monitoring and updating of the Canadian population, which were real strengths of the Canadian response. They helped blunt the limited FI activity. However, we are in a state today in which, while we can look at the past few elections and say there may not have been a determining impact on the election results, there are clear structural vulnerabilities.

There is a real crisis and failure of platform governance. There is very poor data access, very weak and inconsistent enforcement, and almost no transparency coming from the platforms. There's been a retreat from meaningful co-operation with civil society and government. It's a huge challenge. There are of course domestic vulnerabilities that amplify some of the FI risks: partisan echo chambers; online influencers without accountability, who are spreading huge amounts of misinformation in our information environment; and increasingly cheap and widely available digital manipulation tactics. This is part of technological acceleration.

We can talk about AI. We can talk about the ability to cheaply procure bots and artificial accounts across social platforms. Finally, we can talk about poor transparency, reporting and detection by platforms.

These are all vulnerabilities that we live with and that make work in this space incredibly difficult. They create an environment in which even small interference attempts can have second-order effects that rapidly change the discourse and potentially have huge impacts on the outcome of an election.

I have a single recommendation today—out of many. We are in a state in which there is such poor data transparency that, as the entity with the best data and the best ability to monitor FI.... I'm saying to you that we do not have sufficient access. It would have been very possible during the last election for something to occur that we were not able to detect. A major platform in the United States could have made a decision. There could have been a major campaign by Russia or China that was dissimilar to ones we've seen. I urge the committee to take mandated transparency seriously.

I'll leave it there.

The Chair: Thank you to all of our witnesses for being well within the five minutes.

We'll now turn to questions. We'll start with Mr. Cooper from the Conservative Party for six minutes, please.

● (1120)

Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Sturgeon River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Burton, regarding the endless delay around the implementation of the foreign influence transparency registry.

As you noted, Mr. Burton, the Liberals promised the foreign influence transparency registry would be up and running one year after Bill C-70 received royal assent. One year was up in June of this year. June came and went. It wasn't up and running. The minister said it would be up and running by September. September came and went. He then said December, yet we are almost in December, and no commissioner has been appointed. We have no registry.

I would note that under the legislation, the leaders of recognized parties in the House and the Senate must be consulted on the commissioner, and the appointment of the commissioner must be ratified in the House of Commons and in the Senate. A number of processes haven't happened.

Given that, it would seem to me that we have no idea when the registry will be up and running. Is that fair?

Charles Burton: Yes. The minister said it would be coming by the end of the year, in his most recent statement to a parliamentary committee. The Public Safety people have been briefing us that it will be coming next spring. There's a suggestion that there are long delays in appointing the commissioner, with the need for top secret security clearance and so on. When the government needed a fentanyl czar, they seemed able to do an order in council and get that person in place pretty quickly, so I'm puzzled as to why it takes so long for a commissioner.

I see the commissioner as key. If we get a strong commissioner, they can interpret the legislation—things like Senator Woo's concern about “in association with” and being clear on what it means.

What about people anticipating future benefits in the Chinese regime if they go along with a Chinese agenda, when they're in a position of public trust in the civil service or in Parliament? What about secondary influence? In other words, what if a Canadian company has extensive dealings with Chinese Communist business networks and then sponsors a research institution?

There are a lot of questions, and they really need a strong commissioner, in my view, on site and fully qualified to be able to sort them out. What seems to be happening now is that Public Safety is trying to come up with regulations and interpretations, which I believe will inhibit the potential independence of the commissioner in making the registry effective and getting names on the registry.

With that being said, in talking to John Garnaut, who was an adviser to a former Australian prime minister when they put together their act, the simple existence of a registry seems to have a dampening effect on politicians who might be induced to get into situations in which they become beholden to China or another foreign power, so we need this to exist.

We had an election after we heard from a security committee that a significant number of MPs, and a slightly larger number of staffers, appeared to be under the influence of a foreign power. It is outrageous to me that the election happened when we didn't have any means to go into it in a fair way. There was no way to ensure that Canadians were aware of people who may not have been entirely uninfluenced, who were unable to avoid the temptation of benefits from a foreign power or who were subject to very sophisticated engagement by Chinese entities.

Michael Cooper: First it was June. Then it was September, and then it was December. Now you're saying that, according to Public Safety officials, it will be in the spring. Who knows if it will be spring?

The Liberals have a long track record of opposition to setting up a foreign influence registry. They campaigned against it. They amplified Beijing's disinformation against Kenny Chiu after he brought forward a private member's bill to establish such a registry.

It seems to me that after years of opposing a registry, the latest tactic from the government is one of obstruction through endless delay. Is that fair?

● (1125)

Charles Burton: There is probably concern at the centre of government about prominent Canadians, possibly former senior officials, who might have to register because of ongoing relationships with the Chinese state. I have a notion of people who might fall into that category, but as long as we don't have a registry, we can't say for sure. It's a suspicion, but we really need a registry that makes it clear.

Let's bear in mind that nothing stops you or, say, the large number of prominent Canadians who suggested we should release Meng Wanzhou from putting a statement in the newspaper to that effect. We found out that Jean Charest was the recipient of a retainer from the Huawei company when he was involved in this activity; that's information I would have liked to know at the time.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Cooper.

