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• (1725)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. I am going to call the meeting to order.

I have a long preamble here, but I want to get right to this so I'm going to shorten it up.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, January 31, 2023, the committee is commencing its study of the use of social media platforms for data harvesting and unethical or illicit sharing of personal information with foreign entities.

This is a reminder that the connections test, for the sake of the committee, has been completed with our witness. I know he is coming to us from Washington, D.C., today, so let's start the meeting.

First of all, I apologize for the late delay, but I have my own 30-minute declaration on decorum at committee that I'd like to read right now.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I also want to recognize that we have the parliamentary officers' study program here today. This is why we have a large crowd in the back. I want to say "welcome to committee" to them as well.

We have our witnesses until 6:30. From TikTok, we have Mr. Steve de Eyre, director of public policy and government affairs in Canada, and Mr. David Lieber, head of privacy public policy for the Americas. I want to thank both gentlemen for being here today.

We're going to start with you, Steve. You have five minutes to address the committee. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Steve de Eyre (Director, Public Policy and Government Affairs, Canada, TikTok): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of committee.

As you said, my name's Steve de Eyre. I'm the director of public policy and government affairs for TikTok Canada. I'm joined by my colleague, David Lieber, who's our head of privacy public policy for the Americas. He's on Zoom from Washington.

While I do work for TikTok, first and foremost, I am a father of two wonderful children. I care deeply about them being safe and secure online—as I know all parents would—so I'm really happy to have this opportunity to be here today to discuss how we're protecting the data of all Canadians, particularly teenagers.

Millions of Canadians and over a billion people around the world come to TikTok to be entertained, to learn and to build community. TikTok is where an incredibly diverse range of Canadian creators and artists are finding unprecedented success with global audiences. It's where indigenous creators are telling their own stories in their own voices. It's where small business owners are finding new customers, not just across Canada but around the world.

For example, just last week I was able to listen to Jenn Harper. She's the CEO of Cheekbone Beauty, which is an indigenous-owned B corp-certified beauty brand. She spoke at the Toronto Global Forum about the role that TikTok has played in helping her to grow a global customer base and build a community that's invested in learning more about sustainability and indigenous peoples.

We know that with this rapid growth comes scrutiny. We welcome conversations around how we protect Canadians' data.

Let me start by addressing a few misconceptions about TikTok.

First, TikTok is a subsidiary of its parent company, ByteDance. ByteDance is not owned or controlled by the Chinese government. It's a private company. Nearly 60% of ByteDance is owned by global institutional investors, such as General Atlantic and Susquehanna International Group; 20% is owned by its founders; and the other 20% is owned by employees like me. Of ByteDance's five board members, three are Americans.

TikTok has thousands of employees around the world, with head offices in Los Angeles and Singapore. We have a Canadian office in Toronto's Liberty Village with over 150 employees who work closely with Canadian creators, artists and businesses to help them achieve success on the platform.

The second misconception I'd like to address is around data collection. TikTok's handling of Canadians' user data is governed by Canadian laws like PIPEDA and provincial privacy laws. The way TikTok collects and uses data is similar to the way in which other platforms do. In fact, when someone signs up for TikTok, all they're required to share is their email or phone number, their date of birth and their country location. These are used to verify that they're eligible to create an account and to create an age-appropriate experience. We do not require users to provide things like their real names or to enter personal details about themselves.

We take security concerns about our platform very seriously, and we are working globally to be responsive and put forth constructive, industry-leading solutions to address any concerns. If the Canadian government has concerns about the safety and security of our platform, we want to understand them so we can address them.

As TikTok has grown, we've tried to learn the lessons of companies that have come before us, especially when it comes to the safety of teenagers. While the vast majority of people on TikTok are over 18, we've spent a lot of time on measures to protect teenagers. Many of these are a first for the social media industry.

For example, when a teen under 16 joins TikTok, their account will be set to private by default and they'll have direct messaging disabled. Teens under 18 are unable to livestream and have a default 60-minute screen time limit turned on. We also provide a suite of family-pairing tools so parents and guardians can participate in their teen's experience and make choices that are right for their families.

We're proud to partner with leading Canadian non-profits like MediaSmarts, Kids Help Phone, Tel-jeunes and Digital Moment to support their work to educate Canadians and to create resources for things like online safety, well-being and digital literacy.

We're proud to have also built a constructive relationship across the federal government over the past few years and to have partnered to support key public policy initiatives. For example, during the 2021 federal election, we worked with Elections Canada to build a bilingual, in-app election centre that provided authoritative information to Canadians on when, where and how to vote. We were also proud that year to sign on to the government's declaration on election integrity online.

TikTok is committed to the safety and security of our community and to maintaining the integrity of our platform.

• (1730)

I look forward to sharing more with you about how we accomplish this.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. de Eyre.

I'm going to remind committee members before we start the round of questioning that we're kind of old school around here. If you have a question, go directly to the witness, either in person or online, just to be clear, and let Mr. Lieber know that you're asking a question.

We're going to start with six minutes for Mr. Kurek.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you to our witnesses for coming.

I'm curious, Mr. de Eyre. You mentioned in your opening statement that you have kids. Do they have TikTok?

Mr. Steve de Eyre: They're too young. In Canada, you have to be 13 to use TikTok, and it's actually 14 in Quebec.

No, they don't use it. I will scroll it with them sometimes and we'll find videos that we want to watch together, but they're too young to have their own accounts.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Okay. I appreciate that.

Now I'm curious about Mr. Lieber and if he has kids. If so, are they on TikTok?

Mr. David Lieber (Head, Privacy Public Policy for the Americas, TikTok): Thank you for the question.

Yes, I do have two children. One is 11 and is too young for TikTok. The other is 15, and he is on TikTok.

Mr. Damien Kurek: I appreciate that.

Speaking of age verification, unlike some social media platforms that have age verification, there seem to be ways around some of these things.

Specifically with TikTok, Mr. de Eyre, you're asked to put in your age, and there are really no questions asked. You talked about that. It's simple, but have the concerns ever been highlighted about how simple that is, in that as a result a young person may be able to access content that would not be age appropriate?

Mr. David Lieber: I'm happy to take that question.

We do have a neutral age-gating function for users. We don't clue them in about what the eligibility age is. We don't indicate to them that providing an age that's either under 13 or over 13 is what they need to do, but I think you're raising a valid point. Age assurance strategies are something that the industry is talking about.

We're talking about things like age detection technology and age verification. Those can be helpful in providing more accuracy about users' ages, but they also have privacy implications. Therefore, there's a broader conversation about the types of age assurance strategies that we can deploy as an industry to increase the likelihood and confidence that we know what age users are when they disclose that to us when they create an account.

• (1735)

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you for that.

I do apologize if this is a little rapid fire, but we have limited time here.

Governments south of the border in the United States and here as well, and a number of provincial governments, as I understand it, have limited TikTok use on government devices, citing security concerns and privacy concerns. Some of that comes back to ownership and where the data is stored. I have a few questions here that I'm hoping you can provide some answers to.

ByteDance's HQ, I understand, is located in Beijing, but the company is registered in the Cayman Islands. Can you provide, in as short a time as possible, an explanation as to why that would be the case?

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Sure. ByteDance is actually a global company. It was founded in China but has offices around the world. As I mentioned in my opening statement, of the board, which it is ultimately responsible for it, three of those five members are Americans.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you for that.

One of the challenges with data is where data is stored. This is not unique to TikTok, but certainly it's been highlighted with TikTok.

You're a global company. Can you highlight—and I'm not asking for an address—the servers? Where are they located? Where does this data flow through? Specifically, as Canadians, for a Canadian on TikTok, where does that data end up? Where is it accessed, both when they're in Canada and if they happen to travel to other jurisdictions?

Go ahead, Mr. Lieber.

