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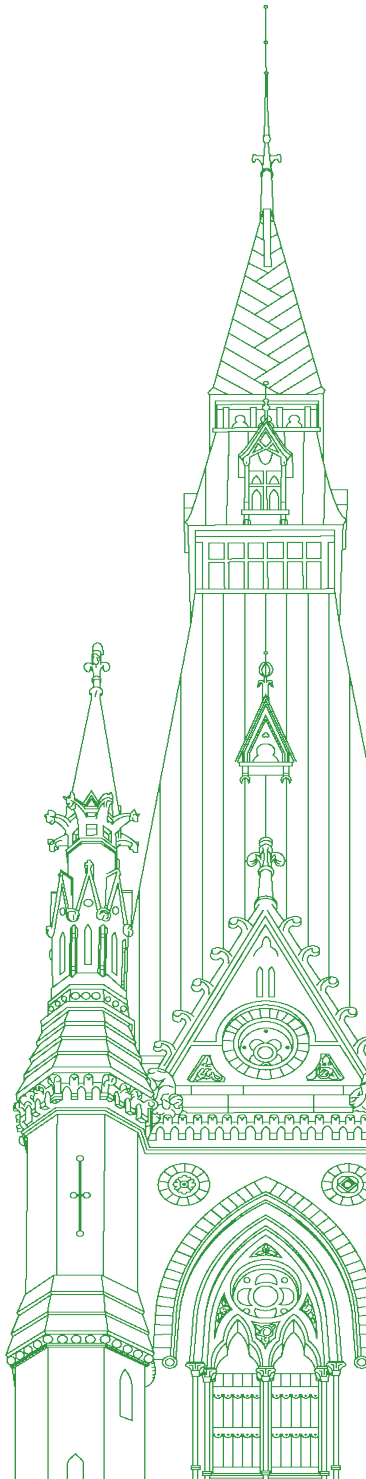

Chair: Chris Bittle

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, April 21, 2026

● (1100)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 29 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), the committee is meeting on its study of the current state of civic resilience in Canada.

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

Before we continue, I'd ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on their table. There's a short video. This is for the health and safety of all participants, especially our interpreters.

As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, raise your hand. For members on Zoom, if you wish to speak, use the “raise hand” feature.

I would like to welcome the witnesses for our first panel.

We have by video conference, as an individual, Ai-Men Lau, research assistant.

From the Canadian Constitution Foundation, we have Josh Dehaas, interim litigation director.

From the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, we have David Salvo, managing director, transatlantic policy and programming.

Each witness will have five minutes to deliver their opening remarks.

I will start with Mr. Dehaas, please.

You have five minutes.

Josh Dehaas (Interim Litigation Director, Canadian Constitution Foundation): Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members.

My name is Josh Dehaas. I'm the interim litigation director for the Canadian Constitution Foundation.

The CCF is a legal charity that defends Canadians' rights and freedoms through communications, public education and public interest litigation. Over the past few years, our biggest focus has become freedom of speech, freedom of expression.

Today, I want to talk about how the erosion of freedom of expression in Canada is harming civic resilience and offer five specific ideas on how Parliament can reverse this erosion.

First, I want to offer a very brief lesson on freedom of expression. We all know that we have this charter right, but do we really know what it means and why it matters?

The concept is pretty simple. Freedom of expression is the idea that governments do not get to decide what people can and cannot say—that is, what ideas we may or may not express. While it's acceptable to put limits on harmful forms of expression like nuisance noise or to prevent immediate physical consequences like violence, a truly free country does not censor ideas.

The CCF is doing its best to educate the public about this ancient freedom with our free high school course packs for civics teachers, our Not Reserving Judgment podcast, our freedom of expression book and our free expression course, available at theccf.ca/learn. Many of us fail to understand that freedom of expression is the oil that keeps the democratic engine chugging along.

As the Supreme Court has recognized, it's only when all of us are allowed to express our ideas freely, no matter how unpopular, distasteful or contrary to the mainstream, that we're able to get to the truth of matters and govern ourselves as a democracy.

Free speech is a necessary component of progress, because throughout history the majority viewpoint has so often turned out to be wrong. Galileo was persecuted for saying the earth revolves around the sun. Mahatma Gandhi was jailed for advocating against British colonial rule. Gays and lesbians were fired from government jobs for advocating for gay rights.

The reality is, when governments censor, it holds back progress for all of us.

Freedom of expression is also an essential component of human dignity. When people are told by their democratic institutions to be quiet, they no longer feel they have an equal right to participate in their democracy. This leads to frustration, anger, distrust and political polarization.

Censorship of social media is part of the reason so many people believe there's a secret cabal controlling them through the World Economic Forum. Censorship of information related to COVID-19 is part of what led to the extreme frustration of the “freedom convoy”.

In that spirit, I want to offer five ways for the government to help reverse this erosion and restore freedom of expression.

First, the government should repeal the Online News Act. The Online News Act has caused quality mainstream news stories to disappear from Facebook and Instagram. The result is that organizations like my own can't post op-eds or quality news stories, but dangerous demagogues can spread fact-free commentary and AI-generated slop.

Second, governments should repeal subsection 319(2.1) of the Criminal Code, which threatens imprisonment for the promotion of “antisemitism by condoning, denying or downplaying the Holocaust”. Parliament should resist calls to ban condoning, denying, downplaying or justifying the Indian residential school system.

Of course, this type of speech can cause pain, but punishing speech because it causes emotional pain is unconstitutional. As Justice Beverley McLachlin warned in her dissent in the 1990 Keegstra case, hate speech restrictions chill an enormous amount of valuable speech without actually stopping hatred. In fact, these laws may make hatred spread faster, because they trigger conspiratorial thinking and they turn monsters into martyrs.

Third, if the Senate amends Bill C-9 to restore the good-faith religious speech defence, the House of Commons should accept that amendment. Removing this exemption has caused religious people across the country to fear persecution for expression of faith-based beliefs.

Fourth, Parliament should say no to the online harms act once and for all. While we can debate what age limit might be appropriate for children to access social media, all previous versions of this act would have given federal regulators control over the speech adults may see online. Most concerning in this proposal is the proposal to create a digital safety commission to block harmful content. This will lead only to censorship of ideas. Australia's eSafety Commission has very quickly turned into a thought police, and Canada need not go down this divisive and dangerous path.

● (1105)

Finally—

The Chair: I apologize. I'm going to have to cut you off unless you have 10 seconds left.

Josh Dehaas: My final point is that parliamentarians should resist attempts to censor expression by regulating the speech that AI is allowed to express.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now turn to Mr. Salvo for five minutes.

David Salvo (Managing Director, Transatlantic Policy and Programming, Institute for Strategic Dialogue): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

My name is David Salvo. I represent the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a transatlantic civil society organization that focuses on countering extremist, terrorist and authoritarian threats to democracy. I'm based in Washington, D.C., but my work often brings me to Canada. This is not because Canada's democracy is comparatively brittle; there's plenty to keep me busy where I permanently reside.

All democracies require constant vigilance. In the face of an increasingly complex threat environment, it's critical to invest even more in civic resilience in Canada.

An interweaving nexus of foreign state actors, non-state actors and domestic extremists of all ideological manifestations seeks to divide Canadians and undermine their trust in institutions at all levels of government. Moreover, the information ecosystem that creates the conditions for many of these threats to metastasize is itself becoming more complex and conducive to facilitating real-world harms.

ISD's digital analysis shows how crises off-line can translate into Canadian communities' being directly targeted online. A major world event such as the Israel-Hamas war produces spikes of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Violent incidents such as the tragic school shooting in Tumbler Ridge spark a dramatic rise of online hate speech, in this case targeting the LGBTQ community.

My organization's study of anti-South Asian hate online in Canada found that between 2023 and 2024, such activity increased by 1,350%. This followed a four-year period in which police-reported hate crimes against South Asians increased by over 200%.

In general, we've witnessed a rise in domestic extremism in Canada, including white supremacist groups that increasingly mobilize off-line through various social clubs and whose online activity either incites violence or, even when the groups are engaging in lawful speech, serves to drive polarization and isolate marginalized communities, such as those of migrants. This all has implications for democratic resilience.

Amidst this backdrop, there are foreign interference operations that seek to intimidate Canadian citizens, undermine the integrity of Canadian elections and further polarize Canadian society. This committee knows those details quite well, so I won't belabour the point. Increasingly, though, these foreign operations are targeting local governance, critical social services and specific communities divorced from electoral contexts. Strengthening civic resilience will also require building better defences against these foreign interference threats at the local level.

The good news is that a vibrant civil society in Canada is eager to scale up its activity to address this hybridized landscape of online and off-line threats. For it to do so, there must be resources for civic actors and community leaders at the local and municipal levels. I therefore endorse the recommendation made by other witnesses before this committee to establish a non-partisan Canadian democracy fund that would provide greater opportunities to support civic resilience work in Canada. I also believe that by investing in democratic resilience, government will pave the way for Canadian philanthropy to step up its own investment in this work, which is important.

There are also the longer-term challenges in the information space that Canada must address. Regulation of big tech is not a panacea—I want to be clear—and it will inevitably draw the ire of powerful players to Canada's south. Nevertheless, I think there should be a coherent legislative mechanism that demands companies allow algorithmic transparency to understand how these platforms are curating speech rather than facilitating a true marketplace of ideas. To protect expression, Canadians should be able to appeal and seek redress when companies make incorrect content moderation decisions that do not align with Canadian law or their own terms of service.