We'll go on to Mr. Louis.

Tim Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga, Lib.): Thank you to all the witnesses.

It's clear that foreign states are actively seeking to influence Canadians and disrupt our elections, including through new technologies such as generative AI and deepfake impersonations.

During the 2025 election, for the first time, Canadians received weekly technical briefings from senior security officials, providing transparency and addressing concerns about foreign interference in real time. We also strengthened the legal framework by passing the Countering Foreign Interference Act, and we have the SITE task force, which expanded preparedness measures, and it runs scenario exercises, engages political parties directly and enhances monitoring. We hear today that the threats are evolving quickly.

I appreciate your time because we want to explore what we can do to secure our elections.

We've also heard in previous testimony and a study before about potentially labelling AI for political content, banning deepfake impersonations during campaigns, preventing foreign funding through third parties and closing loopholes that allow untraceable donations. I look forward to hearing and learning from your experiences and your research about what works, what can continue to work and where the gaps are.

Maybe I shall start with Mr. Shull from the Centre for International Governance Innovation.

I appreciate your thoroughness. You summed it up quite nicely. We need a broad scope, an independent commissioner and strong compliance tools with penalties and consequences.

Maybe I'll start with some things you talked about for implementation. You talked about more information sharing between organizations. Can you give some examples of what has been working and some examples of things that can be improved, where there was not the right level of information sharing?

Aaron Shull: Sure. Information sharing in the national security environment is always a bit of a tricky thing. This is partly owing to its historical nature and partly due to the fact that the goalposts have shifted. It used to be spy versus spy; now Canadians—individuals—are in the crosshairs of foreign adversarial actors. That is a new phenomenon. For businesses, especially when it comes to cyber-espionage and cyber-enabled intellectual property theft, this is also relatively new. We're now in a moment when the tools of the trade are shifting, and maybe they are shifting a little bit slowly.

The point I would raise for this committee is, if you're focusing on what you can do.... I appreciate my colleague's point about surveillance capitalism and the business model of large platforms. If we could deal with that, we would have done so. What you can do practically is put pressure on to get the registry set up. The biggest piece of advice I would offer is to make sure it's resourced properly and you have good investigative capacity.

As for your question on information sharing, make sure the information is flowing between the agencies and the commissioner's office. The absolute worst possible outcome is that we go through all of this effort, we get Bill C-70 passed, we do these thoughtful studies and then the first prosecution collapses. The message this would send to adversarial state actors is not good.

I would say to put the pressure on and get this thing set up. You never want to deliver a birthday cake the Tuesday after a Saturday birthday. Let's get it done and make sure it's resourced properly.

Tim Louis: You mentioned the online registry. You talked about balance—about protecting rights and avoiding stigmatization while at the same time making sure Canadians are protected. You said we need to be very clear on who has to register, when to register and how to register, and to give examples.

Is someone else doing this, so we can look at a model? Do you have ideas in that sense?

● (1130)

Aaron Shull: The models everyone will go to are those of the United States—they've been doing it since the thirties—Australia and the U.K.

When it comes down to it, it's about being crisp about the fact that we're not talking about communities; we're not talking about individuals. We're talking about people who are in association with a foreign principal to undertake activities in Canada. It is country-neutral; it does not matter which country we're talking about. That's the thing we need to make clear.

As for my point about the online portal and registration, we have to make it practical; we have to make it doable and easy for people to do, because what we want to be able to do.... It's like Al Capone. They didn't catch Al Capone for murder; they got him on tax evasion. The point is to figure out who's doing this stuff, and then you can nick them for not registering. Make the process easy so that there's no possible defence, such as that they couldn't possibly have registered because the website didn't work.

Make it super easy so that you can find out who's not registering, and then hit them as quickly as you possibly can with an administrative monetary penalty, a notice of non-compliance and then, if they mess around, a criminal sanction.

Tim Louis: I appreciate that.

Another thing you mentioned was that this needs to be reviewed periodically. As we're hearing from all of our witnesses, this is a fast-changing ecosystem. How is it possible? Is it through regulations? Is it through an order in council? How do we adapt and change? What are some of your suggestions in a system that, as you said, is moving so quickly?

Aaron Shull: There are three things.

The first is that having a thoughtful commissioner is a great way to do it. The Privacy Commissioner is a good example. When the Privacy Commissioner of Canada introduces an interpretive bulletin under PIPEDA, people pay attention—they're good. We should have a thoughtful commissioner who can interpret some of the grey areas in a crisp way.

The second is regulation and making sure you have the requisite regulatory authorities. The third is not being scared to revisit the law. We tend to treat laws like tombstones—they're never going to change. The point is that the world is changing at a good clip, so don't be scared to revisit them if you need to.

Out of all the laws that are currently and have recently been on the books, this is the one that every single party has an interest in. It is about democratic integrity. It is about the future of the country and the state of Canada.

The Chair: Before I turn to Madame Normandin, I'll note that questions will be coming in French, so all the witnesses should either have their earpiece in or be tuned to the English channel in Zoom to make sure English is coming through if you need interpretation.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here. We appreciate it.

