



Interview Summary: Media Ecosystem Observatory (Aengus Bridgman, Peter Loewen and Taylor Owen)

Aengus Bridgman, Peter Loewen and Taylor Owen were interviewed by Commission counsel on August 21, 2024.

Notes to reader

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.

1. Witness Background

- [1] Aengus Bridgman is an Assistant Professor (Research) at the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University. He is the Director of the Media Ecosystem Observatory (“**MEO**”).
- [2] Peter Loewen is the Harold Tanner Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Cornell University. He was previously Director of the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy and the Robert Vipond Distinguished Professor in Democracy, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto. He is the Co-Principal Investigator at the MEO.
- [3] Taylor Owen is the Beaverbrook Chair in Media, Ethics and Communications, the Director of the Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy, and an Associate Professor in the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University. He is the Co-Principal Investigator at the MEO.

2. The Evolving Media Ecosystem in Canada

- [4] The witnesses were invited to describe how Canada’s media ecosystem has evolved in the last 20 years.
- [5] Professor Owen discussed the evolution of the communications infrastructure. He described the media ecosystem once being characterized by “industrial” production and

dissemination. Traditional media – such as newspapers – were responsible for both producing media and distributing it to viewers. They were also responsible for ensuring that the information they produced was reliable and to filter out unreliable or incorrect information. The financial model that prevailed at the time permitted these industrial actors to combine production, filtering and dissemination functions.

- [6] The advent of the internet disrupted this model in several ways. One way was the decentralization of content production. With the internet, the production of media was no longer centralized in a small number of industrial entities but was performed by a wide range of actors.
- [7] The filtering function also changed. Starting with the rise of social media, the key factor in filtering information was “social”. An individual would be exposed to information based primarily on what their friends, family and other online connections were sharing. This shift in filtering from industrial to social resulted in a set of norms and processes being developed, such as content moderation rules on platforms. Media organizations tried to adapt to this form of filtering in order to increase the reach of their publications.
- [8] The 2019 and 2021 General Elections both occurred during a period where the core drivers of visibility and perceived reliability were social networks.
- [9] Since the 2021 election, there have been further changes. While production remains decentralized, distribution has become highly centralized in the hands of a small number of online platforms. Filtering, however, is no longer based on social connections. Instead, the main driver of visibility are centralized algorithmic systems. What a user’s friends say and do is no longer a determinate of what information they will be exposed to. Instead, a platform’s algorithm determines, on a highly individualized basis, what a user will see. TikTok was the first platform that was characterized by algorithmic filtering, but it has expanded to most major platforms.
- [10] Professor Loewen noted that how one defines the media ecosystem is important. If one were to ask the question of how people learn about politics before 2000, the answer would include national and local TV and radio, national and local newspapers, magazines, possibly news letters from organizations like churches, and through direct conversations with other people.

- [11] Each of these elements has declined over the last 25 years to a greater or lesser degree. Print subscriptions to newspapers and magazines are now much less common, though reading articles from these publications online is still common. Watching national news is less common, but the decrease has not been as dramatic. Much more dramatic has been the decline of local news, both on TV and in print.
- [12] By 2010, print subscriptions were in decline, and at the same time Google began to monopolize the online ad market. This led to the rapid decline in newspapers as they lost print ad revenue and could not make it up with online ad revenue.
- [13] Less is known about the consumption of news through media not traditionally viewed as news media, such as Twitter and TikTok, or whether these platforms have displaced person-to-person conversation as a means of conveying information.
- [14] Professor Loewen noted that it is not clear whether, considering all avenues of conveying information, people today are exposed to a greater amount of false information than before. The online environment makes it easier to distribute false information much more quickly and broadly, but there are also greater abilities to identify and track false information as compared to – for example – person to person conversations.
- [15] Professor Bridgman discussed the evolving role that anonymity has played in the online ecosystem. When social media first became widespread, there was a common optimistic view that it would permit radical connections between individuals and provide opportunities for people to come together to enact social change.
- [16] Today, the most influential voices in online spaces are typically known entities, but there is also mass anonymity. As a result, the origins of ideas and information is often murky. In a previous era, consumers knew who was providing them with information, such as an identifiable media outlet or a person that they knew. Today the online environment is impacted by the anonymous creation and dissemination of ideas. Signals of agreement and value given to opinions (i.e. engagement in social media spaces) are also informed by this anonymity and this affects how people interpret the political world.