Together with trusted allies, Canada should also begin to invest in long-term digital sovereignty that gives Canadians meaningful alternatives to foreign-owned systems. This doesn't refer just to AI and data sovereignty, in which Canada has already taken some strides to bolster its domestic capabilities; it also refers to establishing digital infrastructure and an online information ecosystem that advance democratic principles and don't facilitate threats to Canada's national security and democracy.

The fact that Canadians cannot access news articles on Meta Platforms, as my colleague has already outlined, is but one example of a glaring vulnerability. Leaving critical decisions that shape how Canadians separate fact from opinion and truth from misinformation to foreign-owned behemoths has implications for Canada's civic resilience. A Canada that's less prone to the whims of foreign big tech will be a more resilient one.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Ms. Lau, you have five minutes.

Ai-Men Lau (Research Assistant, As an Individual): Good morning, committee members and honourable Chair.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this important issue.

[*English*]

I'd also like to thank the technical staff and the interpreters for their hard work.

My name is Ai-Men Lau. I'm currently an independent research assistant, but for the past three years I was based in Taiwan working at the civil society organization Doublethink Lab, where I researched foreign information and influence operations targeting Taiwan and the international community. While the views I present today are my own, my testimony draws on some research conducted at DoubleThink Lab by my colleagues and me.

Past testimonies on civic resilience at this committee have highlighted a number of factors that have provided fertile ground for polarization, including distance from and distrust of democratic institutions, a lack of transparency and rising economic anxiety. These social cleavages can be and have been exploited by adversaries. I've seen how foreign information manipulation and interference, or FIMI, poses a threat to civic resilience. I was also fortunate to observe how Taiwan's civil society has risen to the challenges of countering FIMI.

I want to stress this: I recognize that Taiwan's model of resilience may not be appropriate for the Canadian context, but I believe there are valuable lessons that Canada can draw from it. In Doublethink Lab's report entitled “Taiwan POWER: A Model for Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference Resilience”, author Ben Graham Jones noted, “Taiwan’s resilience is primarily driven from the bottom-up. Government plays a role as a funding body and in providing overarching directions regarding the significance and nature of the threat, but action is decentralized.”

An example of this decentralized action can be found in Taiwan's Cofacts, a volunteer-driven fact-checking service. The initial verification is done by a volunteer. It is then sent to the user. However, should other volunteers disagree with the initial verification, they can send their own verification to the users, who in turn can make an informed decision. A peer-reviewed study by Andy Zhao found that the crowdsourced fact-checking was as accurate as that of professional sources.

I bring up Cofacts as an example because Mr. Chris Blask from QuietWire, in previous testimony, made a profound point on how community can help people make sense of events without losing agency, which in turn strengthens civic resilience. The Cofacts model is certainly not the sole solution or strategy to countering FIMI, but it is one of many that have emerged from Taiwan's vibrant civil society. However, this vibrancy is in jeopardy, as Taiwan's civil society and resilience are not immune to the challenges of unstable, inconsistent and diminished funding, especially in the past two years. Civil society and resilience cannot be built on a foundation of precarity, whether in Taiwan or at home in Canada. As other witnesses before me have recommended, I'd also recommend that the committee examine ways in which the Canadian government can create a long-term, sustainable funding strategy to support Canada's civil society.

Finally, given my work, I'd be remiss not to mention the impact of a different kind of foreign interference on civic resilience, which is transnational repression. Citizen Lab, and my own research conducted at Doublethink Lab on this subject matter, have highlighted the ramifications of transnational repression for diaspora communities. Such ramifications range from impacts on mental health to widespread self-censorship and fear of political participation.

Furthermore, there is a vacuum of cultural and language-appropriate civic education resources for diaspora communities, which have been exposed to exploitation from adversaries. My recommendation is that the government also consider funding initiatives that not only translate resources but also design outreach and engagement to incorporate community perspectives and practices. In other words, they would meet these communities where they are.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now go to questions.

Mr. Van Popta, you have six minutes, please.

Tako Van Popta (Langley Township—Fraser Heights, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here and for sharing your insights with us on this important study on civic resilience and the state of it in Canada today.

Mr. Dehaas, I'll start with you. Your organization is involved with public interest litigation. You've commented on the litigation around the invocation of the Emergencies Act a couple of years ago. I think the trial court and the Federal Court of Appeal have both ruled that the invocation was done improperly and that it wasn't justified. It's now off to the Supreme Court of Canada, so I don't know how much you can comment on it.

My question is focused on what this has done to a Canadian sense of civic resilience, which is what we're talking about. I'm not talking about the mischief-makers, the people who were honking their horns and really making a nuisance, but about law-abiding citizens, the people who supported the truckers. For example, they may have donated money on the GoFundMe page. I had phone calls from some of them—good Canadian citizens, some of them good friends of mine—who said they were worried that the government was going to freeze their bank accounts. They wondered what they should do.

Perhaps you could comment on this. What does it do to a sense of civic resilience when a people's government turns on them in such an aggressive manner?

Josh Dehaas: The invocation of the Emergencies Act did great harm to civic resilience in Canada. It created a huge amount of mistrust in the government.

Regular Canadians were donating to a political cause. They were not necessarily donating to anything that was breaking the law or intending to break the law. They wanted to have their voices heard. Instead of going out and speaking with people who had these particular concerns or trying to address them in policy, the government decided to use an act that is normally reserved for extreme situations such as insurrections or wars, in order to create unprecedented laws that froze people's bank accounts. This has caused an immense amount of harm to civic resilience. People need to be able to donate to political causes without fearing that they will not be able to pay their grocery bills or rent.

Four judges of the Federal Court and the Federal Court of Appeal found that the invocation of the act was unreasonable—the requirements of the act were not met, and using it violated charter rights. Now the government has appealed. We're hoping the Supreme Court of Canada agrees with the other four judges who have already looked at this question.

● (1120)

Tako Van Popta: Thank you.

Mr. Salvo, I'm going to turn to you.

I'm very curious about your comments on digital security. I think you used the term “digital sovereignty”. You were critical of Meta, which you accused of being an international “foreign-owned behemoth”.

Are we better off with a Canadian-owned behemoth? Explain to me what digital sovereignty looks like. Was the problem with Meta or was it with Bill C-18?

David Salvo: Well, Meta's reaction to Bill C-18 and its decision to block legitimate Canadian news outlets on its platform has created an environment in which Canadians are encountering—as Josh rather articulately characterized it—AI slop and other forms of garbage, frankly, instead of legitimate, authoritative news sources. It's a real vulnerability. Canada's information environment and civic resilience are better served if there is an information ecosystem that doesn't take reactionary decisions, as Meta did in this case.

I don't think Canada necessarily has to create sovereign digital platforms that are solely Canadian, in essence, divorced from any international context or co-operation. Right now, the architecture is overwhelmingly owned by companies based in one country—two, if you want to count China and Chinese platforms. This is a national security risk. It's a risk to civic resilience and democracy.

Whether you're a free speech warrior or coming at this from a content moderation standpoint, there are vulnerabilities in allowing the Metas of the world to make these decisions on behalf of Canadian citizens, who have no insight into how these decisions are made.

Tako Van Popta: I want to follow up on that.

You said we're allowing Meta to do things. How would we prevent Meta from doing them? They're a free company run by free-thinking people. They can make the decisions they want to on whether to co-operate with the federal government when negotiating with digital and traditional media people. It's a free choice.

If you had a Canadian company, how would it be any different?

David Salvo: My assumption is that a Canadian company might make a different decision in this regard. Its reaction to a bill like Bill C-18, whether it respects the bill or not, wouldn't be to ban news sources on its platform. That's the crux of the issue.

My argument is more that Canada is essentially letting foreigners dictate what Canadians encounter online, and it is a risk.

Tako Van Popta: How else would you—

The Chair: You're right at six minutes.

Tako Van Popta: I'm just getting to the good part.

The Chair: Well, you'll have plenty more opportunities. Maybe Mr. Jackson can share his time with you.

On that point, we'll go to Madame Kayabaga for six minutes.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Through you, I would like to welcome our witnesses.

Thank you for taking the time to engage with us on this very important study we're doing.

You're bang on with the comments you just made. I was the one making a bit of noise while agreeing with you.

You have a unique position. You've studied disinformation ecosystems globally. I wonder how you would assess Canada's current level of vulnerability compared with that of our allies.

David Salvo: Canada's in an interesting position because of its heterogeneity. There are tons of diaspora groups here, as our fellow witness online described in her testimony. This is a benefit to Canadian democracy, but it presents a vulnerability in the sense that foreign state actors, in particular, are directly targeting diaspora communities in Canada with an interest in either undermining their trust in Canadian elections and democracy or trying to get them to vote for particular candidates in an election.

I think it's increasingly designed to disrupt or destabilize trust in Canadian institutions at all levels of government. I'm seeing this in the United States and other countries too—removed from the context of elections—when wildfires hit or a hurricane hits and foreign state actors are targeting local communities and even ethnic minorities, trying to get them not to believe that the disaster relief being provided to them can be trusted.

There are all these ways that are conduits for foreign state interference, and there isn't enough investment at the local level in those civic organizations, in community leaders and in the trusted voices in those communities with respect to.... This resilience can't come from Ottawa, nor could it come from Washington in the United States or from another capital. We have to work to amplify and empower the people in those communities whose voices are trusted to get them to build up resilience measures themselves, rather than having these things dictated to them by the federal government.

● (1125)

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: Do you know of any countries that have done this? Can you give examples? If they have been successful, what kinds of methods are they using?