Mr. Bridgman, it's good to see you again. We crossed paths at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Parliamentary Assembly a year ago.

You talked about the fact that the United States is a major player when it comes to foreign interference; people tend to forget that. My question may be a philosophical one, but I'd like to hear your opinion on the nuance between foreign interference and foreign policy. You talked about the importance of having access to data and transparency, among other things. Is the distinction between foreign policy and foreign interference based on the container, that is, the media used to send the information or the source of the information?

I would like you to give me a general answer.

Aengus Bridgman: That's a very good question.

I think the difference is whether or not it's done in secret, whether or not it's visible, or whether or not Canadians know what's going on.

Finally, we have a general idea about the platforms and the influence that comes from the United States. My team and I work very hard every day to discover the dynamics and processes. However, at the end of the day, we're very limited by the access the platforms give us. That said, we can get a sense of it. I'll give a very good example: When it comes to platforms, there have been two major changes in the past two years.

The first is the removal of traditional media from Meta, Instagram and Facebook. There isn't any news on those platforms anymore. This was an important decision that had huge impacts on our democracy, on the way Canadians consume information online. However, unless you do very extensive research, it's impossible to know which media is there, which media is included and which is excluded. It changes all the time. Many small news groups or small news organizations provide information on those platforms. It's hidden, it isn't transparent.

The second is the change to the social media network X. A report we released this year showed that conservative voices on that platform had increased by about 50%. That dynamic is unique to that platform. It's true that it's partly due to the change in Canadians' behaviour, but it's also due to a change in the platform's algorithm. That didn't happen just in Canada; it also happened in Germany and the United States. Those are changes for which there isn't any transparency. That gives the United States tools to transform our system. However, there is no oversight and no governance. This is the exception, but it's an unregulated industry, and we're living with the consequences of that right now.

● (1135)

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Mr. Bridgman.

Mr. Brooking, you talked about the fact that Canada was a kind of test bed for artificial intelligence, particularly in the 2025 campaign. Why is Canada particularly vulnerable compared to other countries? Is it because there are gaps in oversight? Is it because it's a middle power, which means that it's less monitored by like-minded countries? What makes Canada more vulnerable?

[*English*]

Emerson T. Brooking: Very much picking up on Dr. Bridgman's answer, I would say it is the interrelation between the U.S. and Canadian information environments. Many of the same heavily AI-focused and AI-driven influence networks that target Canada also have some origin and overlap in their targeting of U.S. citizens. Essentially, we share a common information space. Canada has had the most recent election; this election overlapped in many ways with other points of foreign policy tension between the United States and Canada, and there were political partisans in the U.S. who were especially interested in the Canadian election. These factors, I think, contributed most to making it a sort of test bed.

We've looked out across the constellation of foreign interference efforts over the past year, and as I said, there are not as many examples of, say, a clearly organized campaign originating in Moscow or Beijing targeting Canada. However, there are very clear examples of harmful and widely shared narratives—false and undermining Canadian election integrity—that were spread on these platforms and then most likely spread opportunistically by foreign actors.

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Quickly, what were the main sources of interference and attempts to use artificial intelligence during the last campaign? Where did that come from? You may have already said, but I missed it.

[*English*]

Emerson T. Brooking: It's difficult to link AI use to a particular campaign. I would say that we observed it first in the context of financial fraud, actually. We noticed a number of deepfake videos of Prime Minister Carney and other candidates in which they would be promoting certain websites or products, which would lead people down a scam journey.

Although the intent may have been financial fraud, it was also deeply politically charged and amplified, and not just in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Calkins, please, for five minutes.

Blaine Calkins (Ponoka—Didsbury, CPC): The first question is for Mr. Burton.

In October 2024, Brookfield Asset Management brokered a $256-million loan with the Bank of China while the current Prime Minister was the chair of that company.

In light of what we know about China cultivating business ties with senior policy-makers and business leaders, would you classify this as a classic example of elite capture?

Charles Burton: I am concerned about this. It's similar to our appointment of Dominic Barton as the ambassador to China. What if the prime ministership is a transitional job for Mr. Carney, and he returns to business afterwards? The Chinese will naturally take into account what sorts of policies he engaged in with regard to China while he was in that position.

I'm not suggesting that Mr. Carney is consciously preparing for this, but the effect is the same. One is concerned about matters like this and his previous connections with the Chinese regime. His current policies, which emphasize promoting Canadian prosperity through seeking to expand Canadian exports into the Chinese market, mean we aren't implementing the registry, we aren't dealing with Chinese espionage in Canada and we're not taking effective measures against agents of the Chinese regime who are involved in intimidation and harassment activities in our country and so on. The Chinese note that.

If you look at the impact of our not implementing the registry from the Chinese government's point of view, I think they welcome it and see it as similar to the Uyghur resolution, which the Prime Minister and the entire cabinet didn't vote in favour of. They think we don't really mean it; we're not actually going to do it, and they'll continue to engage in their influence activities in Canada unhindered.