Mr. David Lieber: Canadian data is stored in the United States, in Singapore and in Malaysia. That's where the servers are located.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Who has access to those servers? To ensure they are compliant with Canadian privacy laws is obviously a big part of it. I'm wondering if you can highlight how a Canadian can be certain that Canadian privacy laws and their information online are protected when servers are stored around the world and in jurisdictions that have very different privacy laws.

Mr. David Lieber: Thank you for the question.

As I think my colleague Steve noted in his opening statement, we do have a Canadian operating entity. We have Canadian users so we are subject to Canadian law, but I want to emphasize, too, that we have data access approval policies. If any employee wants to access user data, they need to make a request.

We operate by the principle of least privilege, which means that employees only have access to the minimum amount of data necessary to perform their job functions. In some cases, that may mean they don't have access to personally identifiable information at all. We also have data classification policies with increasing levels of sensitivity of data. User data is the most sensitive. If an employee makes a request for user data, that will require increasing and higher levels of approval and more rigorous review.

We think a combination of these protocols addresses some of the risks and concerns you're alluding to.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Okay.

I have a couple of quick questions. I'm hoping the answers can be yes or no.

Does TikTok use biometric data at all, whether that's for logging in purposes and whatnot on a device or for tracking an individual's facial structures and that sort of thing?

Mr. David Lieber: We do not use biometric data to identify individuals. In terms of the data that you may be alluding to, we have filters and effects, so we identify where eyes may be located on a face in order for funny glasses to be put on, for example, or for voice effects. That data is not personally identifiable.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kurek.

Ms. Khalid, you have six minutes. Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing today.

First and foremost, Mr. de Eyre, in your opening remarks you talked about access to TikTok. I will say for the record that TikTok allowed 1.4 million children under the age of 13 to use the app in 2020, despite your own rules that you identified.

I want to talk about a specific thing that you mentioned in your statement. You talked about providing “an age-appropriate experience” to people. What does that mean? How do you identify what an age-appropriate experience is if you're not collecting data on people and what their interests are?

As you're going through that, I'd love to know more about your algorithms and how the content you're displaying to people is for each individual to have an age-appropriate experience or to have an entertainment experience, as you identified in your opening remarks.

• (1740)

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Great. I'd be happy to start on those few questions. I appreciate it and the opportunity to be here.

First, I'm not familiar with the figure you cited. What I can tell you is that we issued our most recent community guidelines enforcement report. It's like a transparency report that we issue quarterly. We issued the report for the second quarter of 2023. It just came out last week. In that report, we identified that we removed over 18 million accounts globally of users who were suspected of being under 13.

I think my colleague David identified to Mr. Kurek some of the tools and some of the challenges but also some of the ways in which we work to identify users who may not be old enough to use the platform. When we do find those accounts, they are removed.

Your second question, about an age-appropriate experience, is an excellent question. We work with non-profits around the world. In Canada those are groups like MediaSmarts, Digital Moment and Kids Help Phone, who are doing leading research on the experience of youth online and how we should approach that. We take that feedback and build policies. In the past few years, we have introduced such things as age-appropriate content labelling. There are types of videos that will be labelled and that will not be recommended to a user who is under 18. Take cosmetic surgery, for example. If somebody posts a video about cosmetic surgery, that's ineligible to be recommended to users under the age of 18.

Does that answer your question?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I obviously would like for you to follow up, perhaps, with a little bit more data on how those algorithms are actually operating in terms of providing an appropriate experience to people. Specifically, how do algorithms work? When you're saying that you're not collecting biometric data, what kind of data are you collecting to be able to determine what is an appropriate reel or TikTok video for a certain person?

Mr. Steve de Eyre: I'm happy to respond to that as well.

Essentially, the way the TikTok algorithm works is that it looks at signals on how you interact with videos. There are positive signals: Do you like it, comment on it or share it? Do you watch the whole video? Do you watch it again? There are also negative signals: Do you swipe away from it within a couple of seconds? Based on that, we can identify what types of videos you like and look at similar other users who have interacted similarly with that video and then recommend additional content to you. That really allows Canadians to find content and to be recommended content that they think they're going to love. That's what I hear all the time when I talk to people about TikTok. They've learned new things and found these niches that are really special to them.

Perhaps I can give you an example. There's actually a creator in your riding in Mississauga. Her name is Danielle Johnson. She has a company called Realm Candles. I got to meet her earlier this year at one of our events. She specializes in vegan, ecofriendly candles that she's had great success on—

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I'm so sorry. I am quite limited on time.

That's really not what I asked. My question is around the framework of how algorithms work. How does the data you're collecting impact who sees what in their TikTok?

As a spin-off, you mentioned that the data for Canadians is stored in the U.S. It is stored, I believe you said, in Malaysia and in Singapore. I'm just wondering how the legal aspect of it works as well for Canadians.

How do they protect their data, when we don't have any offices for your company here in Canada that are looking over Canadian data?

Mr. Steve de Eyre: We have an office in Toronto. As we've said, our operations in Canada are subject to Canadian privacy law.

We're happy to engage further. I'm happy to follow up with some more information about how we protect user data, particularly for younger users.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: If you could follow up on the algorithm piece, I'd love to hear about that as well, please.

Mr. Steve de Eyre: I'd be happy to.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Khalid.

You can submit any information and data to the clerk of the committee as well, Steve, just so you know.

● (1745)

[Translation]

It is Mr. Villemure's turn now.

[English]

Mr. Lieber, I want to make sure that you have your translation on. You're good to go.

[Translation]

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

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

Thank you for being here today, gentlemen.

Mr. de Eyre, how many countries have banned TikTok?

The Chair: I think there was a problem with the interpretation.

It is working now, but I would ask you to start over again please, Mr. Villemure.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you.

How many countries have banned TikTok?

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: I focus on Canada. I don't know what the exact number is, or what you would define as a ban. TikTok is available in most parts of the world—

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Mr. Lieber, can you answer my question in that case? How many countries have banned TikTok?

[English]

Mr. David Lieber: Thank you for that question.

I'm aware of one. India has banned the app. However, as you know, there are countries where the app is not available, due to policies, on government devices. I'm not sure how many of those countries there are.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Since February 23, 2023, a number of countries have banned TikTok. They include India, Indonesia and Pakistan, of course. Canada banned TikTok on government devices as of February 28.

Ireland also fined TikTok 345 million euros. Why? What was that to redress?

The Chair: You have to say who the question is for. That will make it easier.

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: I'm happy to take that.

In terms of the government device ban, there have been a few countries that have put forward those policies, including Canada. We've engaged with the Treasury Board Secretariat and the CIO's office to try to better understand what criteria were used to identify only TikTok and to single out TikTok, and whether those same criteria have been applied to other platforms. We operate similarly to other platforms.

I will say that our policy—and we've been public about this—is that there probably isn't a need to have any social media apps, entertainment apps or gaming apps on a government employee's device, but those rules should apply equally to all platforms.

We've actually seen some harmful effects come out of this ban because there was not enough context and information given. In Quebec, in particular, there are a number of doctors who had grown followings of about 80,000-plus on TikTok. They used the platform they had to educate people about medical misinformation around COVID-19, and they would do those duet videos, where you have—

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: The European Union issued a fine of 345 million euros for privacy violations. Now, the Senate of France has alleged that data was sent to the Communist Party of China. I did say “alleged”.

What do you say to that?

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: I will let my colleague, David, answer that one.

Mr. David Lieber: I'm happy to answer that question.

That fine was imposed, and it was in relation to settings for younger users. The investigation that took place covered the period from July to December in 2020. At the time the investigation was commenced, we had already implemented protocols to make certain teenagers' accounts private by default. Some of the settings that Mr. de Eyre talked about in his opening statement were deployed for all of our users. We addressed those concerns. We disagree with the decision and the fine, and we've appealed that fine.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: The Senate of France said that TikTok was giving the Communist Party of China access to its data. That was

alleged in various contexts, but I am referring to the case of the European Union, which was even detailed in a report.