David Salvo: I'll give the example of Moldova. It's a little less complex than Canada, the United States or a comparative country because there are two primary ethnic groups in Moldova, but the Russian ethnic minority is at the tip of the spear of Russian state interference operations.

Moldova had an election last year that could have gone either way. The choice was a pro-EU candidate or an anti-EU candidate. There was a lot of investment by the national government and local civic actors to spread to the community authoritative sources of information about what happens if you are the recipient of, say, a Russian text message telling you to take cryptocurrency from an unknown Russian-based entity or individual. There was a lot of civic empowerment to do outreach to an ethnic minority—and the ethnic majority—but it was at the local level.

There's a lot that we bigger democracies can learn from a small, emerging democracy like Moldova that has done this house-to-house, community-to-community work to build more civic resilience.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: Do you think economic impacts and affordability could be used by these actors to target those they involve in disinformation?

David Salvo: Economic grievance has been the source of a lot of foreign state interference operations. It's also the source of a lot of genuine domestic grievance in our countries. People feel disempowered and disenfranchised, and they can't advance on their own. The sentiment is organic, but you have a lot of inorganic external interference amplifying those grievances because it's an easy threat vector for them. The mood, the sentiment and the disenchantment with the establishment and institutions are already baked into the fabric of those communities.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: We've had a lot of witnesses appear here and advocate for a non-partisan, Canadian democracy fund to support civic engagement and resilience. What are your thoughts on that? How do you think the Government of Canada can do this in a non-partisan way?

David Salvo: I endorse the concept. At this moment in time, Canadian funds should be supporting Canadian initiatives. This is not to exclude the importance of, say, international development or doing pro-democracy work overseas, especially in the vacuum of American largesse abroad. At this moment in time, if there are resources the federal government can use to empower local actors in a non-partisan way, it should do that.

You will obviously need some sort of arm's-length intermediary to execute grants, implement funds and ensure that funds are actually being issued to actors of all political persuasions and for different causes, but I recommend the idea. I wish we had.... We have a lot of philanthropy in the United States, but I think this sort of mechanism should exist in many countries.

Canada would be leading the way for a lot of countries to take similar steps in the future if it did this.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now going to Madame Normandin. Put your earpiece in. If you require it online, select the interpretation channel on Zoom.

● (1130)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, you may go ahead for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for contributing today. It's very appreciated.

Ms. Lau, I had the pleasure of meeting you at Doublethink Lab's offices. You talked about what causes polarization. Again today, you discussed declining transparency and rising anxiety, which hostile actors use to further polarize society.

I'd like to hear your views on the core drivers of citizen resilience. You said that civil society in Taiwan has really organized to address the issue.

Is it true that the bigger the threat, the more people mobilize? It may seem counterintuitive; it's logical that people would want to protect their own safety in the face of a major threat, but the opposite is happening in Taiwan. The people there are very active.

What is driving Taiwan's population to mobilize, and what examples should we draw on?

[*English*]

Ai-Men Lau: Yes, that's a great question.

Here, I think Taiwan might diverge in terms of whether this would be appropriate to the Canadian context.

Ben Graham Jones's report, which I mentioned in my testimony, noted that a lot of the actors in civil society have a shared sense of purpose. Resilience isn't driven by a single organization or a shared strategic plan but a sense of purpose. This was really borne out during the sunflower movement in Taiwan, which protested a trade agreement with the then ruling KMT and China. The success of that grassroots protest movement really embedded a civic society mentality that “we can do it” and “we should galvanize”.

Further events later on, such as FIMI's targeting certain local elections in Taiwan, really galvanized people to build up a civil society and various initiatives in Taiwan.

Now, that sustainability has also really continued, as we see sunflower movement leaders become members of Parliament or heads of the civic society organizations. That sustainability, though, is under threat. This is another lesson for Canada. Taiwanese youth voters are facing the same challenges as Canadian youths. They are getting more concerned about rising economic anxiety, rising housing prices and low wages. They're less concerned about the threat of invasion. We saw that reflected in the last few elections as well. That's another threat to civic resilience.

It also has to think about how domestic factors are impacted, as well as the international context of how FIMI can leverage those factors to threaten civic resilience.

There are lessons here. Taiwanese citizens did not feel as though they were reflected, in 2014, in their democratic institutions. Those movements have then had a further impact on why we see a vibrant and innovative civil society.

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: I'd like to ask you a question about Cofacts.

How much credibility does it have with the population, considering that the fact-checking is peer-based? Here, we have *Les décrypteurs* and other TV shows that do fact-checking, but it takes a while for wrong information to be corrected.

Could you talk about how quickly the Cofacts process works and how much credibility it carries with people?

[*English*]

Ai-Men Lau: There is a great article from Cornell Tech called “Crowdsourced Fact-Checking Fights Misinformation in Taiwan”. It explores this question of how quick, trustworthy and credible Cofacts is. It found that a lot of the volunteers were vectors of information. They were able to disseminate credible information much more quickly than state or media agencies that do fact-checking. It said that they respond faster than journalists, mostly because they repurpose a lot of articles, work and media and disseminate them to the community much faster than a top-down approach could maybe do.

The article found Cofacts to be just as accurate as professional sources. I will say that Cofacts employs a pluralistic and participatory model of fact-checking, which is often seen as a more top-down approach. In a very small sample, it was found that Taiwanese graduate students found articles by journalists to be more persuasive, but Cofacts' posts were much clearer. That's how the model works. I would just say this is a much more decentralized effort.

One of its key unique features is that it has volunteers with diverse backgrounds, who are able to give multiple verifications if they don't agree with the initial verification that's done. You have a community working together. I should also say that users can upvote or downvote the perceived the quality of the verification that is done to build further trust. I recommend looking into the Cofacts model for inspiration.

● (1135)

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I'll keep my last few seconds for the next round.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Jackson for five minutes, please.

Grant Jackson (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Chair, I'm going to defer my time to Mr. Van Popta.

The Chair: Mr. Van Popta, you have five minutes, please.

Tako Van Popta: Thank you.

We'll continue our conversation, Mr. Salvo, talking about what you call digital sovereignty. I like the idea, and we're going to be writing a report at the end of the study, perhaps with recommendations. I would like to see a recommendation around enhancing Canada's digital sovereignty as a way of enhancing our civic resilience.

We need to know more about what this looks like. You talked about the foreign-owned behemoth Meta not playing nicely with us, but there's another foreign-owned behemoth that played quite nicely with us. I wonder how a Canadian-owned social media platform you were suggesting might be better behaved. How would that be?

For a foreign-owned social media platform to become big and effective, let's say it's going to be headquartered in Vancouver instead of 200 kilometres away in Seattle. How's it going to be better? To grow, it's probably going to have to offer an IPO. Does it make a difference to you whether it does it on the TSX or the New York Stock Exchange?

David Salvo: First, I should say that I don't think a Canadian information environment should be or can be fenced off from national borders, so I don't think there will be a company that is solely Canadian. The investment of resources and time to generate an environment that would provide a meaningful alternative to what currently exists would take a generation.

My argument is that there's no time to lose. Canada has to work with like-minded, trusted allies and partners. Whether it's a social media platform or whether it's AI systems, Canada has a position now to really drive this debate with, say, Europe and other non-American Five Eyes partners to create another ecosystem.

Yes, some of that will involve private companies, and those private companies may indeed behave in ways that are different from how some of the American companies do. Some of the American companies behave differently from Meta, as you identified. Google reacted differently, ultimately, than Meta did.

However, when you have an information environment simply dominated by American media and platforms that also disincentivize the sharing of Canadian news sources, that is not in service of Canadians' being well-informed about what's happening here.

This is really the crux of my argument, not that Canada must create a Facebook equivalent that's only owned by Canadians and has no foreign users. That's not the vision. The vision is more that right now, decisions are essentially made in Silicon Valley on behalf of Canadian interests. I don't think they're actually working on behalf of Canadian interests.

Tako Van Popta: Understood, but they are free companies—

David Salvo: They are free companies.

Tako Van Popta: —run and operated by free-thinking individuals. I know you would never advocate for more authoritarianism, whether it is from the Kremlin or from Ottawa.

David Salvo: I would not, and I think Meta made a decision as a foreign-owned company. It has that right.

I think Canada, as a sovereign nation, has a right to react to that decision and determine what's in the best interest of its democracy and its citizens. Allowing the current environment to continue status quo is not in service of that vision. Canada is in a position to do something about that. I don't advocate that Canada should somehow regulate even more or penalize Meta. Meta made its decision. However, standing pat doesn't solve anything either.

● (1140)

Tako Van Popta: I appreciate the insights, but with all due respect, you're not leaving us much to put in a report about digital sovereignty for Canada. I understand it's a challenge to find that.

David Salvo: It is a challenge, and I think one good step that started is creating, say, sovereign data centres here so that private data is being stored on Canadian servers, on Canadian territory. That is a good step towards establishing digital sovereignty, but as I mentioned, there has to be long-term investment in recreating or replicating the current information environment as it exists, because the alternative is that we're all comfortable with the current architecture.

If there's a recommendation to ask about, it is this: Can there be incentives for Canadian companies to establish the same sort of infrastructure that currently exists but is owned by foreign entities? Tax breaks and the like are incentives for companies to get off the couch and do something about it.

The Chair: I'm going to have to cut you off there.

We'll now turn to Madame Brière for five minutes, please.

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

Welcome to our three witnesses. Thank you for being with us today.

Mr. Salvo, I will ask my question in French.