- [17] Starting in 2015 and 2016, misinformation and disinformation became prominent in the academic agenda. Researchers have attempted to study it on the assumption that it is a distinct phenomenon that operates differently from other types of information, and which can be identified, tagged and tracked. In the last 5 years, it has become increasingly clear that this may be unrealistic. It is difficult to distinguish it from true information. While there is nothing uniquely new about misinformation and disinformation, anonymity makes it hard and often impossible to know where ideas come from, and false information can circulate in the same way as true information
- [18] Professor Bridgman cautioned that it can be a mistake to assume that what occurs in online spaces is an accurate reflection of what is going on in the real world. Research shows that there is a chronically online population in Canada that shares misinformation and disinformation, but that this population is very different from most Canadians. However, it is possible for these individuals, even if they are small in number, to have significant impacts in the real world.
- [19] When asked about what features of the information ecosystem may be novel or different in 2025 and beyond, Professor Loewen referenced the role that Artificial Intelligence (“AI”) could play in spreading information. The capacity of AI to generate high quality visual or persuasive language at scale has a significant potential to impact the ecosystem in the near term. Professor Loewen further noted that the low cost of using AI to generate content could have a particular impact in the context of elections. He referenced legislated limits on election advertising spending as a central feature of Canada’s approach to electoral fairness. Generative AI could disrupt this approach by permitting the production of impactful political messages during an election at low or no cost.
- [20] Both Professor Bridgman and Professor Owen agreed that generative AI was likely to be a significant new feature of the information ecosystem. They also made reference to the move towards hyper-personalized information flows arising from platform algorithms as a factor that will continue to have a growing impact on the ecosystem.
- [21] Professor Owen noted that platforms are still in the process of developing AI policies, and that he does not believe that they will be fully implemented in time for Canada’s

next federal election. He noted that a large amount of content on platforms is already generated by AI, and that we are reaching a point where people will be exposed to more content that is AI-generated than produced by humans.

- [22] Professor Bridgman identified the removal of news content from Facebook and Instagram [as a result of the enactment of the *Online News Act*], as well as the evolving practices of Twitter/X under new ownership as additional factors that will impact the media ecosystem going forward. Professor Owen indicated that the loss of an estimated 11 million views of journalist-produced publications by Canadians is likely a net negative as those publications had a least some presumptive integrity to them.
- [23] Professor Loewen agreed that there is likely a significant social cost to the loss of news sharing on Facebook. He also questioned whether the *Online News Act*'s system of subsidies will make media entities better or worse off financially, which could have further impacts on the information ecosystem. Professor Owen suggested that it would likely vary from publication to publication.
- [24] Professor Bridgman noted that the Canadian public is now significantly more attentive to the issue of foreign interference. This could have a range of impacts on the information ecosystem. On the one hand, people are now on the lookout for what could be foreign interference in the information ecosystem and may be more likely to flag it for academics, journalists, or government. On the other hand, this may result in hypervigilance that results in overreactions to information that may or may not be foreign interference.
- [25] Professor Loewen commented that, if online platforms become so distrusted due to concerns about foreign interference, AI deepfakes or other factors, people may simply no longer turn to these platforms to obtain information on political topics at all. Professor Owen suggested that this could also lead to members of the public placing a real premium on events that they can be confident are authentic, such as the leaders' debates during elections. These events could regain some of the prominence that they once had in previous decades.

3. The Media Ecosystem Observatory

3.1 The Creation of the MEO

- [26] The MEO emerged from conversations between Professors Loewen, Owen and other colleagues in the period leading up to the 2019 federal election. They were concerned that there was not a sophisticated capacity in Canada to understand what was taking place in the Canadian information ecosystem.
- [27] They felt that having the capacity to better understand the Canadian ecosystem – which is different from other media ecosystems in which work was being done – was important to understand what was taking place during elections. Methodologically, it would also be challenging to recommend policy based off research into other jurisdictions' media ecosystems. There could be no certainty whether Canada's ecosystem was the same or different from other jurisdictions in relevant ways.
- [28] Professors Loewen and Owen also believed that there were very few entities that brought together research in both the media ecosystem itself (e.g. how information flows) and behavioral responses (e.g. how individuals respond to the information they are exposed to). They believed that there would be value in bringing these two pieces together.
- [29] It would likely require government support to do this type of work due to how resource intensive it would be to work at such a large scale. However, Professors Loewen and Owen also felt that the work should occur independently of government. They did not believe that law enforcement, security and intelligence agencies, or other government actors should be involved in the actual data collection and monitoring work itself.
- [30] As a result of these discussions, the MEO was created as a co-led initiative between the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University, and the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy at the University of Toronto. It brings together expertise in computer science, political science, communications science and public policy in order to better understand Canada's media ecosystem using large-scale online data analysis and survey research.