The other country we have to look at is the United States, which has increasing doubts about the integrity of Canada as a country that has not been infiltrated by China or other states. We could run into problems with whether we're going to continue in our role with the Five Eyes and the extent to which the United States feels it can share information with us without it being leaked to the PRC. There are a lot of implications in what you're saying. It's a very complicated question.

● (1140)

Blaine Calkins: I understand. It's a very complicated position that Canada finds itself in right now.

You intimated in your testimony, Mr. Burton, that the eagerness with which the Minister of Public Safety and the government went about passing Bill C-70 seems to be dissipating. Time has gone by, and we have no appointed commissioner. You intimated that there seems to be some softening in the implementation and the approach the government is going to take, if they ever eventually get around to appointing a commissioner.

Do you think this is because of pressure from Beijing? The Taiwanese have warned us very much that this is exactly the way the PRC does its business. Do you think this registry is being compromised as part of a larger influence campaign from China?

Charles Burton: Whether it's active or passive is another question, but I agree with the recent statements by the leader of the Taiwan delegation here in Canada, by Michael Kovrig and by others that we have a problem of evidently responding to Chinese agendas in Canada.

This is an ongoing process. In other words, the infiltration gets deeper and deeper as time goes on. China is becoming more and more aggressive. We're seeing concerns about Chinese infiltration into Canadian infrastructure. The lead story in the National Post today was about the possibility of Chinese sabotage of our water supply by working with the filtration stations.

It's not just the water. It's the EVs. All sorts of areas suggest that a future conflict with China will not be about buildings blowing up in faraway countries. It will be that the ATMs won't work anymore. The electricity will turn off. Real Canadian citizens will suffer real consequences from China's cyber-infiltration into our system, which appears to be an ongoing matter.

Blaine Calkins: Thank you for those answers, Mr. Burton.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Calkins.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brière, you have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière (Sherbrooke, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Bridgman, during the 2025 election, political influencers accounted for nearly half of all the political content that was published. Beyond the volume of content, those political influencers were also garnering attention. Some of you mentioned in your opening remarks that Canadians are not only worried and skeptical, but also vulnerable. You also mentioned that there were structural vulnerabilities in the Canadian system and a failure in governance. Knowing that those influencers' platforms are unregulated, I'd like to know what we could do, formally, to regulate them and protect ourselves.

● (1145)

Aengus Bridgman: That's an excellent question.

I'll start my answer by saying that influencers are here to stay. Right now, that's how young people take an interest in political content, and that will continue. It's true that our research team observed a shift in mindset in 2025. More than half of political content and engagement was playing out that way. This is a dynamic that's being observed around the world, not just in Canada. There has been a shift in the way information is consumed. That isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it's important to be careful.

During an election, there are certainly a lot of rules surrounding spending limits and what can be said or promoted during a campaign. Influencers are like a new entity. They're different from traditional media and organizations, but they have a much deeper impact on the opinions and behaviours of Canadians. That means it's important to think about how the law will deal with that. How will it treat this new group, which has much more influence than all the other groups, but which isn't regulated in the same way?

Here's an idea. Lauren Southern appeared before the committee one year ago. She's a major Canadian-born influencer, but she now lives in the United States. She was involved in the Tenet Media scandal; some $10 million originally from Russia had been used to support a group of influencers in Canada and the United States. In her testimony, she said that she was just a small media organization with little money. She said that was her position in her remarks. Okay, but if she's a real organization, if she's a company, and if she pays taxes to the Canada Revenue Agency, then she isn't just an influencer. We have to stop thinking about an influencer as a single person. In fact, influencers have editors, researchers and an entire infrastructure. It's true that, in Canada, there's less money in all of this and there are fewer people like that. However, in the United States, an influencer is a media outlet. When people talk about Joe Rogan, they're talking about not just Mr. Rogan, but also his entire team and all the infrastructure behind him. In fact, he and his team have more impact on American politics than all the rest of the media and all the other traditional actors.

Personally, I think it's really worth reflecting and taking action to formalize or limit the role of influencers in the ecosystem. I think a good start would be to do so through the Canada Elections Act.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you very much for your comments.

Mr. Brooking, would you like to add anything?

[*English*]

Emerson T. Brooking: Picking up on these excellent points, I would first observe that with the changing landscape and the impact of influencers, revisiting the utility of such things as a ban on formal political advertising or electioneering is also required, simply because these sorts of rules are not evenly applied against the most consequential actors in this space today.

Finally, I'd add that another way to begin to get at this problem is actually via the foreign influence transparency registry. I understand that this is principally a tool to control or understand formal state lobbying, but it could also be applied in some instances when there are particular influencers in the space who are clearly advancing a foreign state agenda.

● (1150)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will turn to Madame Normandin. I will use my discretion since we are merging two sections.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for five minutes.

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Burton, you talked a lot about the registry of foreign actors, but I'd like you to talk to us about something that may be a blind spot. I know you have covered this topic before. I'm talking about the acquisition of companies by foreign actors. We know that there aren't really any private companies in China; everything is connected to the state.