What are your thoughts on that?

[English]

Mr. David Lieber: We've been quite clear that we would not disclose user data to the Chinese government if it made a request. It has not made such a request, and the Chinese government has not asserted the rights over any TikTok user data. The TikTok app itself is not available in mainland China. As we have discussed before, we have a Canadian operating entity in Canada. We have employees in Canada. We have users in Canada, and we're subject to Canadian law. We also have a biannual transparency report where we disclose the number of government requests that we receive from governments throughout the world. Therefore, if we did receive a request from the Chinese government, we would certainly disclose it in our transparency report.

● (1750)

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: How does TikTok define transparency, in terms of consent?

[English]

Mr. David Lieber: I'm not sure that I understand the question.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Do people who create a TikTok account understand the extent to which their data may be shared, yes or no?

[English]

Mr. David Lieber: Thank you for the clarification; I appreciate that.

Yes, we do have a privacy policy. We publish information about the data that we collect, how we use it, the extent to which it may be disclosed and under what conditions. We provide extensive settings that users can utilize to the extent that they want to limit information sharing.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: I have to interrupt because I only have 30 seconds left.

Do you think users understand how their data is used?

[English]

Mr. David Lieber: We are constantly endeavouring to improve their understanding of how we collect and use data. It's one of the reasons that we provide the settings that we do—so that they can take advantage of those if they want to further protect their privacy. In many instances, as Steve mentioned in his opening statement, those privacy protections are available by default. Users who are under 16 have their accounts set to private by default. Direct messaging is disabled. Livestreaming is unavailable for users who are under 18, and for users who are under 18, there's a 60-minute daily default limit. Those are all industry-leading protections that we deployed, and some of them we deployed several years ago to address some of these very concerns.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

I gave you extra time because the answer was important to the committee.

[English]

Mr. Green, you have six minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead on your point of order.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much.

I'm deeply concerned here, Mr. Chair. You'll recall that, in the outset of the study, I debated vigorously to ensure that other companies were presented here. I have received communications from a Ms. Rachel Curran, somebody who should be well known to the work of committees and the importance of committees. I just want to get clarification from the clerk on which version of the motion was sent to Facebook—or its parent company, Meta—and Ms. Curran. There was a reference to “the use of social media platforms”, in that this study is not just a study about TikTok.

The Chair: I'm going to refer that to—

Mr. Matthew Green: Was it the original version that was sent, Mr. Chair, or was it the amended version that was sent?

The Chair: According to the clerk, Mr. Green, it was the amended version that was sent.

Mr. Matthew Green: Just to be clear, as our Standing Orders present in terms of the parliamentary privileges of committees to seek documents and call witnesses, I want to begin, Mr. Chair, in this point of order by sharing my deep disappointment that a corporation, particularly one like Facebook, which was involved in Cambridge Analytica, can simply send us a letter and say that they're not going to attend based on their personal opinion on the matter.

Just for the record, Mr. Chair, it's not up to their personal opinion. I want to ask you, on this point of order, whether or not this would warrant a follow-up letter from you as the chair to demand that they come here, or whether we ought to seek other more direct subpoena-type powers for corporations—besides TikTok—that have been involved with some serious security breaches and some serious malicious behaviour, as I referenced with Cambridge Analytica, in order to have a full discussion about the impacts of social media. I'm seeking your direction, sir.

The Chair: I appreciate that, Matt. What I'm going to suggest is that we will have time after these witnesses are done. We have a hard stop at seven o'clock if we want, so we can have time to discuss where we want to go with this.

Of course, as the chair, I'll certainly take the direction of the committee, but my suggestion is that we continue. I appreciate your point of order and your concern about this, but my preference is that we continue with the witnesses, because we have them for a short period of time—only until 6:30. Then, if you like, you can bring this up afterwards, sir.

• (1755)

Mr. Matthew Green: I most certainly will.

I'll begin my statement, sir, by welcoming the members from TikTok for having the courtesy and the integrity to show up before this committee. It's a very important discussion. I would suggest that the targeting of one particular company and its geopolitical relationships is troubling for me and is part of a continuing trend of what I would call “red-baiting”, but we'll allow you to answer in this next series of questions.

In reference to the last interventions regarding the French Senate commission of inquiry into the use of the TikTok social media network and the use of the data and strategy to influence, it released the conclusions of its report. They were just referenced. I want to make it crystal clear that while you're here—and certainly we haven't made you swear in officially on oath—I'm going to take you at your word that you understand the quasi-judicial nature of this committee and the seriousness of this study.

One of the conclusions included its finding that the Communist Party and the Chinese intelligence agencies could potentially have access to data collected on TikTok on its users around the world, despite constant efforts to conceal those facts. I want you to provide us with a concise and clear response to that allegation, because it seems to be at the crux of the matter here.

Mr. David Lieber: Thank you for that question. I'd emphasize that it is a theoretical concern that's been raised. We've been pretty clear categorically, sir, that we would not disclose user data to the Chinese government if we were requested to do so.

Mr. Matthew Green: That's a request, sir. What if they didn't ask you? Do they have the ability through their technology or through any other back doors to this through any of your partners, or any relationships to any operations on mainland or in Hong Kong or anywhere else, that might provide them without the need to request any access to user data?

Mr. David Lieber: I'm not aware of any such capability, but I also want to be clear that it would be irresponsible for me or any other employee of a technology company to make categorical guarantees about what governments are capable of or incapable of in terms of their ability to conduct activities, including hacking, on their own initiative—

Mr. Matthew Green: I wasn't speaking about hacking. I was just talking about without requesting, about if they could just access it.

I appreciate the response on that, and obviously that is the crux of the matter. As somebody who has pushed for a wider study on the use of social media, whether it's through private actors like Elon Musk and the kind of unhinged nature in which his takeover of Twitter has resulted in the devolution of that platform, or Facebook or Instagram or others, I think it's important that we get clear about what it is that's at stake here.

One of the other findings from the four headings under the French Senate report included that, for the extensive data collection carried out by the platform, the purposes remain “opaque”. The multi-faceted opacity on the part of the company included its lack of transparency and the opacity of TikTok's recommended algorithm, and the public health issue with regard to concerns about the psychological effects of TikTok, particularly amongst young people.

Do you accept the findings of the report?

Mr. David Lieber: I would disagree with the characterization about extensive data collection. We collect less data in many instances than our competitors. If you sign up for a TikTok account, the only thing you need to provide is an email address or phone number, date of birth and a user name. You can create an account in that fashion. We don't ask for people's—

Mr. Matthew Green: Sir, let's be clear. We know that's how you sign up, and we know that, once the app is installed, you're tracking things whether the app is running or not. Is that not the case?

Mr. David Lieber: What I can tell you is that when people are using our app or collecting information—

Mr. Matthew Green: That wasn't the question I asked you, sir.

Mr. David Lieber: We're not collecting—

Mr. Matthew Green: When you're not using the app, does it continue to collect information on what you're searching—keystrokes, views and all of those things?

Mr. David Lieber: No.

Mr. Matthew Green: Okay.

For the past several years, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States has attempted to negotiate a national security contract with TikTok meant to mitigate concerns that it would be used by the Chinese government to access valuable personal information about U.S. citizens or manipulate U.S. civic discourse. Can you comment on the status of these negotiations, please?

Mr. David Lieber: The status is those negotiations are ongoing.

Mr. Matthew Green: Is that all you're going to comment on?

Mr. David Lieber: I'm happy to talk further about the protocols we've deployed to address those concerns, if that's useful.