[*Translation*]

In the 2018 report “The ASD Policy Blueprint for Countering Authoritarian Interference in Democracies”, you point to political polarization and the decline of trust as vulnerabilities. Do those two things affect civic engagement? What can we do to make sure that citizens participate constructively in democracy?

[*English*]

David Salvo: Yes, polarization and lack of trust hamper meaningful participation in democracy, although I think that in countries like Canada, people still, by and large, show up to the polls and vote, including young people, and that's encouraging.

What's disadvantageous to a healthy democracy is if citizens, especially young people, increasingly feel as though institutions aren't working on their behalf or helping them advance in their lives. This creates a rife environment for foreign actors and non-state actors to simply amplify polarization.

To counter this, there are Canadian civil society groups that work with specific communities across this country to help empower citizens to participate in their democracy in a meaningful way. There are groups focused on youth. There are groups focused on diaspora communities. There are groups focused on migrants, which integrate them and assimilate them into the norms of Canadian civic life. However, they are under-resourced.

This is one of the main vulnerabilities that the Canadian democracy fund backers are trying to address for this reason. I know this as a representative of a civil society organization that operates in Canada. Funding is complicated here. Canadian philanthropy is not at the same level, for example, as American philanthropy or even European philanthropy. There's a real resource gap in doing this work at scale in Canadian communities, and this is something that the government and the committee can help address.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: You brought up youth, and I want to stay on that topic.

Various organizations work to get young people involved in democracy. How, though, can we tailor the message to different audiences, youth, marginalized communities and people in rural areas, for example, without watering down the core message?

[*English*]

David Salvo: We have to work through trusted messengers in those communities, as I mentioned earlier. I can't show up in a rural community in Canada and be a credible voice for why media and digital literacy is important, why a young person should show up to the polls and vote, or why they should volunteer on behalf of a political campaign. I'm not the right person to do this, but there are messengers in those communities or leaders of those communities who are. There are organizations, and I know one of the prior witnesses in front of this committee runs a civil society group that works across this country with youth groups. She understands who the right people are in those communities to serve as those voices. I think those pathways exist. It's just a matter of identifying the credible people to serve as trusted messengers.

● (1145)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: I think reaching those audiences is another challenge, because they don't get their information from traditional sources. Do you agree?

[*English*]

David Salvo: That's correct.

A lot of those groups are active online. Although there is some backlash against engaging online, and although we want to hold more town halls—those things are fine—the reality is that people are online, even in far-flung communities in rural environments far from Ottawa. There has to be a meaningful plan to engage these communities online. When you have platforms, for example, that disincentivize boring, authoritative sources in favour of polarizing, inflammatory content, there's an imbalance in the architecture for reaching those citizens. This doesn't mean having more regulation, but it does mean we need to understand why the information is designed so that election management bodies, for example, have a harder time reaching those communities than—

The Chair: I'm going to have to cut you off there, unfortunately. You'll have further opportunities to expand on that.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Ms. Normandin for three minutes.

Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Salvo, in your opening remarks, you talked about both online and off-line threats, and the polarization that happens in the real world.

In terms of what people can and can't say online, you said the platforms tended to be less active in grey areas. Off-line, people have more freedom.

Are you seeing a rise in the number of people who take their polarizing narratives online into off-line spaces?

I think the phenomenon has been documented among alt-right and incel groups, and others.

Also, do you think greater regulation of online activity is a double-edged sword that could push more people off-line, where we could lose the ability to identify them? We could lose track of people who end up becoming extremely polarized.

[*English*]

David Salvo: That's a very interesting question. I hadn't heard it expressed in quite that way. Let me take a minute....

I think that a lot of the rise in off-line violence coincides with the rise of violent extremists or violent speech online. These trends are interlinked, with the online environment creating these opportunities for greater off-line expressions of violence.

There's a difference between regulating lawful speech and regulating violent speech. The platforms have...it's written in their own terms of service that they do not permit violent speech, yet violet speech on these platforms goes, maybe not unabated, but it certainly slips through the cracks quite significantly. My organization has done research showing how, even now, there's a rise in violent speech on many platforms.

I don't think it's coincidental that you then have greater numbers and incidents of violence targeting communities that are in the crosshairs online. I don't think that pushing people off-line will necessarily lead to our not being able to monitor or understand how these violent phenomena are expressed. However, I think we need to get a handle on the environments in which people are coming together to feed off one another. That's not happening exclusively online, but by and large, it's happening online.

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

I'll bank your other 15 seconds for the future too.

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

Blaine Calkins (Ponoka—Didsbury, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Dehaas, if I can recap and get agreement with you about what you had to say, it is that the path forward should not be through government-mandated censorship online. I'm assuming you don't mean just platforms such as Meta, X or any of these other things, but also chat apps and these kinds of things. Do I have that right?

● (1150)

Josh Dehaas: Yes, that's right. Any form of censorship online creates more distrust. It creates more resentment. It makes people feel that they're left out. Even though we may disagree with the speech that they are putting forward, they need to be able to say that, whether it's on social media, in a chat or online generally.

Blaine Calkins: It's the "I disagree with what you have to say, but I'll defend, with my life, your right to say it" kind of mentality. Is that right?

Josh Dehaas: That's right. My personal view of freedom of expression is that if everybody has an equal opportunity to say things, even if they're considered distasteful, unpopular or contrary to the mainstream, it allows people to feel included in the democracy. It makes people have more trust in the process, and it's the way that we, first of all, identify problems with extreme views or harmful opinions, and fight back by including those people in the conversation rather than censoring them from the outset.

Blaine Calkins: You're saying it creates even further distrust if you try to use an authoritarian approach to clamp down on these things.

Josh Dehaas: That's right. Every time we see governments trying to put more and more regulations on what people can say online, we see more and more people leave that conversation. They're no longer engaging with the mainstream media or the civic institutions as they might have. They no longer want to go through the regular democratic channels of petitions and things like this. They become isolated, and it does more harm than good.

Blaine Calkins: As a last little follow-up, there are lots of different ways people can be censored. It can be by authoritarian laws by the state. There's also the cancel culture and shaming. There are other ways people can feel censored. What would you say about folks who engage in the kind of behaviour that indirectly censors people? How should we deal with that?

Josh Dehaas: I think free speech culture is important. Free speech is there to protect you against government censorship, but we should also have a free speech culture in which, when you hear ideas you don't like or you find difficult, you try to push back with reasoned argument instead of demanding censorship by someone else, because reasoned argument is how we come to agreements and figure out where the other side is coming from.

Blaine Calkins: I'll switch over to Mr. Salvo now.

Based on the conversations I've heard so far during the study—and even today from Ai-Men Lau, who has talked about crowdsourcing of fact-checking—we know that on platforms like X, for example, there can be community notes in which information is fact-checked. We have organizations like Snopes and others like the IFCN, with all of these people.

I think the real issue here is that disinformation by foreign state actors or their purposeful spread of misinformation—or even spreading it with ill intent—is a real and present thing. Somebody at a previous meeting asked what would happen if we got rid of the "like" button. However, instead of getting rid of the "like" button, maybe we should have a way for people to click on something and readily fact check it a little more prevalently than is now done on these media. There are lots of ways. AI can be used to do this. There are crowdsourcing organizations.

Is this a better way to build resilience? How would this work? What does your organization think of those kinds of notions?

David Salvo: I definitely think there should be methods to enable online users to understand the content they are encountering without that content's being censored. On this, I agree with Josh. Rather than censoring or taking down content, users who encounter AI-generated content or state-sponsored propaganda online should be free to encounter the content, but they should understand what they are encountering.

Blaine Calkins: Could this be an accreditation process that's mandated by government, or should it be organic?

David Salvo: I think you could have both organic processes and companies having labelling policies, for example. They're not uniformly or consistently enforced, but I think there are a lot of vehicles—absent, say, government regulation—that would allow for the labelling, understanding or contextualization of content on these platforms without having content moderation policies in place.

Blaine Calkins: Well, I think that's—

The Chair: You have five seconds.

Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen.

The Chair: Ms. Vandenbeld, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

I'm subbing at this committee for this study, and it's very similar to some of the testimony we're hearing right now in the subcommittee on international human rights. Whereas Canada used to be protected by our geography from a lot of these authoritarian international forces, I think we are in a situation now in which we're not anymore. They can get right into our children's phones, so we can't divorce Canadian democracy and civic resilience from global forces.

I'd like to start with a question for Ms. Lau, because we heard yesterday at our subcommittee that authoritarian national actors are working in a coordinated way and learning from what they're trying in different countries. When there's push-back, they learn from that, but when they get away with something in one country, they will replicate it in other countries. Democratic forces and legislators are not necessarily doing this kind of international learning and coordination—although, Ms. Lau, you shared some examples, including the really good example of Cofacts in Taiwan. I know of Rappler in the Philippines.

How do we better coordinate internationally to make sure that we are learning from one another and learning that what is happening globally is impacting us. We talked about a fund; we talked about different things, but how can we best do this? I'll start with Ms. Lau, and then I'll go to Mr. Salvo.

● (1155)

Ai-Men Lau: That's a great question.

What I've seen in the past few years, which is some good news for the committee, is further engagement with particular countries in the Indo-Pacific on the topic of disinformation, misinformation and FIMI.

I really think this committee should also consider how countries that are under significant stress from FIMI, such as Taiwan, and from domestic disinformation, such as the Philippines, are responding to the current threats and how they're moving in lockstep with these threats. Currently, Taiwan is thinking a lot about how to address AI, FIMI and such things.