- [31] The goals of the MEO are to enhance our understanding of what the media ecosystem looks like, how information moves through it, who are the relevant actors within it, how its operation impacts the information people are exposed to, and how that influences their behavior. The intended audiences of the MEO's work include individuals, journalists, and policy makers.
- [32] The MEO operates independently of government. While it receives government funding, it does not take direction from government in how it operates. Both Professor Owen and Professor Loewen noted, however, that the MEO is designed to engage in research with a high degree of relevance to policy makers. As such, the MEO does not hesitate to engage with government. While all of its reports are released and made available to the public, the MEO will also brief civil servants about its findings. This includes officials within the Privy Council Office ("**PCO**"). The information provided to Government officials is the same as the information the MEO makes publicly available.
- [33] The MEO is in regular contact with the Democratic Institutions Secretariate of the Privy Council Office ("**PCO-DI**"). It maintains a standing monthly meeting with the Protecting Democracy Unit ("**PDU**"), which regularly connects the MEO with other government audiences to share its work. The MEO does not have a formal relationship with officials on the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol's Panel of Five. However, the MEO hopes that these bodies take an active interest in their work, and this appears to be the case. While the MEO is unable to make determinations about the integrity of elections, they can provide baseline information about the information ecosystem and understand how shocks can impact its operation. This can be valuable information for entities such as the Panel of Five to use when performing their own functions.

3.2 MEO's Activities 2019-2022

- [34] MEO began its work by examining the media ecosystem in the run up to and during the 2019 General Election. It undertook this work with funding from the Digital Democracy Project/Public Policy Forum, the Rossy Family Foundation, the Luminate Group, the McConnell Foundation and the Mozilla Foundation. Its work involved monitoring digital and social media, conducting national surveys and studying a sample of metered online

data (i.e. data from a group of individuals who agreed to have their online activities logged and tracked for research purposes). This resulted in a report entitled *Lessons in Resilience: Canada's Digital Media Ecosystem and the 2019 Election*.¹

- [35] At the same time, the MEO also participated in a parallel project called the Digital Ecosystem Research Challenge, co-led by Professor Owen and Professor Elizabeth Dubois at the University of Ottawa, which was funded through a grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage. In this project, the MEO distributed the data that it collected to 17 other projects across Canada. This permitted these projects to undertake their own analytical work using the MEO's data respecting the 2019 election. This resulted in a report entitled *Understanding the Digital Ecosystem: Findings from the 2019 Federal Election*.²
- [36] Following the 2019 General Election, the MEO's infrastructure was established and was available to continue its data collection. It also continued to maintain relationships with partner institutions, sharing the data it collected to permit them to conduct their own analysis.
- [37] When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Canada in early 2020, the MEO focused its attention on how pandemic-related information circulated in the Canadian media ecosystem. During this period, the MEO had more frequent interactions with the Government of Canada, providing them with information about how information related to the pandemic was circulating in Canada.
- [38] In 2021, the MEO once again focused on the health of the media ecosystem as it related to the federal General Election. Compared to 2019, the MEO was able to conduct a more sophisticated analysis of the 2021 election. This resulted in a report entitled *Mis- and Disinformation During the 2021 Canadian Federal Election*.³

¹ COM0000511.

² COM0000578.

³ COM0000512.

3.3 The Canadian Digital Media Research Network

- [39] In April 2022, the MEO received a grant from Canadian Heritage through the Digital Citizenship Contribution Program in order to develop a new structure called the Canadian Digital Media Research Network (“**Network**”).
- [40] The Network is a partnership between the MEO and nine external organizations who collaborate in order to better understand the Canadian media ecosystem.
- [41] The MEO serves as the core of the Network. It is responsible for data collection related to the media ecosystem, as well as coordination of the Network and administering funding. Other members of the Network gain access to the MEO’s data and can apply their own methodologies and expertise to analyze it from their own perspectives.
- [42] The logic behind the Network model is that the cost of data collection should not be unnecessarily duplicated. Prior to the Network, researchers would be responsible for both collecting data on the media ecosystem as well as analyzing it. Performing both functions is resource intensive. By centralizing data collection with MEO, the Network relieves partners of this burden and permits them to focus on analysis. Internationally, the MEO is the only organization performing this type of centralized data collection for an entire country’s media ecosystem.
- [43] In addition to collecting and distributing data, the MEO also performs its own analysis. Every month, under the auspices of the Network, the MEO releases a Situation Report, which reports on the state of the information ecosystem in the previous month as it relates to politics, media and the broader state of democracy.⁴
- [44] The Network is intended to take a leading role in monitoring the online ecosystem during the 45th General Election and identifying misinformation and disinformation impacts on the election. However, the ability of the Network to perform this function is contingent on continued funding. The Network is currently only funded through to the end of March 2025.