We do have a project, called Project Texas, that endeavours to address the concerns that the U.S. government has raised, mainly the concerns about Chinese government access to user data and how the platform may be manipulated or used as a conduit for—

• (1800)

Mr. Matthew Green: Can you appreciate for a moment the concern that I have about the contradiction between your opening remarks about the ability for the Chinese government...and your very clear refusal in terms of its access to your data and the fact that the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States is in the process of an ongoing negotiation for a national security contract?

Clearly, the U.S. thinks this is a problem. Is that fair to say?

Mr. David Lieber: We're eager to address those concerns. We think the protocols that we've developed respond directly to the theoretical concerns that the U.S. government has raised.

Mr. Matthew Green: In the follow-up to the questions about Ireland's data protection commissioner and the fine that was received of 345 million pounds, you addressed some of the things you've changed regarding that. I would like to ask you, are these policies in place for all users or only the ones based in the EU?

Mr. David Lieber: The policies vis-à-vis teenagers are in place for all our users.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

That completes our first round.

[Translation]

We will now begin the second round.

You have the floor for five minutes, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the two witnesses for being here.

My questions are for both of them and pertain to consent for the publication of content.

People often use TikTok for promotional purposes. Artists use it for their art and people in business use it to promote their products. There are people who appear on TikTok involuntarily though because people use other people's videos and modify them without their consent. I was a victim of TikTok. I can tell you that it can be quite a surprise when they give you giant ears and make all kinds of things come out of your mouth.

If I had wanted to make a complaint or have that kind of video withdrawn, how would I have gone about that? Would I have been able to reach someone in my first language of French? Further, would someone in Canada have answered me? Would it have been someone from another country who might not be too bothered that Jacques Gourde is filing a complaint with TikTok?

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Thank you for the question. There are a few things in there I'd love to answer.

We do have a number of policies. We have our community guidelines. Those are public. They're on our website. They outline what is and isn't allowed on TikTok. That's what guides our content moderation. We have a team of over 40,000 safety professionals globally who work every day to moderate content and remove content that violates those guidelines.

For example, if something were to meet our guidelines for bullying, or if something were to meet our community guidelines for violative impersonation of, particularly, public officials...and there's copyright as well. We have intellectual property guidelines. Those could all be instances where that material would be removed. I can't speak to specific instances. I don't work on the trust and safety team. That is separate from the public policy team that I'm on, but I'm happy to follow up with those guidelines or if there's a specific instance that you want us to look into.

In terms of the language, the TikTok app user interface is available in a number of languages, including not just French but also a Canadian French setting. Any user can select that and the entire app and interface will be in Canadian French.

The moderators we have, as I said, are around the world. We do have content moderators in Canada. We have a team across North America and around the world who work 24-7, 365 days a year, to ensure the security of our platform.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Along the same lines, let's talk about the protection of minors. High school students who are 12, 13, 14 or 15 years of age often take videos of other people, and young people end up on TikTok through no fault of their own.

You talked about guidelines and protection earlier. What about when there are abuses? I am thinking about people who have not consented to being in a video. They might appear in videos that are shared around the world and feel ridiculed. This is a form of harassment, it is discriminatory and can be harmful to a young person's development.

Do you have any protection measures? Do you even have redress measures if a young person causes irreparable harm?

• (1805)

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Again, if it were to be the situation where there was ridicule of or discrimination against an individual, whoever it was in the video, that would violate our community guidelines. Any user could report that video. We would review it, and we would remove it.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Can you give the committee any statistics on the removal of videos that prove TikTok's good faith as to the protection of privacy?

If you cannot do so today, could you provide that later on?

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Of course, I'd be happy to share a number of items, including our community guidelines enforcement report that I mentioned earlier. I do have some of the data, if you'll allow me.

In the second quarter of 2023, 885 videos that were uploaded in Canada were removed for being violative of our guidelines. It sounds like a lot of videos, but it's actually less than 1% of the entire volume, and that's a consistent average we see globally. We removed 90% of those videos proactively. That means we didn't wait to get a report. We do rely on user reports; they're very valuable.

We were able to identify 90% of those violative videos and to remove them before a report even came in.

I'd be happy to follow up with the entire report. It's a very rich data report. You can download it as a CSV. I'm happy to make sure you have that information.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

[English]

Thank you, Steve.

We are going to go to Mr. Bains now for five minutes

Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Parm Bains (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be sharing some time with my colleague Ms. Damoff.

Mr. de Eyre, my first question is for you.

In his statements before Congress, the CEO of TikTok, Mr. Shou Chew said, "we do not collect precise GPS data at this point."

However, according to TikTok's privacy statement:

Advertisers, measurement and other partners share information with us about you and the actions you have taken outside of the Platform, such as your activities on other websites and apps or in stores, including the products or services you purchased, online or in person. These partners also share information with us, such as mobile identifiers for advertising....

Can you inform the committee what the difference is between collecting precise GPS data and receiving "mobile identifiers" from third parties?

Mr. David Lieber: I'm happy to answer that question.

It is true that we do not collect precise location information about our users. We do collect approximate location, often based on the user's IP address. What we can do is identify that someone may be in a particular province or city, but we wouldn't be able to identify, with any precision, where an individual was located. We wouldn't be able, for example, to deliver a pizza to somebody's house based on the location information we have.

The part of our privacy policy that I believe you are alluding to discusses how data may be shared from advertising partners that we work with. Sometimes advertisers launch campaigns with TikTok, and they want to understand, for example, when a user has clicked on an advertisement, if they've put something into a shopping cart, or if they've downloaded an app. Oftentimes, mobile identifiers are the ways that we can match up activity between a TikTok user and an action they may have taken on an advertiser's website.

Mr. Parm Bains: The third parties do have access to these identifiers, and they are shared.

Mr. David Lieber: They have access just for the purpose of understanding, for example, how their advertising campaigns worked and whether they were successful: how many app downloads or installs occurred, how many people looked at an ad or how many people may have purchased a good. That's the type of data they're often interested in, and it's more in an aggregated fashion.

Mr. Parm Bains: Okay. I'm just going to follow up with a different question.

According to Reuters:

ByteDance Technology sold a 1% stake in an...deal to WangTouZhongWen (Beijing) Technology, which is owned by three state entities [according to] Tianyancha, an online database of China's corporate records.

The deal also allowed the Chinese government to appoint a board director at Beijing ByteDance....

Why would a 1% stakeholder merit a seat on the board?

That question is to you, Mr. de Eyre.

• (1810)

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Sure, I'd be happy to respond to that and to clarify that. There's been some misinformation around that.

You are correct. There is a Chinese operating entity that's specifically for the Chinese market where that was the case, and my understanding is that's a local law. That entity has nothing to do with TikTok and has no oversight over TikTok. Those employees cannot access TikTok user data, and it is not above TikTok in the org chart.

My understanding is that it is required, and it's for things like content licensing and media licensing.

The Chair: Ms. Damoff, you have one minute exactly.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): I'm timing myself.

Thank you for being here.

I know Cheekbone. I'm wearing it right now, actually.

When you talk about the information that you're able to obtain from people, it reminds me of when we were studying the national security framework, and somebody said, "Oh, it's just a return address on an envelope." If young teenagers are doing certain searches, maybe they have self-esteem issues or they're overweight, you can tell all of that from what they're doing online, and then things get targeted to them.

I know you're on the board of MediaSmarts, so you must care about this stuff a lot, but what are you doing in your company to make sure that young people are being protected online, because it's a lot more than just an email address. A 15-year-old who is having self-esteem issues....

I'll let you go. You only have a few seconds.

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Maybe I can follow up with some more information on that, but thank you for pointing out MediaSmarts. We're very proud to be partners with them, and I'm proud of the work that I get to do with them personally.