I'd like you to talk about the risks of not better regulating the acquisition of Canadian businesses by Chinese actors. It's also a matter of bringing Chinese technology into the country. Think of electric vehicles, which are now outright espionage tools, depending on how they are used. We saw that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police acquired drones made in China. Is this a blind spot that should be addressed?

[*English*]

Charles Burton: It's an excellent question. You're right. I have written about this.

Since 2009, I've published over 200 pieces in the Canadian national press. I'm not sure how much influence they've had on Canadian government policy, but I keep trying.

We have to understand that any Chinese business is part of a coordinated complex led by the Chinese Communist Party. As the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, said, the party is in charge of everything. Any investment also involves the party, the military, the security agencies and the government. They're all coordinating together. That's really why you see such an excellent discount on the sale price of Huawei technology. One assumes that they factor in the opportunities for intelligence and data collection when they sell it.

There's a lot of Internet of things stuff going on. The U.S. is concerned about TP-Link routers, which are considerably cheaper. When I heard about this, I smashed mine with a hammer, but the one I had to buy to replace it was four times the price of my excellent TP-Link router.

There are concerns about this, in all investment. Is there something else? If China wants to buy a money-losing gold mine up north, you find that it's quite close to a NORAD facility and has an outlet into the Northwest Passage. The mine was losing money, so why did they want it? All of these kinds of investments are tricky.

The problem is how we determine whether an enterprise is in fact operating under the influence of a hostile foreign power or simply ethnic Chinese people who want to make a good investment. I think we need to look at that carefully. Of course, we don't want to be involved in discriminating against Canadians simply because of their ethnic origin, but it's a serious matter, and we're clearly not sufficiently on top of it. We need to put a lot more resources into protecting Canadian national interests.

It's really like a game of go. The Chinese are putting down tiles everywhere, and eventually they're going to encircle us. It's just a matter of time. The process happens because we don't really fully appreciate their overall planning.

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

Mr. Shull, I would like you to tell us about Canada's position. The registry still isn't effective, but the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States have one. Canada is clearly lagging behind when it comes to the registry of foreign actors. How does that position Canada, considering that it's part of the Five Eyes?

Aaron Shull: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

Not well.

I don't know. I'm not security-cleared. I'm just some guy, so I have no idea, but I can't imagine it's helpful.

The other thing we don't have is a national security strategy. In your last question, you were talking about strategic state behaviour. At the risk of stating the obvious, I think strategy begets strategy. In order to respond, one needs a strategic framework. Our last national security strategy was done in 2004, and it has not been updated since. If we're talking about gaps and things we might want to get our hands on, I would start with a strategic framework, where this is all linked.

I have a hard time seeing differences among traditional national security, economic espionage, data governance, the spy and cyber stuff. It's all part of the same thing now. Strong states are going to do what strong states do. They've been doing it since the dawn of time. This is perfectly logical behaviour. We need to respond with a strategic framework too.

● (1155)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to MP Jackson for five minutes.

Grant Jackson (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thanks, Chair. I appreciate that.

To all the witnesses, it's nice to meet you, some of you virtually, some in person. Thank you for being here today and sharing your expertise.

I have to admit, as a new member of Parliament, that all of this is quite concerning to me, particularly as a young Canadian. The more I hear from experts with various perspectives on this issue, the more I find that government as a whole has left Canada—particularly young Canadians—very vulnerable to the influence, whether passive or not, of foreign actors who are not our friends and who have no interest in doing us any favours. I'm very alarmed by this.

In particular, my perspective is that of one of the few members of Parliament from gen Z; we get all our news from social media. None of us is going to cbc.ca—or very few of us are. Most don't follow the mainstream media. I would argue that's probably similar for diaspora communities; they predominantly favour other types of information sources to get their news.

We have a question about how active foreign operators are in those spaces and what, if anything, is being done to govern that to ensure that we're getting the truth and not necessarily what some foreign country wants us to believe.

I'll start with Mr. Shull and Mr. Burton on that front.

Aaron Shull: It's a great question.

You don't have to take my word for it. Justice Hogue, in the long and thoughtful study she did, identified the information ecosystem as the primary threat to Canadian democracy, and that's because adversarial states are leaning into it.

However, the original sin is the business model of the platforms. They're commercializing and harvesting intention. They're using sophisticated behavioural targeting ads to persuade you. These are persuasion machines, and they're not broken. This is the way they were designed. This is the way they were built. We have individualized ad cocktails that are being served up, and this is breaking people's attention spans. It's actually making us generally stupider.

This is the thing. This is all set to get way worse. The trend lines don't look good, so intervene where you can. The problem we're going to bump into is large incumbent players with lots of dough and super sophisticated lobbyists thinking everything is just fine. They don't care about any of the stuff I just said.

Add to that the fact that we still have reptilian brains, so we're easy to persuade. Add to that the fact that we have charter protections. Freedom of expression is a real thing, so people are allowed to say stuff, and you also have the right to be wrong. It's a cacophony of issues.

I can't settle this in 45 seconds, because it's super complicated, but as a starting point for this committee, if we can get this registry thing sorted, it's one thing you can tick off your list that will be helpful.

Grant Jackson: Mr. Burton, I'm going to add something to my question for you to answer.