I've seen more peer-to-peer relations, whether that's through engaging with community civil society actors.... However, what I've seen in my own experience is that it's from government to civil society actors. I'd like to see more civil society actors doing exchanges and having this facilitated more in thinking about how we can counter FIMI to share ideas and best practices.

In my organization, Doublethink Lab, every fall we have a conference called the IO, or Information Operations Roundtable, where we bring together actors from the Indo-Pacific to present on what they see in their countries and how they're trying to counter it.

We heard quite a bit from the Philippines as well in regard to how they're dealing with domestic disinformation there. This is where I learned the strategy of prebunking, which is a bit more novel to me.

Prebunking, for the committee, very quickly, is anticipating what types of disinformation and misinformation will happen in particularly sensitive times like elections. For example, I'm from Alberta. The Alberta referendum is coming up—or potentially coming up—so when you think about that....

What I mean is that I would not have been introduced to this idea if we hadn't brought those organizations in. I would like to suggest to the committee that peer-to-peer relationships are important. Relations from civil society to civil society are important as well.

Anita Vandenbeld: Perhaps one thing Canada can do with this democracy fund is use its convening power to bring these groups together and share knowledge.

I see you nodding, Mr. Salvo. Please go ahead.

David Salvo: I agree with that wholeheartedly. Canada has been seen, over the last decade, as really being a leader in the field of countering foreign interference. On a government-to-government level, a lot of Canadian ideas—policies and measures to facilitate intergovernmental coordination and communication with the public on threats to Canadian elections, for example—are procedures and policies that have been adopted by other governments, including my own, based on the Canadian best practice.

I think that Canada is already perceived as being the right player to facilitate exactly the type of contact Ms. Lau is talking about.

I agree that on a level of civil society to civil society, there's very little, that I'm aware of, facilitating this knowledge sharing, because it's tough to fund, other than some ad hoc work being done through the EU, for example, on a transatlantic basis.

The Chair: I'll have to cut you off there.

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses. We will suspend for a few minutes to prepare for the next panel.

● (1155)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1205)

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone. I would like to welcome our second panel.

We have Dr. Shelly Ghai Bajaj, assistant professor, Department of Defence Studies at the Canadian Forces College.

From Digital Public Square, we have Shlomit Broder, chief executive officer.

From Vote16 Canada, we have Sasha Banka, who is a volunteer.

Welcome.

We'll start with Ms. Banka for five minutes, please.

Sasha Banka (Volunteer, Vote16 Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

[*Translation*]

My name is Sasha Banka, and I'm 16 years old. I am here on behalf of Vote16 Canada, where I work as a volunteer.

[*English*]

A new survey from GreenShield, conducted in partnership with Mental Health Research Canada, reveals that over 80% of Canadian youth are overwhelmed by stress and anxiety about their future. Economic pressures are key drivers of this stress, with even higher rates of mental health concerns among racialized and LGBTQ+ youth.

As a student, I hear these concerns on a daily basis. A lot of my peers look at the world and feel they have no power to change the things around them. While this committee has explored many potential solutions to these challenges, one of the most powerful tools has remained overlooked. It is expanding voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds.

[*Translation*]

Seventeen countries, including Germany, Austria and Argentina, and 15 U.S. cities have extended the right to vote to citizens 16 and up. Just recently, the U.K. did the same. Giving young people the ability to participate in the democratic process validates their role as contributing members of society. Including them builds a sense of belonging, shows that institutions are listening to what they have to say, and ensures that youth stay engaged and informed, and feel invested in our democracy for decades to come.

The hesitation around adopting such a measure often stems from the idea that 16-year-olds aren't mature enough to vote. However, the science on cognitive development and international case studies show the opposite.

Neuroscientists distinguish between hot cognition—which refers to decision-making that is emotionally driven or influenced by peers—and cold cognition—which refers to thoughtful and informed decision-making. Voting relies on cold cognition. Like consenting to medical treatment, voting involves deliberation, and 16-year-olds already have that ability.

Research done in Austria, Belgium and Germany shows that 16- and 17-year-olds are equal to adults when it comes to the quality of their voting choices. In Scotland, 16- and 17-year-olds sought out more sources of political information than their peers who didn't have the right to vote elsewhere in the U.K., and more than 40% of them voted differently than their parents in the referendum on independence. This research shows that 16-year-olds make their voting decisions as effectively and competently as adults.

[*English*]

Canada's own experience shows how 16- and 17-year-olds can participate meaningfully in democratic life. When the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing studied this issue in 1991, they determined that, “in terms of political competence, 16 could be just as defensible an age as 18”.

Furthermore, Vote16 Canada has identified 22 first nation, Métis and Inuit organizations and governments across Canada that have either enshrined a minimum voting age of 16 in their legislation or successfully implemented it in recent elections. Specific examples include Haida Nation, which sets the eligibility age for council elections and referenda at 16, and the Nunatsiavut Government, which has a voting age for assembly and presidential elections of 16. As well, 16- and 17-year-olds have been able to vote in official participatory budgeting projects in such cities as Montreal, Hamilton and Toronto, effectively giving youth a greater say in the future of their cities. During Prince Edward Island's 2016 referendum on electoral reform, 16- and 17-year-olds were eligible to vote. In fact, they voted at a higher rate than all those aged 18 to 44.

By enfranchising youth earlier, we catch them when they are most supported, helping them build a lifelong habit of participation. As the chief electoral officer of the Northwest Territories noted in a report, 16- and 17-year-olds not only vote at a “higher rate than 18- to 24-year-olds...but they're also more likely to vote in the next election, and the one after that”. These precedents are significant, because they provide real-world, international and domestic evidence that expanding the voting age is not a radical experiment but a functional and proven model for enhancing civic engagement.

Nelson Mandela is famously credited with saying, in 1990, “The youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow.” While it is a beautiful sentiment, I believe it is time we updated it.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

Not only are young people the leaders of tomorrow, but they are also the leaders of today.

Elected officials' support for lowering the voting age to 16 would send a strong message: they trust today's young people, they value our perspective and they recognize our right to shape the Canada we will inherit.

[*English*]

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Though I usually don't editorialize after a witness's opening remarks, that was excellent work. Thank you for appearing with us today.

Ms. Broder, you have five minutes, please.

Shlomit Broder (Chief Executive Officer, Digital Public Square): Thank you and good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to be here today.

My name is Shlomit Broder. I'm the CEO of Digital Public Square, a Canadian not-for-profit that, throughout the last decade, has worked to bolster civic resilience in Canada and abroad by creating digital spaces that allow for greater participation, encourage critical thinking and invite more voices to be shared and heard in a productive and respectful manner.

Today I will speak to two areas—the state of polarization in Canada and the role digital spaces can play in strengthening civic resilience.

Across the world, we are seeing deepening polarization, growing information manipulation threats and declining trust in institutions. Canada is not immune to these challenges. It is a critical moment to take a thoughtful and proactive approach to safeguarding and strengthening our civic resilience.

Our nationally representative surveys show that Canadians perceive the country to be far more polarized than it actually is. Many believe that those with opposing political views are more extreme than they truly are and underestimate how much common ground exists in our shared priorities and values.

In our July 2025 survey, 30% of Canadians said the country is highly polarized, and 62% stated they are concerned that the political left and political right can't speak to each other about political and social issues. However, when we look at how Canadians identify politically, the picture is quite different and more nuanced. Most Canadians self-identify as ideologically centrist. Within our survey, 66% of Canadians placed themselves in the three middle pillars on a seven-point scale between political left and right. Only a small minority identified at the ideological extremes.

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt you for a second.

The microphone is very sensitive. When putting the paper against it, there's some background noise. I apologize. It's something I'm guilty of too.

Please continue.

Shlomit Broder: Should I repeat the last part?

The Chair: Yes, go back to the last part.

Shlomit Broder: In our July 2025 survey, 30% of Canadians said the country is highly polarized, and 62% stated that they are concerned the political left and political right can't speak to each other about political and social issues. However, when we look at how Canadians actually identify politically, the picture is quite nuanced. Most Canadians are ideologically centrist. Within our survey, 66% of Canadians placed themselves in the three middle pillars on a seven-point scale between political left and political right, and only a small minority self-identified at the extremes.

This gap between perception and reality matters. Canadians who perceive high levels of polarization tend to have lower trust in institutions; they are less satisfied with democracy and more likely to feel the country is heading in the wrong direction. Our research also shows that as individuals identify more strongly with the political left or the political right, the further extreme they become, the more they tend to view their own group increasingly positively and the opposing group increasingly negatively. At the extremes, they question the other side's morality.

Disagreement itself is not the problem, nor are strong political viewpoints. We invite differences of opinion in this country. The risk arises when difference turns into division and people begin to see those on the other side of an issue not simply as wrong but as illegitimate or even dangerous.

What is driving this perception of polarization? In our survey, we asked this question.

Politicians and political parties were the most cited cause of polarization by all Canadians. Those on the right were also more likely than other Canadians to point to the political system and the country's diverse makeup as additional causes of polarization, whereas those on the left were more likely to cite social media platforms and online influencers.

Polarization is not a new phenomenon, yet Canadians perceive it and experience it to be increasing. Within this context, unsurprisingly, we should acknowledge the role of social media platforms that are designed to amplify the most extreme and emotionally charged content. They often expose users to the worst representations of opposing views, distorting our perception of the public square and reinforcing an “us versus them” dynamic.

What do I propose we do?