We have a number of settings that we have put in place, such as education and advocacy campaigns. We also provide links. If you search for a certain topic that might be related to mental health or well-being, a button will come up in the search results and will direct you to resources like Kids Help Phone or Tel-jeunes, or others that may be able to provide that help.

The Chair: You know you had 30 seconds there, but it was an important response. One of the tough parts about this job, which I don't like, is that I have to cut people off.

[Translation]

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

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

Since I have just two and a half minutes, I will be quick.

Mr. de Eyre, would you agree that the use of social media such as TikTok is a type of addiction?

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: There's a lot of research out there on the appropriate amount of time for social media use, particularly for young people. That is something they should be discussing with their parents or guardians. It may be different for every family.

We take screen time use very seriously. As I mentioned, we have a default 60-minute screen time limit that applies to all users under 18. If you spend time on TikTok after a certain hour, every once in a while a video will come up suggesting that you take a break.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: If you 18 or over, the addiction can nevertheless be real.

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: We think this is an issue that.... Yes, it's something that all people, regardless of their age, should talk about. It's not something that's unique to TikTok. It's an industry challenge.

There's a role for industry, government, civil society and non-profits to figure out how to address this. This is something that Canadians do care about. We care about it. We're trying to work here to find ways to ensure that people who love our product, who love using TikTok, can do it in a healthy way.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Do you think the use of social media such as TikTok, among others, is a kind of manipulation?

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: No, I would disagree with that characterization. We recommend videos to users based on what we think they're going to like and identify videos that we think they would like. David mentioned the town that you're in. Local content and locality of content is something that's important for TikTok, and somewhat unique to TikTok.

If you're in Quebec, you will get more Quebec-based creators recommended to you, and they're able to be discovered. There's actually a great small business in Trois-Rivières called Bonbons Mêlangés. It is an ice cream and candy shop. It only opened in May, and the business has exploded. Because of the interest, people are driving from all over the province to go there to meet the owner, Annie, because of what they see on TikTok.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: It is nonetheless an algorithm that thinks we like something.

• (1815)

[English]

The Chair: Can you provide a quick response, please?

[Translation]

Sorry, but can you ask the question again?

Mr. René Villemure: You said the algorithm thinks you will like something. So decisions are made by something other than the user.

[English]

Mr. Steve de Eyre: The decisions are made and presented to users, and then we can see how.... Depending on how they interact with it, it will present a broad range of choices to them. If they watch a whole video, if they like it, if they interact positively with it, it will recommend more videos, not exclusively, but that will give it a signal of the type of content they like.

I, for example, get a lot of parenting humour. I get a lot of—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. de Eyre. We went over on that one.

It sounds like a road trip to Trois-Rivières is coming up for some ice cream.

Mr. Green, I'm going to give you three minutes, because of Mr. Villemure's three minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much. It's going to give me the opportunity to return to a very important question.

Mr. Lieber, I want you to think carefully about the next question I'm about to ask before you answer it.

I want to begin by referencing “Home Ice Advantage: Securing Data Sovereignty for Canadians on Social Media”, which is dated November 2020.

It states:

TikTok's Privacy Policy states that they store and transfer user data “in Singapore or in the United States, outside of the country where [users] live.”

However, it goes on:

Prior to 2019, TikTok's Privacy Policy stated: “We will also share your information with any member or affiliate of our group, in China, for the purposes set out above...” This provision has since been updated with: “We may share your information with a parent, subsidiary, or other affiliate of our corporate group.”

Based on the questions I asked you, that is a marked departure from the characterization and framing you made about where and how information is shared.

I would like for you now to comment on whether or not you may share information with your parent companies or subsidiaries in China.

Mr. David Lieber: Thank you for that question.

I believe the question you asked before was about storage. We do have a provision in our privacy policy that talks about sharing within our corporate group. There are functions that are performed by other aspects of our corporate family, maybe for something such as troubleshooting an account or—

Mr. Matthew Green: Sir, I wasn't talking about storage. That wasn't the context. The Hansard will reflect that.

I was talking about sharing information with the Chinese government. You stated that is not the case.

It's not about storage. Do you have a parent company in China that has access to user data, yes or no?

Mr. David Lieber: Yes. There are instances where other—

Mr. Matthew Green: Is that Chinese company—your parent company—also regulated under Chinese state national law, such that should the Chinese government want to access their information, third party to you, they could do that, sir? Give me a yes or no.

Mr. David Lieber: I'm not an expert in Chinese law, but what I can speak to—

Mr. Matthew Green: You should be, if you're a subsidiary of a company related to China, sir.

Mr. David Lieber: The Chinese government has not asserted any rights over TikTok's user data.

Mr. Matthew Green: That's not what I asked.

I want you to state whether or not your parent company is subject to the Chinese Communist Party's laws. Is it yes or no?

Mr. David Lieber: The parent company has subsidiaries that are in all parts of the world. Those parts of the world where there aren't Chinese users may have jurisdictional arguments that the Chinese law doesn't apply. I'm not going to opine on the application of Chinese law in each of those subsidiaries.

Mr. Matthew Green: Do you share information with your parent company? Do you sell information? Do you sell it to third parties, yes or no?

Mr. David Lieber: We do not sell information—

Mr. Matthew Green: Do you share information?

Mr. David Lieber: With third parties, we do, as described in our privacy policy.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: Can you clarify the difference between selling data and sharing it with third party partners?

The Chair: Mr. Green, I'm sorry, but that's three minutes. I apologize about that. If we're going to stay on time....

We'll go to Mr. Barrett for five. Then we have one more five with Madame Fortier.

Go ahead Mr. Barrett. You have five minutes.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thanks, Chair.

Thank you to both witnesses for being here today.

I have a couple of very important questions to get through, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention why these questions are so important. These questions are important because I know that for local content creators—we were talking about local content before—your platform presents opportunities. What we need to know is what the risks are to people in our community who are using this platform.

There's a great local story in my riding. Corey and Kyle of McMullan Appliance are TikTok famous with their appliance shop. It's this little appliance shop just outside of Smiths Falls, Ontario. They do a tremendous business in sales as a result of a very entertaining TikTok account.

I wish them continued success in that.

What we need to know, of course, is what risks folks are exposed to as a result of using this.

For either of the witnesses, can you tell me about any connection between TikTok and the United Front Work Department? I'm happy to explain what the United Front Work Department is in further detail if more information is needed—other than its being a propaganda arm of the Chinese Communist Party.

Go ahead, Mr. Lieber or Mr. de Eyre.

• (1820)

Mr. Steve de Eyre: First, thank you for mentioning Corey. I know you've spoken about McMullan Appliance in the House. It's one of my favourite accounts. They've done an amazing job. It shows the global reach of TikTok.

In terms of your question, I'm not familiar with that organization, but I can speak about the Chinese government or the CCP writ large.

TikTok is not available in mainland China. TikTok is not a state-owned enterprise. We are a private organization. ByteDance is a private company. The company is ultimately accountable to the board. Three of those five members of the board are American.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I appreciate that you provided some of that information before, Mr. de Eyre. Can you tell me about a connection between Douyin and TikTok?

Mr. Steve de Eyre: My understanding of Douyin—I've never used it—is that it is a similar product that ByteDance has that is

specifically for the Chinese market, because TikTok is only available outside of China.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Both are owned by ByteDance.

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: We have a social media app for mainland China, and we have a social media app for everywhere else. The app everywhere else is TikTok, and the mainland China app is Douyin. These are sister companies.

Mr. Steve de Eyre: That's a general assessment, yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: There have been media reports that outline what Douyin is used for in mainland China, and it's used as a propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party. They pump hundreds of thousands of dollars into their influencer network so that they can affect the propaganda that the Chinese Communist Party is looking to disseminate through the United Front Work Department.

The proximity between these sister companies is the type of thing that gives rise to great concern for us as legislators, for Canadians as users and for us as parents.