We know that WeChat, for example, is a very popular PRC-linked social media platform, and it promoted Prime Minister Carney and the Liberal team during the last election.

I wonder, specifically with respect to this, what connections you draw for something my colleague Mr. Calkins mentioned: the $276-million loan Mr. Carney secured prior to his winning the Liberal leadership. Do you think there's a connection at all between the November deal and winning the Liberal leadership, as well as this happening during the April election campaign?

Charles Burton: Are you young enough to use TikTok? TikTok not only sucks up a lot of information about you, Mr. Jackson, but also shapes your opinion through very cool, short pieces that target you specifically, based on an understanding of the kind of stuff you would buy into. It's an extremely sophisticated and subtle mechanism.

In terms of WeChat, the language of my home is Chinese. I use WeChat every day because it's the only way I can communicate with my former colleagues and classmates from my education in China. It is clearly very sophisticated in the same sort of way. It sets out messages that are pro-PRC, and it's active here in Canada. Ashbury College in Ottawa not only has an Ashbury College WeChat site, but has, for every single grade, a WeChat site to speak to Chinese parents in the Chinese language.

I would never put anything on WeChat that would be in the slightest way political. You can see that the degree of specificity of this technology—I don't think it's from humans, but from algorithms—is staggering. We should be worried about it.

I was very much involved in the Kenny Chiu matter, in which similarly anonymous Chinese sources were very sophisticated in their manipulation of people's attitudes towards this candidate.

● (1200)

Grant Jackson: My friends think I'm a dinosaur because I don't have a TikTok account.

Am I out of time? I'm sorry, Chair.

The Chair: You're out of time, and it's not because you called the rest of us old in a very diplomatic way.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I feel that, though. I resemble that remark.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lauzon, you have the floor for five minutes.

Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for being here today.

Today, I have the honour of replacing a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, so I'm revisiting my old passions.

Mr. Bridgman, based on your research, what is Canada's actual capacity to resist election disinformation? Are negative campaigns about interference sometimes used or exaggerated by political parties themselves? Could that disinformation become a tool during the election campaign?

Aengus Bridgman: Thank you for those good questions.

I can't answer the question about the capacity to resist election disinformation, because my security clearance doesn't allow me to know everything. I have read the reports that have been published, and I can say that, internally, Canada is certainly able to identify disinformation and share information about it.

I'm more of an expert on what's possible for Canada's universities and citizen groups. We have a real capacity. We look at what's happening online, we conduct analyses and we communicate that very well. In fact, we have some of the best capacity in the world to do that kind of research and analysis. That's largely thanks to the Canadian Digital Media Research Network.

We have a lot of capacity, but it should be noted that the data we can access and our ability to understand the situation are really limited because of the platforms' decisions. A very relevant example is the platform X, which decided this week to publish the location of all accounts on its platform. We don't know exactly how it goes about accurately finding an account's location, as well as its definition. For example, the CBC was located in the United States, and tons of accounts were identified in different places. That doesn't mean the CBC is located in the United States; that isn't true. It's also a matter of transparency. We need to know how the platform made that decision. We lack the real-world data to do that properly, to properly protect Canadians from efforts to manipulate information. That's my answer to the first question.

It's a lot harder to answer the second question. Are political parties using information manipulation tools, the tools and capabilities of these platforms, and our current ecosystem to manipulate Canadians' opinions?

I personally think that politics is an exchange of values, a debate on public policy, and an effort to convince Canadians of what's real and what isn't. For our part, our research doesn't focus on political parties or politicians. It's up to you to convince Canadians. However, it's certain that, from time to time, these manipulations manage to convince members or political parties of something that isn't real. That means that you yourselves are also victims of all these dynamics. I'm not going to say that one party or another is spreading disinformation, but you are victims of it as well. I know you don't want to lie to Canadians; that's fundamental. That's the way to think when it comes to believing in democracy. I don't think our system is set up so that you have enough information to react properly, communicate properly, and know if something is true or an effort by a person or a state to convince you of something that isn't real.

● (1205)

Stéphane Lauzon: I don't have much time left, but I think your answer was very comprehensive.

In closing, do you believe that politicians are dramatizing or exploiting the concept of interference for certain supporters? You sort of gave us the answer, but we feel that it will be important to be more vigilant during future campaigns. Do you agree with me?

Aengus Bridgman: It will absolutely be important to be vigilant. It can very easily be an attempt at interference. The appearance of interference can be more powerful than interference itself. That's kind of what happened last year in Kirkland Lake, so yes, that's a danger.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go to Mr. Cooper next. We'll do six minutes, six minutes and then three and a half before we go in camera.

Mr. Cooper, go ahead, please.

Michael Cooper: Mr. Burton, I'd like to get your thoughts on something you referenced—that is, this government's pursuing a strategic partnership with the PRC.

During the English-language leaders debate in the last federal election, Mark Carney said that the PRC is Canada's biggest security threat. He went on to say that it is “one of the largest threats with respect to foreign interference”. Consistent with this, the director of CSIS stated just two weeks ago that the PRC is a major threat to Canada's security because of its foreign interference activities, yet we have Mark Carney's foreign affairs minister talking about a “strategic partnership” with the PRC, including on matters of security.