I propose we make Canada's civic resilience a national priority, strengthening civic engagement, rebuilding trust and fostering greater social cohesion. This is not a small task. Achieving this requires a deliberate, non-partisan framework that brings together government, civil society, researchers and the private sector. There are many important efforts already under way across the country, and there have been for years. The opportunity now is to better align them and invest in sustained, long-term initiatives so that, collectively, they deliver a more meaningful and measurable impact for Canadians.

With respect to digital spaces, on which much of my work is focused, we should not limit ourselves to thinking only of reducing online harms. We should also seize the opportunity to actively use these spaces to engage Canadians and strengthen civic resilience. Our work has shown that when people are encouraged to engage thoughtfully with complex and often contentious issues in a respectful, judgment-free digital environment, they become more resilient to polarizing narratives. When individuals feel that their concerns are heard and taken seriously, they are more open to nuanced information and more willing to engage across differences.

Importantly, these kinds of digital interventions allow us to reach Canadians who may not participate in the more traditional forms of civic engagement, broadening both access and impact.

Thank you.

I look forward to your questions.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go online to Dr. Bajaj for five minutes, please.

Shelly Ghai Bajaj (Assistant Professor, Department of Defence Studies, Canadian Forces College, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the members of the committee for the invitation to appear today. I would also like to take a moment to thank the interpreters and the technical support team.

I'm an assistant professor at the department of defence studies at the Canadian Forces College, but I appear today in my individual capacity and the views I offer are my own.

Over the past four years, my research has focused on threats in the digital information environment, particularly on how these threats impact several of Canada's ethnocultural diaspora communities. My own thinking around these topics has shifted over time, from how we can counter disinformation to how we can build and sustain trust. This reframes matters because it conceptualizes trust as both an input into democratic governance and an outcome of it.

My remarks today address three dimensions of this challenge.

First, there is the threat landscape. Canada is not immune to the geopolitical and technological pressures affecting liberal democracies more broadly. Internationally, this is unfolding alongside prolonged democratic backsliding, creeping authoritarianism and increasing strain on the rules-based international order, multilateral co-operation and the post-war international security system.

Threats are increasingly hybrid, spanning digital, cyber, social, economic and physical domains, with technologies advancing at a rapid pace. The low barrier to entry means that a wider range of adversarial state and non-state actors operate persistently below the threshold that would trigger a conventional state response. These activities are persistent, cumulative and corrosive.

The second dimension I'd like to emphasize is the impacts of these threats and how they are unevenly distributed.

Ethnocultural diaspora communities live in layered, complex and transnational information environments. They use private and encrypted chat and direct messaging applications at rates exceeding Canadian averages. More than 80% of our survey respondents belong to at least one internationally scoped chat group. For these communities, disinformation is often shaped by home country political dynamics, the ebb and flow of information across platforms and foreign-driven narratives.

Moreover, there is also an added layer of harms for these communities. Members of these communities reported being the targets of xenophobic and discriminatory disinformation circulating within Canada. In our own survey, 44% of respondents reported emotional harms. At the group level, 46% reported experiencing hate because of disinformation on social media, while 51% reported feeling marginalized. These communities often experience fear, intimidation, information overload, self-censorship and even threats to their physical safety and security. All of this can impact civic engagement.

This leads to the question of what we can do and why we should do it.

To enhance and deepen civic resilience in Canada, we need to bring civil society back in and to resource it properly. Civil society organizations operate as trusted intermediaries in the digital spaces in which these communities engage and share information. They are also often the first to understand how information threats manifest on the ground. Microgrants tied to measurable outcomes, longer horizon funding for established organizations and genuine co-design of resilience programming are strategic investments.

Civil society can also function as a force multiplier in this rapidly shifting threat environment. It extends the reach, legitimacy, cultural fluency and local knowledge of a durable and resonant resilience strategy that cannot be easily replicated. For below-threshold threats, civil society organizations can help detect emerging harms, prebunk harmful narratives, build community awareness, strengthen information literacy and reinforce democratic participation.

Civil society also serves as an added benefit as a critical feedback mechanism for government by identifying how institutional arrangements, policies and interventions are being experienced on the ground in ways that can help inform policy-making.

Civic resilience is a relationship that must be continually renewed and nurtured. The government's role is not to manage the relationship from above but to create the conditions for it to flourish from below. That means centering trust, investing in our most vulnerable communities and treating civic engagement as a democratic value to be protected.

● (1220)

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We will now go to questions by the members.

We'll start with Mr. Cooper for six minutes, please.

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

Ms. Broder, can you speak to the report from your organization entitled "PRC Foreign Interference and Transnational Repression in Canada"?

Shlomit Broder: To some degree, I can.

Michael Cooper: Okay. Very good.

We know that CSIS, NSICOP and Madam Justice Hogue, who of course was the commissioner of the inquiry into foreign interference, identified the Beijing-based Communist regime as the biggest foreign interference actor in Canada. Indeed, the Prime Minister only a year ago quite appropriately characterized Beijing as Canada's biggest security threat.

A major component of Beijing's interference activities in Canada involves transnational repression involving efforts to surveil, harass, coerce and intimidate members of diaspora and other targeted communities. To be specific, prioritized target groups by Beijing include Uyghurs, Tibetans, Falun Gong practitioners, pro-democracy activists and Hong Kong and Taiwan independence advocates, which President Xi has characterized as the "five poisons".

Is this a fair summation?

Shlomit Broder: I believe so.

Michael Cooper: Thank you.

Now, in preparing the report, interviews and surveys with 25 Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Tibetan, Uyghur and Falun Gong community leaders and activists were conducted. Page 15 of the report notes the following: "Almost all of the respondents to our survey reported experiencing or observing harassment or intimidation connected to PRC transnational repression objectives."

Let's look at those numbers. For harassment, it's 19 out of 25 leaders; 18 leaders identify intimidation as occurring in their experience; for surveillance, it's 12 out of 25; and for online threats, it's 10 out of 25 cases of community leaders. It would seem to me that these results reinforce what we've heard from CSIS, law enforcement and national security experts—namely, that Beijing's transnational repression activities are pervasive, coordinated and widespread. Targeted communities are experiencing what is a serious threat on a regular basis.

Can you speak to this?

● (1225)

Shlomit Broder: As part of our project, we did two things. We conducted a survey in Canada, trying to access members of the community. We also spoke with 25 individuals who are affiliated with the diaspora groups you mentioned, although "diaspora" is not the right name for some of those groups—or at least it is not how they like to be identified. However, those were the experiences they attested to.

I want to note that this project was looking specifically at PRC transnational repression. We are very much aware that there are other groups in Canada affected by other foreign state actors.

In this context, yes, those were the group members who shared those experiences.

Michael Cooper: How were the community leaders selected?

Shlomit Broder: It was mostly through existing networks of activists and community groups.

Michael Cooper: The report further notes that among the PRC bodies involved in foreign interference operations in Canada, including transnational repression, was Beijing's Ministry of Public Security, which of course was involved in setting up and operating police stations, some of which have not been closed down.

Is this correct?

Shlomit Broder: I believe so.

Michael Cooper: With that in mind, having regard for combatting transnational repression and more broadly building civil resilience, would it come as a surprise to you that this government, when the Prime Minister went to Beijing, signed a law enforcement co-operation agreement with none other than Beijing's Ministry of Public Security? This is the very ministry that is actively involved in serious transnational repression activities in Canada, including operating illegal police stations that are putting the safety and security of Canadians at risk every day.

Shlomit Broder: With respect, it was very important to me to channel the voices of diaspora communities and pro-democracy activists in this country. I'm not sure I'm in a position to comment on the acts of the government in this context.

As a Canadian citizen, by the way, I want to say that I think it's an interesting moment with our current government, in which Canadians—and this is part of civic resilience—need to contend with Canadian values. How does this connect with things we talk about, such as transnational repression and foreign interference?

It's a very important point that you make, but I don't feel I'm in a position to comment on the broader government activity.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now turn to Ms. Sodhi for six minutes, please.

Amandeep Sodhi (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thanks to all of our witnesses for being here today.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask my first question of Ms. Bajaj.

In your appearance at the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference, you noted that diaspora communities engage with online information differently than other members of society. Why do you think that is?

● (1230)

Shelly Ghai Bajaj: In our research, we found, first and foremost, that their experience is differentiated by the actual digital spaces in which they engage. As I mentioned in my remarks, they use private encrypted chat applications at a higher rate than Canadian averages. By virtue of the design of these digital spaces, their experiences are different. This is because these private digital spaces are unique among other public social media platforms, such as X, YouTube, Facebook and so forth. In these private digital spaces, you're engaging with individuals you know, and information is being shared with people whom you often trust. This, at an individual level, often impacts how information quality is assessed and processed.

As individual users, we all use these heuristic devices and cognitive shortcuts to quickly assess and process information that's incoming, and we process the quality of the information. As for the shortcuts that were shared with us by focus group participants, sometimes the identity of the sender would impact how they processed and received the information. They're in a chat group; they have an auntie in there, and that auntie is very trusted. The auntie is known to send good-quality information, so they're going to trust what she's sending to them.

Vice versa, they also use this on the flip side. Sometimes individuals develop a reputation in these private chat groups for sharing poor-quality information—sometimes misinformation. This is also used as a shortcut to ignore that kind of information.

The digital spaces in which they engage shape their experiences with disinformation online.

Amandeep Sodhi: What challenges do you believe this creates for encountering disinformation in these communities? For the second part, what opportunities does this create for strengthening resilience in diaspora communities?

Shelly Ghai Bajaj: In terms of challenges, in academic literature the focus has been on the spread of disinformation and its impact on elections. We found in our research that disinformation isn't just experienced between the start and the end of an election cycle. It's an everyday experience, by virtue of our digital participation in these digital spaces.