What assurances do we have that the techniques that have been documented as being carried out by the Chinese Communist Party and the United Front Work Department using Douyin, the sister app to TikTok, aren't being employed by the dictatorship in Beijing to interfere in our democratic institutions here in Canada or to affect other nefarious purposes that haven't been detected?

Mr. Steve de Eyre: Thank you for the question. It's a great question, and again I appreciate that you're asking this in terms of ensuring the safety and security of Canadians and your constituents.

I will preface that I work for TikTok. I am not involved in or familiar with.... I have never used Douyin. It is a separate app. TikTok operates for markets outside of mainland China.

Our CEO is a Singaporean. He's based in Singapore. Our general counsel is an American based in the U.S. Our global head of trust and safety is based in Dublin. He is the ultimate authority if you are concerned about things like propaganda videos being recommended. He is the ultimate authority on our community guidelines and what videos come down, and those decisions on content moderation are based on our community guidelines.

I'll just wrap up very quickly. We strive to be very transparent. We have our community guidelines enforcement report, and I will share that with you. We outline in that covert influence operations that we've identified, disrupted and removed from our platform, and I think that speaks to the seriousness with which we take this.

The Chair: Thank you for that. It sounds like we may expand our witness list here.

Madame Fortier, please go ahead for five minutes.

This is the final round.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will share my speaking time with Ms. Damoff.

Thank you for being here today.

We touched on this earlier, that TikTok has been sanctioned various times for violating regulations that protect the privacy of minors or children who use the application, including the 345 million euro fine levied with respect to the accounts of users under the age of 16 that were configured as public by default. The United Kingdom fined TikTok 12.7 million pounds for the improper use of data belonging to users who are children.

Given this very disappointing lack of diligence with respect to the digital safety of children elsewhere in the world, how can we trust TikTok and its operations in Canada?

My question is for Mr. Lieber or Mr. de Eyre.

• (1825)

[English]

Mr. David Lieber: I'm happy to take that question.

I had mentioned earlier that the investigation that took place with the Irish Data Protection Commission centred around settings that were public and that we had changed before the investigation was commenced. We think we've addressed those issues.

However, I take your point. This is an issue that we approach with determination but also with some humility.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Let me be more direct, Mr. Lieber, since I do not have much time left.

What measures are you taking to ensure the safety of minors and children?

[English]

Mr. David Lieber: They are the measures that we discussed. We make the accounts of users who are under 16 private by default. We disable direct messaging for that universe of users. We impose a 60-minute time limit on the use of TikTok, which is a daily time limit, and we limit live streaming to only those users who are over age 18. Those are protections that are industry leading, which we've led on, and we think they protect the privacy and safety of our teenage users.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: My next question pertains to consent. I know we also touched on this, but I want to make sure I understood you correctly. How can you be sure that minors actually consent to the collection of data on your platform, among others?

[English]

Mr. David Lieber: There are certain data elements which, if any company requests them from users, they will need to obtain consent from them. That's more sensitive information like contact lists or precise location information, which we do not ask for, unlike most of our competitors. We've made decisions about the data we collect

in a pretty deliberate way, and we've chosen not to collect data that would be very useful for the company, I think, in order to protect the privacy not only of our teenage users but of our user base writ large.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

I will let Ms. Damoff take it from here.

[English]

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Mona.

I want to go back to the line of questioning I was using before about young people, because I don't think adults understand how much data they're sharing with social media companies. It's not just youth. Certainly, teenagers have no concept of what kind of data you're able to collect and the influence you can have on their interests and the types of things they see. I worry particularly about those who are impressionable and vulnerable and the type of information they receive.

Can you maybe go into a little bit more information on how you're trying to educate teenagers about what they're sharing and what influence that has?

Mr. Steve de Eyre: I'd be happy to.

As I think I mentioned in my opening statement, I'm a father. We live in Oakville North—Burlington. This is something that's really important to me as my kids are coming of age and starting to explore online.

I think we've outlined a few times the settings that we have in place. One thing we may not have mentioned is that, if you're under 16, your videos will not be eligible for recommendation into the "for you" feed, so those will not come up for other users as they come out. We also work extensively with the non-profits that I've mentioned. They're doing some great work. Canada has some of the best non-profits in the world on these issues.

We've hosted sessions with Digital Moment, for example. They're based out of Montreal. We had a youth session at our office in Toronto, where they brought in a number of youth from the area to talk about algorithms, understand how algorithms work and what algorithm bias is. This is an industry issue. It's not unique to TikTok, but we know we are a popular platform and that we have responsibility and a role to play here.

Going to Madame Fortier's question about consent, we know this is something for young people that's in Bill C-27, which is something we're looking forward to being engaged on, especially as it's in committee now. We think there's definitely a role for government and a need to update Canada's privacy laws.

● (1830)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

I want to thank both of our witnesses for being here today, Mr. de Eyre and Mr. Lieber. We certainly could have gone on longer. Unfortunately, circumstances dictated that we had to shorten the meeting. I want to thank you both for being here as part of this important study of this committee.

Ms. Khalid, I have Mr. Barrett first. There are a couple of hands.

Let me dismiss the witnesses, and then we can start.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: That's just it. I wanted to make my point while the witnesses are still here, if that's okay, Chair.

The Chair: Okay, go ahead while the witnesses are still here.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Through you, Chair, I wanted to know if it would be appropriate if we as a committee.... I realize that there was not a lot of time on the clock today for us to get all of our questions in. I'm wondering if our witnesses would be amenable, if the committee sent them a list of questions, to providing written responses.

The Chair: Mr. de Eyre, I suspect that's not a problem for you or Mr. Lieber either. If you do, obviously you're going to go through the clerk, and we'll send them on behalf of the committee.

Gentlemen, I want to thank you for being here today, both Mr. Lieber from Washington and Mr. de Eyre. You should be able to catch your flight back to Toronto, as promised.

I'm going to dismiss the witnesses. I do have a hand in the room and that would be Mr. Barrett's.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks very much, Chair.

I wanted to use the opportunity we had this afternoon to follow up on a notice of motion that I provided to the committee with respect to Sustainable Development Technology Canada.

There were new revelations in news media today with respect to the whistle-blowers in this case who have now expressed a concern for reprisals against them.

The committee currently has this study programmed, and because of the importance of this issue and the runway that's required to get a study off the ground, I would like to move this motion today. We have a few minutes. Members have had a few days to consider it, so I would like to advance this and then we will proceed with this.

This has been circulated to all members of the committee. I will read the motion now. I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and in light of the new information revealed through whistleblower complaints, regarding the one-billion-dollar fund awarded by the government to Sustainable Development Technologies Canada to deliver taxpayer money to the green tech sector, the committee dedi-

cate six meetings to this matter and hear testimony from the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, the Minister of the Environment, the Minister of Finance, and that the committee order the government to produce all documents related to this program, including emails, briefing notes, text messages, contracts, funding agreements, memorandums of understanding and any other document that the government has related to this program.

Chair, it is incredibly important. At a time when Canadians are facing a cost of living crisis, it looks like, as a result of conflicts of interest and gross mismanagement at this taxpayer-funded organization.... Canadians must be able to get answers about the alleged misappropriation of over 150 million taxpayer dollars.

This is incredibly important. I appreciate that this isn't a study that's going to step off on Monday morning or Wednesday afternoon of next week, but I put the motion on notice in good faith because I wanted members to have the opportunity to consider it. With the revelations today about the concerns of the whistle-blowers, the proponents behind this, the prospect of a parliamentary committee studying this should in its infancy provide some comfort that Canadians are now aware, that reprisals would, of course, be unacceptable and that the country is watching.