How can we square, on the one hand, Mark Carney's saying that the PRC is Canada's biggest security threat, backed up by CSIS, and on the other, all the while, his government's pursuing a strategic partnership with a hostile foreign state that is a threat to Canada's security?

Charles Burton: It's a great question. The strategic partnership agreement was signed between Canada and China in 2005. I opposed it at the time. Then, when we had the Indo-Pacific policy come up, all of a sudden we forgot about strategic partnerships and talked about disruptive forces in affairs. Now we have the strategic partnership back, articulated by Minister Anand and the Prime Minister, as you said.

The Chinese interpretation of a strategic partnership goes along with the other stuff that the Prime Minister, in his meeting with the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, and that indeed Deputy Minister David Morrison in his speech to the celebration of China's National Day last September...which is that we are buying into the Chinese language about being pragmatic and constructive, as well as their other language about seeking common ground while setting aside differences.

By using this language, we're essentially saying that we're going to do Canada-China relations in the way China wants to do it. The idea of having a partnership with a country that the Commons, through a unanimous resolution, determined was engaged in genocide and facilitates third world dictatorships by providing them with Chinese surveillance technologies and all the other things China does—menacing Taiwan, the abrogation of the Hong Kong agreement and so on—is completely extraordinary to me. I mean, are we partners? I don't want to be partners. I don't feel that Canada should partner up with a regime whose values are so discordant with what makes our country great.

Michael Cooper: To shift gears a bit, other than in the United States, the PRC has the largest number of accredited diplomats in Canada. The PRC's diplomatic presence is significantly larger than the presences of such countries as India, Japan, the United Kingdom and France. In fact, in 2023, for example, the PRC had 176 diplomats in Canada compared with 178 diplomats in the United States. By the way, the United States is the PRC's top trading partner and most popular immigration destination for PRC nationals. Still, they had only two more Chinese diplomats than Canada, notwithstanding that the United States is 10 times larger.

Should the size of the PRC's diplomatic mission in Canada be of concern? Why do you think the PRC has such a large diplomatic footprint in Canada?

● (1210)

Charles Burton: I mean, Japan has 40-some. India has 30-some. The U.S. has, as you said, 176. We don't have anything like that number of diplomats in China. Why isn't it reciprocal?

When they're accepted by Canada, diplomats are supposed to provide what diplomatic function they will be maintaining. The question is, are Chinese diplomats so inefficient that they need large numbers to engage in legitimate diplomatic function, or is it that about 70% of them are engaged in espionage, influence operations, harassment of Canadians of Chinese origin and other things that are not consistent with their diplomatic function? I would like to see their cohort cut down to the number they need to function in a diplomatic way.

In Ottawa, it's not just that former convent on St. Patrick Street. They have other buildings in our city to accommodate the large number of Chinese operatives, not to speak of proxies being run by Chinese diplomats in these so-called police stations, which are similarly engaged in activities that I believe are in violation of Canadian law. The perpetuators should be made accountable for that.

We're not expelling people who I believe CSIS knows are espionage agents. The only one we expelled was Zhao Wei after it was exposed in the press that this gentleman had been involved in activities to pressure the family of Michael Chong.

I just don't want any Chinese spies to be operating freely in our country. The fact that we don't expel any of them and that we don't make any of them a *persona non grata* or bring their proxies to Canadian courts to be made accountable for these alleged activities sends a signal to China that Canada is open territory for this kind of thing. It also sends a signal to the United States that Canada is open territory for Chinese infiltration: Can the United States trust us in important collaboration on security and military issues?

The Chair: Thank you for finishing your answer at exactly six minutes. That was exceptional work.

Mr. Louis, go ahead, please. You have six minutes.

Tim Louis: Thank you to our witnesses.

I'll focus my questions, from the top, on Mr. Brooking from the Atlantic Council, the director of strategy.

You had an article entitled “Deepfake video of Canadian Prime Minister reaches millions on TikTok, X”, and you noted that, both during and after the 2025 election campaign, a video circulated on social media of Prime Minister Carney “announcing controversial auto regulations”. Can you explain the relevance of that video? Specifically, where did it come from, what happened after it was published and how extensively was it amplified?

Emerson T. Brooking: Absolutely, I can. We do not know the exact origin of that video. As I alluded to in my earlier comments, its most likely origin is...focused on financial fraud. We know that the video spread rapidly. That was one of numerous examples, featuring primarily Prime Minister Carney but also other Canadian political figures, in which they were essentially.... There were AI voices and scripts being used to sell particular products and direct people to click on links to then go down rabbit holes for further fraud.

What struck us most, though, was just how widespread the sharing patterns around this content were, as well as the slowness, on the part of platforms, to limit the spread. They should have limited it either because it was a clear scam or because it was politically oriented, but this was not a factor in their content moderation decisions.

Tim Louis: The phrase that comes to mind is “trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube”. Once information is out, it's really difficult to contain. However, it sounds to me as though, if we could talk to the source—the social media platforms themselves—that would make more sense. I believe it was Mr. Bridgman who said that these are the consequences of their not being regulated. What pressures are being put on these social media platforms to regulate, specifically during elections?