The challenges are that there are often a few buckets recommended for solutions and responses to countering disinformation. One bucket falls under what we call the legal regulatory framework. This is using regulatory mechanisms to reduce the encounter—the spread of disinformation online. For private spaces, this creates unique challenges, because these are inherently private spaces in which people are sharing information, with the expectation of some privacy.

In liberal democracies, we have the benefits of individual rights and civil liberties, so we don't necessarily want to erode trust by having government intervening in these digital spaces. It also creates a challenge in that, because of their closed and encrypted nature, you can't collect data at scale, so it's harder to know what's happening in these spaces. This often produces unique considerations around research design.

The other kind of intervention that's often recommended for countering disinformation is technological. This is content moderation—slapping something online that says the content is false. This is also trickier in private digital spaces. These things can be interpreted ambiguously.

For example, in WhatsApp, something can be “forwarded many times”. In our research, we found that “forwarded many times” is interpreted differently by different groups of users. Younger users would often use that as one of the cognitive shortcuts to signal that this is junk information coming in. Older users would often use that flag as a way to interpret that information as higher quality.

Technological interventions are also limited. This is why, in our work, we've really pushed and advocated for a bottom-up approach. These digital spaces are hard to govern through legal mechanisms and through technological mechanisms. What you really need is a bottom-up, grassroots, civil society role in which you're building trust, inoculation and prebunking at the individual level. This is the opportunity.

● (1235)

The Chair: You have five seconds left.

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent work.

Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, over to you for six minutes.

Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Ms. Banka, we know that just because people have the right to vote, it doesn't mean they do. You said that 16- to 18-year-olds voted at fairly high rates.

Have you done any studies to identify the link between

Technically, 16-year-olds have to go to school, and the classroom is a good place to discuss and understand the issues in an election. Have you studied that or identified that correlation?

Does exposure to voting at an earlier age increase democratic resilience afterwards?

If students learn to ask the right questions in school, are they more likely to ask more questions as they get older?

Sasha Banka: That's what I was about to say. You explained it very well.

Yes, 16-year-olds typically go to school, a structured environment where they have access to resources and supports. Conversely, at the age of 18, a young person typically leaves home or may move to a different city, so they're in a less controlled environment. Resources and information on the voting process may not be as readily available to them.

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Ms. Banka.

Ms. Broder and Ms. Ghai Bajaj, both of you talked about civic engagement online, which can take many forms. As we know, most platforms' business model revolves around disseminating information. The more the information is shared, the better it is for social media sites.

Do you see civic engagement as a way to fight fire with fire when it comes to ascertaining the quality of the information being shared? For example, we could require platforms to make it mandatory for people sharing information to check a box indicating that they have or haven't verified the content but are choosing to share it anyway.

Should we increase civic engagement in the sharing of information online?

Should the platforms be required to do that?

[*English*]

Shlomit Broder: Thank you. That's a great question. Even though I deal a lot with digital spaces, I have an opinion, which I'm happy to share.

There's a world of research out there about interventions that help the digital environment be, perhaps, healthier for us. I'm not sure about fact-checking. I think fact-checking has proven to be more problematic.

I'm not sure whether it was introduced here before, but another very successful example is the concept of friction, which is that, when you have someone about to press a button that says “share”, a simple line pops up that says, “Are you sure you want to share this?” Just introducing a friction moment has been proven to be effective in getting people to share less information that is problematic.

There's a world of recommendations from experts in this field—this is what they do—on how we can try to build better guardrails within our platforms. Separate from that, I definitely don't advocate for censorship online. I don't want to regulate speech as much as I want to regulate transparency.

I can speak for our organization. We used to do regular research through CrowdTangle, which was one of the mechanisms Facebook provided to civil society organizations to research their platform and the data. It was taken away. That's just one example.

There are many things we can do related to how these systems are designed, related to the transparency offered to researchers and civil society. There are also all kinds of things that we can do in the platforms that, I think, are not ones that we would debate and argue come at the expense of freedom of speech. Many things can be done that will have broad agreement.

Thank you.

● (1240)

Shelly Ghai Bajaj: May I jump in?

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Absolutely.

[*English*]

Shelly Ghai Bajaj: Thank you for the question. This question really emphasizes the need for us to adopt a multipronged approach.

Absolutely, we should have these friction mechanisms and force big tech platforms to put these friction mechanisms in place. These friction mechanisms can even work, to a limited extent, in private encrypted chat apps. For example, WhatsApp has a limit on the number of people you can forward content to. That, in and of itself, slows down the spread of potentially harmful content or disinformation.

That said, some technological solutions will likely be more effective in public, open platforms than they will be in private. This is why there's also the need for a legal regulatory framework that considers differential harms and impacts. However, there's also a need for bottom-up engagement in which we are teaching individual users, at a very individual level, the basics of AI and digital literacy and, hopefully, contributing to the long-form durable information literacy, which are those critical reasoning and critical thinking skills that we all need to use, as individual users, in this digital world.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go to the next round.

I have a warning in advance. Unlike normal, I will be enforcing the strict time limits. We have a couple of extra minutes, but we'll have to stick to the time.

Mr. Cooper, you have five minutes, please.

Michael Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to direct my questions to Ms. Banka.

Thank you for your submissions regarding lowering the voting age. I will say at the outset that I respectfully disagree with your position, but I understand some of the arguments you've put forward.

One argument you put forward, which is often put forward as to why lowering the age would be a net positive, is encouraging greater engagement, with young people voting and this becoming a habit going forward as they become adults. However, I would argue that some of the data and analysis of it is not particularly strong. If you look at a lot of the research, it tends to be focused on the immediate impact of lowering the age and having 16- and 17-year-olds voting. I think that if you look at a number of jurisdictions, you will find that 16- and 17-year-olds who have the opportunity to vote for the first time often do vote at a slightly higher rate than 18-year-olds, for example, but what is less clear is the longevity of this early voter boost.

I would cite one study from Scotland, a fairly detailed study. I think Scotland is a good jurisdiction to look at because they have had voting for 16-year-olds since 2014, so there has been more than 10 years of it now. This study, "Longer-Term Effects of Voting at Age 16: Higher Turnout Among Young People in Scotland", looked at:

> ...original survey data from Scotland collected, among 16- to 31-year-olds, seven years after Scotland lowered the voting age to 16. The data was collected specifically to allow for the consideration of cohorts with different ages of enfranchisement. The survey sample includes cohorts of young people who experienced their first opportunity to vote at age 16/17 as well as cohorts who experienced their first election aged 18 or older, between four years before and up to seven years after the change of the franchise.

The study concluded:

> For engagement with politics beyond voting in elections...we find no lasting difference between young people who were eligible to vote at 16 versus 18. The experience of voting at age 16/17 did not make a difference in young people's non-electoral engagement in early adulthood.

Can you speak to the issue of engagement over the long term, not simply voting at the age of 16 or 17?

● (1245)

Sasha Banka: Thank you for the question.

Unfortunately, I'm not familiar with the study, but I find it really interesting. I could totally look at it and then provide a response later on, or the folks from Vote 16 could do that. I'm not very familiar with the research on that. What I will say, though—and this is not from a scientific perspective but is just my personal opinion—is that I think in general when we talk about habits, the more you do something and the earlier you start doing it, it has a tendency to stick for longer. However, of course, I understand there's research, and I'll have to look at it before I provide an answer.

Michael Cooper: Can you speak to any other jurisdictions? I cited one study from Scotland, but can you point to other studies that would support that argument?

Sasha Banka: There are the studies and case examples I mentioned in my testimony, but I don't think I have anything specific when it comes to the longevity of the effect, which I think is what you're specifically referring to. As I said, I would have to defer it to a later date, but I think it's an important topic and I will definitely get back to you on that.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Michael Cooper: Okay, Chair.

Thank you.

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

Madame Kayabaga, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you.

Through you, Chair, I'd like to welcome and thank all of our witnesses for being here today.

My first questions will go to Madame Banka.

First of all, I want to commend you for your opening remarks. I don't think my 16-year-old could pull that off, so kudos to you for being so eloquent. I'm sure I'll get in trouble for saying this, but it is well.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: I want to ask the following: Are you aware of citizens' assemblies? What do you think of them? Could you just share, from your perspective, what you think of citizens' assemblies?

Sasha Banka: I would need to have more information. I'm not particularly educated on them. I'm sorry about that.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: No worries, I'll go to another question.

What role do you think schools and student organizations can play in building civic awareness and participation?

Sasha Banka: They play a major role. A good example is me right now. I would not be sitting here answering your questions if not for the student organizations I have had the chance to participate in. I'm in my student council. I'm a student trustee. All these experiences really cultivated a civic awareness and an interest in politics. They're extremely important.

From an education perspective, I learned so much more about politics through my civics class in grade 10, but I'm also taking politics now. Education and schools play a major role. They're so important for cultivating civic awareness with youth.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: I couldn't agree more. I had a similar journey. I started on student council, and today I'm a member of Parliament. I hope to see you take up a seat in the House of Commons one day.

Madame Broder, can you talk to us about your "Canada is Talking" campaign and how it tries to bring people together and reduce polarization online?

Shlomit Broder: Absolutely. With the support of the Canada centre within Public Safety Canada, we were working on a program that was trying to counter polarization on two topics—polarization between political left and right in Canada in the last year and polarization about the topic of Israel-Gaza, specifically in Canada. Those were two easy topics, as you can imagine.