I think it's incredibly important for our democratic institutions that people know that, when they see something wrong happen, they can bring it forward without those fears of consequences and reprisals, and that they are not working with their hands tied behind their back because of non-disclosure agreements or threats to their safety or their livelihoods.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

The motion has been moved. I'm going to deem it in order, but I will caution the committee that, whichever way we want to go with this, as you stated, it's not going to start in the next couple of weeks. I want to make that clear because we have committed to and are focused on the social media study and that's the actual game plan that we have mapped out between the clerk and the analysts.

I see Madame Fortier, but I'm going to go to you, Mr. Green, first because you had your hand up.

Go ahead, Mr. Green.

● (1835)

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

As you will recall, I think this is an important study. I just want to reference, as I'm sure you will all recall, that in the Trudeau Foundation study we made it crystal clear that, for people who testify here, their testimony is protected. I think it's important for Canadians watching to know that when people participate in these parliamentary committees they should be able to do so with candour. Certainly, whistle-blowers need to be protected, so I wanted to start there.

I do think this is something we could probably get done maybe in two meetings. I don't know that we need three.

If I'm to understand correctly right now, you're looking at three. Is that right?

The Chair: The motion says six, Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: It's six. Okay. That seems like a lot. I'm going to be honest. I'm not on, I don't think, for six meetings, but I will certainly cede the floor to other interventions that might be able to convince me otherwise.

At this point, I think we can bring in the necessary parties and have perhaps the time within two or three meetings to unpack some of that, rather than drag it out over six.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

Thank you for the point on parliamentary privilege being extended to members of the public who appear within the committee structure as well. I think that is an important point.

Madame Fortier, go ahead, please.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

Thank you for bringing that motion forward. I believe there is some importance to looking into it. Perhaps I would suggest the same as my colleague from the NDP, Matt Green, that we don't need six meetings to do so. Two would probably be the better approach.

There is also a lot of effort being done currently, as we know, by the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry in looking into it. We know we saw that there is a Grant Thornton report that has been tabled.

I would bring forward, Mr. Chair, three amendments to the current motion, if I may.

The first one would be, as I mentioned earlier, to replace the words "six meetings" with "two meetings". It would also be to invite the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, but we would remove the words the Minister—

The Chair: Excuse me. Can we...?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Am I too fast? I'm sorry.

The Chair: Yes, we should go one amendment at a time because the clerk has to make note of it.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Okay. I'll go one amendment at a time. I have three.

Do you want me to explain them all first, or do you want...?

The Chair: I think the way we should do this is debate each amendment—

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'm getting coached for the first time. Thank you.

The Chair: That's okay. We should debate each amendment, Madame Fortier, as you propose them.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes, that's perfect.

The Chair: The first one is to go from six to two. We've heard Mr. Green speak to that.

I'd like to hear what you have to say about that particular amendment. Go ahead, please.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Again, I think it's important that we look into it, but we don't need six meetings. Two meetings should be enough for some of the witnesses we could bring forward. I will be sharing further down that there may be fewer witnesses.

I'll share that later.

The Chair: Can we poll the room, then, to see whether there's agreement among the parties on this particular amendment?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Let's just move to a vote on it, Mr. Chair. Then we can move on to Ms. Fortier's next amendment.

The Chair: The first amendment on the motion is to reduce this from six to two meetings.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 7; nays 3)

The Chair: You have another amendment to the main motion as amended. Go ahead, please.

• (1840)

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The motion is to invite three ministers, but I think there is one who could answer our questions and help us get a closer look.

That is why my second amendment would delete the words "Minister of the Environment" and "Minister of Finance".

[English]

The Chair: The second proposed amendment by Madame Fortier is to remove "the Minister of Finance" and "the Minister of Environment", but have the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry appear.

You've heard the terms of the amendment. Is there any discussion on this?

Mr. Barrett, go ahead, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, like the previous amendment, I am also opposed to this amendment.

Because of the seriousness and scope of the issue, the ministers listed were carefully selected. I don't always swing for the fences and ask that, for example, the Prime Minister come to committee on every issue. I think it's important that the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, the Minister of Environment and the Minister of Finance be invited to come to committee, their schedules permitting. I'm sure they'd have the time, if requested.

I'm opposed to the amendment.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Barrett.

[Translation]

Mr. Villemure, you raised your hand. Is it for the amendment or something else?

Mr. René Villemure: No, just to say that I would like to hear the three amendments to give us an overview.

The Chair: Okay.

We are talking about the second amendment right now.

[English]

It's on the floor. Is there any further discussion on this? Do we have agreement among the committee?

We don't.

Let's go to a vote on the amendment, which is to remove “the Minister of Environment” and “the Minister of Finance”, and to have the Minister of Industry, Innovation and Science appear before the committee.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 7; nays 3)

The Chair: We have another amendment by Madame Fortier to the main motion.

Is this the final one?

Hon. Mona Fortier: This is the final one coming from me today.

Again, as we see in the current motion that has been tabled, we talk about perusing all documents related to this program, including emails and briefings. I believe that the report presented by the third party that has been given the mandate to audit this issue—Raymond Chabot Grant Thornton—would be a sufficient document to bring to the committee's attention. I don't think we need to do the job for a third party that just audited this report.

Therefore, my third amendment, Mr. Chair, would be that, after the word “produce”, we would replace the remaining text with a copy of the report by Raymond Chabot Grant Thornton. That is my third amendment.

The Chair: Okay. We've heard the terms of the amendment, which is, just to recap, after the word “produce”, to include the report from Raymond Chabot Grant Thornton; that is, to eliminate all the words after “produce” and replace them with that.

Mr. Kurek, go ahead, please, on the amendment.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Chair.

I think it's concerning that we would not permit the committee to take a look at what, obviously, is a very concerning situation and the associated documentation. The government has a track record of covering up, of not producing documents when asked and of hiding behind things like cabinet confidence.

Mr. Chair, I think it's important that this motion be expansive in allowing this committee to access any and all documentation that is related to this issue to ensure that Canadians can in fact get answers.

With respect to the intent of the motion, we understand and we've heard that an audit and an investigation has taken place, but certainly, there's a basic question of trust here. Certainly, I hear from Canadians on a daily basis that there is not trust in the government and, as a result, I think this committee needs to have the ability

to ask for those documents and certainly should be entitled to do so.

I think it is incumbent upon us to keep that in the motion, and I certainly will not be supporting this amendment.

● (1845)

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Kurek.

I see that Mr. Green's hand is up.

Go ahead, Mr. Green.

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

I'd like to take a moment to just draw on some experience I had in another committee that had a prolific number of document requests.

Through you, Mr. Chair, does anybody around the table have any idea, based on appendices or anything, of how many documents we're talking about? The reason I ask is that I would like for this committee.... I would assume that this committee would like to see the documents before we commence the study. I think that would be an obvious first step. We would receive the documents, and then we would have the study, rather than call witnesses before we've seen any of the documents.

If that's the case—and we're talking about documents in the thousands, or as in my other committee, tens of thousands—I would caution that this would require a translation service that might prove to be onerous for the purpose of this study. We need to ensure that the French language is protected at all times within the House of Commons, and that bilingualism is protected as a foundation of the country.

My concern is that, if we're doing a demand for documents that includes tens of thousands of documents, in a very practical way it would be very unlikely that we would get to this study before at least mid-2024. That's what I'm dealing with at another committee.

I'm wondering if there's any light on exactly what it is that we're talking about in terms of the scale of the documents.

The Chair: Frankly, Mr. Green, I just asked the clerk and there is no way of knowing this, but there are some options that we could explore. We could start by accepting the amendment as proposed by Madame Fortier to have the report. We're going to have the study. We're going to have witnesses that come, so the committee can, at any point, ask for particular documents to be requested either after or during the appearance of a witness before the committee.