I'll ask Mr. Brookings. I referenced Mr. Bridgman, but I'll get back to him. I'm sorry.

● (1215)

Emerson T. Brooking: I would say that this is an especially difficult question because Canada has placed pressure on the platforms. In fact, from our assessments in both 2019 and 2021, platforms were actually more keyed in, because of these pressures, to take proactive action—or at least quick action—when something was obviously undermining Canadian election integrity. It's my sense that the broader political conditions in 2025 made it so that some previous commitments, voluntary commitments that these platforms had made, were no longer in force. In that environment, one has to turn to law and statutory mechanisms to try to compel the same co-operation.

Tim Louis: I will turn to Mr. Bridgman. To that point, there's legislation, regulation and enforcement—there's a balance of all three. We see it's not possible to move legislation as quickly as the manipulative digital tools that could affect our free elections.

You briefly mentioned the Canada Elections Act and possibly looking at that. Can you expand on what types of legislative changes can be used in such a fast-moving ecosystem?

Aengus Bridgman: I'm not an expert on the Canada Elections Act. I was specifically referring to influencers with regard to that, as well as speech and promotions during elections. There is what can be done in the immediate term, what can be done in the medium term and what can be done in the long term.

In the immediate term, this is a challenging environment. Platforms are currently under pressure in the United States to adhere to a "free speech first" approach, which they interpret as meaning the platform can do whatever it wants in terms of algorithmic amplification, and that is an extension of free speech. Whatever the algorithm decides is an extension of free speech. While I have trouble with this, it is the interpretation of the United States, which makes any unilateral action by Canada very difficult: To wit, we probably cannot engage super effectively in this unilaterally. We should instead look to other countries, to partnerships and to joint regimes that can encourage this degree of transparency.

I would suggest that our best ally in this is the European Union, with the DMA and the DSA. Its approach to mandating data transparency has really entered into a greater degree of force. Its approach to mandating data transparency, which has really entered into a greater degree of force, is not without issues. The EU is also undergoing geopolitical battles in relation to data access and attempting to ensure that these platforms maximize democratic values alongside social connectedness. That is certainly the approach Canada should take. I think the European Union would be willing to and supportive of trying to align there. In some ways, the online harms act was getting to some of this.

Tim Louis: I'm pretty much out of time, so I just want to say thank you for this. It's very helpful.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'll now turn to Madame Normandin for three and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

My question is for both Mr. Bridgman and Mr. Burton. This may be the defeatist question of the day.

There has been a lot of discussion on the importance of passing legislation about platforms such as TikTok. However, aren't we tilting at windmills, given that there's still a critical mass of people who like those platforms, who are interested in them and who may not be that interested in the truth? If I may draw an analogy with the movie *The Matrix*, they prefer the blue pill to the red pill.

Every time we try to use legislation to regulate what happens on those platforms, aren't we wasting our time, unfortunately? Ultimately, there are human beings behind all this, and they may not want to know the truth.

[*English*]

Charles Burton: The thing is, the non-truth is more fun than the real truth. This stuff about Mr. Carney, etc., on TikTok is much more interesting than presumably the rather boring guy he probably is in real life, like me, so of course people like it.

The problem is, if we're going to get into a situation in which we know the stuff is not true and we don't care, is it the end of civilization as we know it? It's pretty disturbing when people don't want to have fact-based information at their disposal.

I hear you on this, and that does seem to be the trend, but I think it's incumbent on the government to do something about such things as TikTok. Providing a service that appeals to young people in the same way but doesn't send enormous amounts of data to China would be a good idea. So far, Canada has not been prepared to do that, although if I understand correctly, parliamentarians are not allowed to have TikTok on their official devices, so that's a good thing.

How can we go against young people who clearly are not interested in concerns about their personal data or the fact that the algorithm is subtly shaping their perception of the world in a way that is favourable to nondemocratic and autocratic forces and is supporting the agendas of billionaires and awful dictators around the world?

● (1220)

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Mr. Bridgman, do you have anything to add?

Aengus Bridgman: Personally, I'm not pessimistic about this. At the end of the day, people, including young people and those online, don't like being lied to: they hate it. If someone understands that they've been lied to, they'll be angry, even if it's a white lie.

It's important to trust in that; it's important to trust the public. We live in a democracy, and we have our values. The truth isn't necessarily going to win at the end of the day. The public is looking to the future with hope for democracy and the well-being of our country. We need to have that trust.

At the same time, though, it's important to provide the necessary tools and information to help people, and it's important to be transparent. Even for me and for experts in this field, there's a huge lack of transparency online. It's really hard to navigate all of this. People should be helped, just like they are at the supermarket. All the products in the supermarket have a list of ingredients and the number of calories per serving, for example, which helps people make informed decisions. However, when it comes to social media, platforms and our news ecosystem, there's nothing of the sort. I think that's the biggest problem. It's important to trust people, but to gain their trust, it's important to give them information and be transparent.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'd like to thank all of our witnesses.

We will suspend briefly as we go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]