As part of the effort to deal with political polarization, we looked specifically at trying to engage Canadians online. Following the survey, to go back to some of the survey data I quoted, we saw the gap between perceived polarization and some positions that most Canadians held. I believe that in the engagement, we used protection of minority rights. Working with social psychologists at the University of Ottawa, we developed a digital intervention.

The idea there is exactly what I mentioned before. It's to get people to engage with this information in a thoughtful way, when nobody else is watching. You can engage with it in the privacy of your phone. We tried to demonstrate the gap between perception and reality in a very tactile, fun and engaging way. We had about 10,000 people at large engaged with it. This was not a significant enough number. I wish we'd had more time to get more people to engage with it, but that follows the idea I presented before of trying to create positive interventions in digital spaces.

● (1250)

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: In the pre-election phase, when trust in the electoral process increased from 22% to 60% in completing one module, why do you think that was?

Shlomit Broder: I would not attribute it to a two-minute intervention. We're not going to fix trust in the electoral process with a two-minute online intervention. What we try to do is illuminate ideas. In this context, first of all, we try to meet people where they are and not delegitimize their position. You have low trust? We understand. I'm not going to tell you not to have low trust and that you should trust.

We try to approach these ideas with understanding and empathy around the causes of the low trust. We try to share data in a way that's easy to consume.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: How do we get more people off their screens and connected in face-to-face engagement?

The Chair: Be brief.

Shlomit Broder: First of all, I want to say that I think the idea should be “also”. It should be both. They should not be mutually exclusive. Our lives are connected, digitally and in person. Ideally, we can reach people at scale with shorter interventions online. In the best case, we can then transition them into actual rooms for those who are interested. There are some people who will never get in a room. Then there are people like me, who will always get in a room. We need to—

The Chair: I will have to interject.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Ms. Normandin for three minutes.

Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Ms. Ghai Bajaj, but Ms. Broder may wish to answer as well.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on how to effectively regulate social media, taking into account the need to balance regulations and privacy. Data are often encrypted to protect users' privacy.

Shouldn't we focus on the platforms' own commitments to address hate speech? In many cases, they commit to providing users with a healthy space, but they don't honour their commitments. Should we tackle the issue from that angle, to make sure that the content posted to digital platforms and social media sites is not harmful?

[*English*]

Shelly Ghai Bajaj: My thinking around this has shifted over the years. I guess I've become increasingly skeptical about the platforms' willingness to do the right thing and relying on their goodwill. Instead, I've shifted my thinking to these bottom-up responses.

If we can also disincentivize platform behaviour, through what individual users as a collective are demanding of their digital spaces, and if we do the groundwork of engaging civil society organizations, which are those trusted intermediaries to help promote greater levels of digital, AI, media and information literacy, we can have informed users engaging with these platforms.

It's almost like the way we can exert power as consumers. We can adopt some of these individual-level behaviours in the digital spaces. This can incentivize certain things for the platforms but also disincentivize certain kinds of algorithmic promotion, search engine optimization and the kinds of behaviours that may sometimes promote harmful online content.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Jackson, you have five minutes, please.

Grant Jackson: Thank you to the witnesses for your testimony today. It's been very interesting.

Perhaps, to start with you, Ms. Broder, we're talking a lot about civic resilience, and it often gets tied to the digital space. I'm curious; my question is, are you familiar with the work of the American author Jonathan Haidt and a book called *The Anxious Generation*? This is a work by a social psychologist with a Ph.D. He teaches at New York University right now. His work has just been shared with me.

His whole thesis in the book, if you have a chance to read it, is basically that the generation born after 1995, so starting in 1996 and onward, all—and I count myself in that, because I was born in 1997—got social media right when we were going into the high school era. This had a dramatic effect on puberty and brain growth. Haidt has empirical evidence in his book to show that, as a result, levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide dramatically increased from 2010 to 2015, which were exactly the years when I was in high school. It has continued to get worse since.

I'm curious to know whether you have a comment. It's not a problem if you haven't read the book, but I'm wondering whether you've looked at the generational impact that access to social media, at such a young age, has had on brain development, and where that's leading my generation and all the ones that are coming after mine, in terms of civic resilience.

● (1255)

Shlomit Broder: Thank you for that. I will pick up the book.

I definitely have an opinion, and this is also very evident throughout our work. I can't speak to brain development and exactly what happened, but there are many correlations that we see.

In the same survey that I'm speaking of, younger people were reporting higher rates of feelings of social alienation. There is self-reported lower mental health. I'm not part of that generation, as I came before, but I absolutely think that for the generation that grew up in this world, in which the main way that they engaged with the world was through online spaces, this has had a huge impact on them. The optimist in me wants to say we're going to figure this out over the next few years so that future generations are not, perhaps, going to carry that burden as much as this generation.

I'm fascinated by this space because what we are living and seeing is an interplay between our human tendencies—our most natural human tendencies toward community and safety—and online spaces incentivizing things that are not good for us. We thought they were going to be good for us. It was supposed to help us connect but, in fact, it's helping us....

In our data, young people, the ones who are reporting that they are more online and that they are spending, I believe, over a certain number of hours online, are also the ones who were most likely to say they feel the most disconnected. How is it that we created social media, and the effect of it is disconnection? We have to fix this system.

Grant Jackson: Yes, I think of what some of the latest statistics show. Many young people are reporting that the number of hours they spend per week on social media is equivalent to having a part-time job, and for many it's even higher than that.

I appreciate that. This is something we're grappling with as part of civic resilience, but I think it's a broader conversation that's going on. You've seen Australia now taking steps to remove social media for people under a certain age. These discussions are important for the civic resilience of future generations, which are going to be the leaders of this country.

I wonder, Dr. Bajaj, whether you have a comment on that topic as well.

Shelly Ghai Bajaj: I'd like to emphasize that in our research, and in our focus groups, we often found that the younger users, who were all adult ages—I should add that disclaimer, 18 plus—were also active digital participants. What I mean by this is that they often displayed a high level of digital agency. They understood how the flow of information worked in these digital spaces. In chat groups in which there were older demographics, younger users would often volunteer for the function of correcting incorrect and inaccurate content; take the extra step of having an off-line conversation with, perhaps, a senior family member; negotiate tricky cultural dynamics by walking the fine line of being respectful to a senior but correcting the poor-quality information they were sharing; and flag in a group that this kind of content is inflammatory and shouldn't be shared.

We should absolutely recognize the kinds of harms that digital spaces create for these individual users but, for younger populations, also give them some credit.

The Chair: I'm going to have to interrupt you there. I apologize.

Perhaps you'll have another opportunity with our next questioner.

● (1300)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brière, you may go ahead for five minutes.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us.

Ms. Banka, I commend you for your opening remarks and your commitment.

The subject of citizens' assemblies was raised earlier. I know you said you weren't very comfortable discussing the issue, but I do want to come back to it. I'd like to know how young people get together. How can we bring them together to discuss politics and civic engagement?

Sasha Banka: Thank you for your question.

As far as citizens' assemblies are concerned, I'm going to make sure I do some more research. It's a very interesting area.

I think there are two options. We talked about student organizations earlier. I think they're a great way to reach out to young people. Events could be put on with youth organizations and schools, for instance. I think that's a very easy way of reaching out to students.

We just talked about social media and the harmful effects. When used properly, social media platforms are a very good tool for sharing information.

Speaking from my personal experience, I have a lot of friends who use Instagram to shine a light on causes or challenges in Canada or other countries. I think social media can help people find those opportunities. In my case, I found a lot of opportunities online.

In short, using social media and schools or student organizations are two very good ways to connect with students.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you very much.

Professor Ghai Bajaj, we've talked a lot about foreign influence and the threats we all face.

Could you talk more about the impact those various threats have? What are Canada's vulnerabilities, and how can we be better equipped?

[*English*]

Shelly Ghai Bajaj: I often refer to the information space as being asymmetrical in nature in terms of information threats by foreign adversaries. The asymmetry arrives from a kind of authoritarian advantage that our adversaries often have, in the sense that they often have barriers—whether it's the great firewall in China or closed access and Internet restrictions in countries such as Iran and Russia. They create these physical barriers.

In comparison, the information environments of Liberal democracies are open. By virtue of our existence, we believe in freedom of expression, the right to information and the free flow and exchange of information. This is part of democratic discourse. It also creates a vulnerability for us.

This is also why, if we only chase technological solutions or legal regulatory frameworks, we will always be a step behind the threat. It is why, in our work, we often argue that the best defence is a strong offence. It is why I introduced the idea of civil society and civic resilience as a force multiplier. Because our societies are open, and because they are diverse, we almost have to create multilevel stopgaps for these information threats.

At the strongest level is the civic resilience. This is the most durable. This makes it harder for poor information, influence campaigns and FIMI activities to stick and gain traction in our democratic societies.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you so much.

Madame Broder, would you like to add something to that?

Shlomit Broder: Thank you.

The way I think about it is in the digital spaces—the supply and the demand. I think Shelly's pointing to that as well. We have to go after the supply of disinformation flowing into our systems, but then we also have to create resilience so that there isn't demand.

What creates a harmful narrative that sticks versus one that doesn't? It usually takes advantage of some sort of existing fissure within our society. We have to build up the resilience on the demand side, and we definitely have to go after the supply side, which is very sophisticated. We're never going to stop that flow, but if we can reduce some of it and build resilience to it, that is part of the fight.

● (1305)

The Chair: Thank you so much. That is five minutes.

The bells are ringing, so this committee stands adjourned.