We have no way of narrowing down, based on the way the motion is right now, just what the volume of the documents is going to be. If there's some way.... Maybe we start with the report—this is my suggestion as the chair—and then, of course, as you know, Mr. Green, the committee has the ability and the authority to compel witnesses for documents if we require them at a later time.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Chair, again, on a practical notion, I haven't received...or I don't know the full extent of the report. Do you know how many pages it is? Has it already been translated into both official languages? We may find that it's voluminous. We may find that there are two or three.... I don't know how extensive the Grant Thornton audit was.

Does anybody in the room know how many pages it was? These are practical considerations that would create a tremendous delay and would be pretty cost-intensive for us to have to translate.

The Chair: I don't have an answer to that question.

If anybody in this room does have an answer to the question, please help me out here.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Although I don't know the actual number of pages, I do think it is a more clear, concise or clean way for us to start this, as opposed to just putting out a call for a whole bunch of documents that we have no idea about.

I absolutely agree with Mr. Green. We should have a more practical approach to this. I'm more than happy to start with this report and then see where we land.

The Chair: I have Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: If I could have the floor, Chair, although I will cede the floor to any other members from other parties who want to go on the record and say they agree with me.... I'm happy to do that any time.

I'm looking for my Conservative and Bloc friends to do the same. We can move forward with this. I want to let everyone know where we're headed, because I know, Mr. Villemure, that the francophones around the table, Ms. Fortier and others, will not allow us to receive information that is not translated into both official languages. As New Democrats, we will continue to fight for those language rights.

At this point, I'm happy to end my time on the intervention and allow my colleagues to intervene.

• (1850)

The Chair: Okay. Thank you for your intervention, Mr. Green.

I'm interested in hearing what.... I do have a list. I have Mr. Villemure, Mr. Barrett and Madame Fortier.

Look, we've made some headway here in terms of coming to an agreement on at least two of the amendments, the majority of the committee.... I suspect that the emails and all of the documents will be exhaustive. If there's some way that we can find a way to start with this report, I would strongly consider that, and then use our leverage as a committee to compel further documents if we need to at some point. This may be a good starting point for us. Maybe not. It all depends on the committee.

Go ahead, Mr. Villemure.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Such reports are usually complete and are rarely more than a hundred pages.

I have contributed to various reports and I think they serve as a good basis. Even if we start looking through emails, among other things, we are not even able to analyze them. To my mind, the report is sufficient. It was probably produced in both official languages, so I am happy to start with that.

I would like to propose an amendment later on.

[English]

The Chair: I'm relying on Alexandra here, our analyst.

In a September 25 news article, the report was expected to be released publicly in the coming weeks. We're in the coming weeks. I'm not sure that the report has been released at this point. I suspect, as Alexandra said, that perhaps it's in translation in order to be released publicly. Just to be clear, that report is not available at this point—at least based on this.

Go ahead, Michael.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, should I complete my hat trick and lose three votes in a row here?

To Mr. Green's point, if we request this report and it's not available because it has not been produced or the translation has not been provided for it, I wouldn't see anyone on the committee looking to take steps to order its production when it's in production. As a starting point, as you said, if the committee then has a request for individual documents that we've identified through witness testimony or through our review of this report once it's available in both official languages, then I think we could further our end of providing some answers for Canadians.

The Chair: Okay. What I will do, with the help of the clerk and the analyst, is find out when the expected date of this report is to be released publicly, and if we can find out an answer to that. As I stated earlier, we're not going to start this study if the motion is adopted as amended in the next couple of weeks. This article appeared on September 25, and it said that it was going to happen in the coming weeks. We are in the coming weeks now. If you can just leave that with us, we'll find out if we can get some information and then I can relay that to the committee.

Michael, if you're saying this is a good starting point and that we can agree to that....

I have Mona next.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: I just want to say that it is important that the document be produced in both official languages, but we have already discussed that.

The Chair: We know it is important to produce the report in both official languages. It will not be sent out in one language only.

[English]

On the amendment, I'm sensing we have agreement on that.

I don't need to take a roll, do I? What do you want to do?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Let's do it. Let's make it a hat trick.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 7; nays 3 [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: We have a motion as amended.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mr. Villemure.

• (1855)

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

I would also like to suggest an amendment to the motion in order to include the evaluation of the degree of ministerial interference or potential ministerial conflicts of interest in this situation. Ideally, I would like to motion to be worded that way.

The Chair: Just to be clear, which minister are you referring to?

Mr. René Villemure: The one who will be appearing at committee, obviously.

The Chair: Just a moment please.

There is a question and a suggestion from the clerk.
[English]

We're worried about where this might go.

Madam Clerk.

[Translation]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Nancy Vohl): In an ideal world, when someone suggests amendments, they provide a sentence, indicating where in the motion it is to be inserted.

Can you give us the exact wording?

Mr. René Villemure: I propose that the Minister of Innovation appear to evaluate potential interference or conflict of interest in this regard.

The minister will be appearing for a reason, and it is part of the committee's mandate.

The Chair: Mr. Villemure proposed an amendment. Are there any comments?

[English]

Mr. Barrett, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I support the amendment.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is there any other discussion? I don't see any.

[Translation]

Are we in agreement on Mr. Villemure's amendment?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Could someone repeat the amendment? The first time, I thought it pertained to the minister, but now it seems that it pertains to the situation.

I just want to make sure that I understand the difference.

Mr. René Villemure: I propose that the Minister of Innovation appear to evaluate the minister's potential interference and to a potential ministerial conflict of interest.

The Chair: If I understand correctly, that would be after the minister's appearance, is that correct?

Mr. René Villemure: No. I am proposing that this be included now so we can talk to him about it.

[English]

The Chair: No, that's okay.

Just hang on a second, guys. Let's get through this, if we can.

Do we have agreement on division?

(Amendment agreed to on division [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Villemure.

Mr. Green, can I assume that you were good with the amendment? Okay. Thank you.

Now we're on the main motion as amended.

Is there any further discussion on the main motion as amended?

Seeing none, by a show of hands, do we have agreement as a committee on the main motion as amended?

(Motion as amended agreed to on division [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: Mr. Green, can I circle back with you to have a discussion about what you brought up earlier? I do have some information that's relevant to your concern. I'd like to do that, if we can get together at some point tomorrow, and then we can discuss it. Obviously, I'm at the will of the committee if the committee wants to expand this further, but there was some discussion about the amendments and the motion as related to the social media study. I would like to discuss that with you first. Then, if we need to, we can bring that back to committee at the next meeting.

The clerk has just reminded me again that we work on deadlines here. On Ms. Khalid's point about asking TikTok for any further information and any questions that we have, can we set a firm deadline?

I'm going to suggest maybe a week from now. Is a week from today too long or too short to have your questions in to the clerk so that they can send them to TikTok?

• (1900)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Chair, I can probably have them in by the end of the week, to be honest.

The Chair: How about Friday by five o'clock?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Yes. I'm not sure how other members feel about it, but I have my questions prepared.

The Chair: Okay. Why don't we look at Friday by five? That provides a little bit of clarity on your side.

A voice: Is there a deadline for them to answer back?

The Chair: Do we want a deadline for them to answer back?

Ms. Khalid, do you have any suggestions?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: A week would be fantastic. We do want to be able to write the report based on the answers.

The Chair: Okay. Our deadline for proposing questions will be Friday at five o'clock. Their deadline for responding to questions will be the following week at five o'clock.

Now, we do have a study budget that should be adopted today. I don't expect that this will be a problem. I just want to make sure we have the approval of the committee on the budget. We have a study budget that is in the amount of \$22,250.

Can I seek approval from the committee to approve the budget?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Have a great week, everyone. We'll see you on Monday.

The Chair: I want to thank everyone for today. We started what I thought was a really good study.

I want to thank the clerks and the analysts for all their preparatory work on this, which will continue next week. Thank you to the technicians as well.

The meeting is adjourned.

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