⁴ For examples of MEO Situation Reports, see COM0000514, COM0000515, COM0000516. For the MEO’s methodology for producing Situation Reports see COM0000499.

4. Methodological Approaches to Monitoring and Countering Misinformation and Disinformation

4.1 Generally

- [45] Commission counsel asked the witnesses to discuss the methodologies that are used to detect misinformation and disinformation in the online environment as well as to counter its effects.
- [46] Professor Bridgman explained that different types of actors have used different methodologies, and that those methods have evolved over time. He identified three categories of actors who have played some role in this: journalists, civil society organizations, and academic researchers.
- [47] Professor Loewen stated that starting in the 2000's, journalists began to engage in "fact checking" of political discourse. At the time, these activities were done in order to gain readership, and perhaps not principally out of a policy concern regarding mis and disinformation or foreign interference in elections. Professor Bridgman indicated that, subsequently, when foreign interference in elections became a more widespread concern, civil society organizations also began to engage in fact checking of political statements with the goal of providing accurate information to the public.
- [48] More recently, it has become apparent that there are limits to fact checking, both in terms of understanding how misinformation and disinformation circulates, and to counter it. Professor Owen noted that researchers have now discovered that journalistic attempts to debunk misinformation often result in the amplification of misinformation on account of bringing public attention to it.
- [49] Both journalists and civil society actors began to increasingly rely on ethnographic methods based on observing online communities. In some cases, they embed themselves within these communities by creating accounts on platforms and devoting significant time to both observing and engaging with online actors. The focus of this work was on understanding the actors who generate and spread mis and disinformation, and the environments in which they operate.

- [50] Academic researchers subsequently began to get involved in these types of activities as well. Their focus was less on understanding particular pieces of misinformation and disinformation, and more on understanding the structure of mis and disinformation within the online ecosystem. To that end, researchers began to examine misinformation and disinformation “at scale,” meaning across the online ecosystem as a whole.
- [51] A limit on such large-scale research is that it is largely retrospective. While researchers can identify an event that occurred in the past and analyze how misinformation or disinformation spread, by the time these research results are made public, the event has already occurred and its impact has been felt. Organizations like the MEO attempt to address this limit by focusing on active monitoring methods, which allow for more real-time detection of events and timely reporting.
- [52] Professor Owen added that the move towards large scale monitoring has also applied to fact checking by online platforms themselves. He referred to platforms like Facebook that adopted large-scale content moderation practices backed by tens of thousands of fact checkers. This occurred because, for a time, the spread of misinformation and disinformation was viewed as an existential threat to the continued viability of these platforms. Fact checking became a major driver, along with social connections, of what users were exposed to online. Platforms imposed a range of measures to limit exposure to unreliable information, from small “nudges” like fading images or suggesting alternative sources of information, to blocking access to information.
- [53] More recently, two features have led platforms to cease this type of at scale fact checking. First, the movement away from social filtering and towards algorithmic filtering meant that there was more centralized control over what users were exposed to. Second, there has been a strong ideological movement away from fact checking. Today, many view fact checking as a form of censorship that should not be performed by platforms. The result of these two trends is an ecosystem in which scaled fact checking by platforms is largely absent.
- [54] Professor Owen pointed to the current “community notes” feature of Twitter/X as an interesting experiment in decentralized fact checking.

4.2 Methods Employed by the MEO

- [55] The MEO does not focus its attention on trying to understand individual pieces of misinformation or disinformation. Instead, they attempt to understand the online ecosystem as a whole. They also focus on real-time data collection and analysis.
- [56] The MEO uses three main sources of information in order to perform this function: digital trace data, representative surveys, and media monitoring.
- [57] **Digital trace data** is any information that is left on a platform that can be collected and analyzed. This can include metadata such as likes, shares, comment counts, embedded links, uploaded photos, hashtags, mentions and post URL. The MEO collects digital trace data from six major online platforms hosting political content: TikTok, Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Telegram. This data can be analyzed together to identify semantic similarity of text over time – in other words, identifying posts that have a similar idea, and tracing their relationships with one another. This permits the MEO to identify the spread of information not only within a single platform but also across the major platforms operating in Canada.
- [58] The MEO has triaged the Canadian information ecosystem by identifying approximately 4,000 key accounts that appear to have the most significant impact on the spread of political information. It also has identified key accounts from foreign countries that are known to produce misinformation and disinformation that is relevant to Canada. These include China, Russia and India. Its media monitoring team [discussed below] is constantly evaluating the ecosystem to identify additional key accounts to monitor.
- [59] **Representative surveys** of the Canadian population are taken on a rolling basis to capture attitudes and opinions, with a particular focus on misinformation and disinformation. The MEO partners with a commercial polling panel provider to conduct a monthly survey of a nationally representative sample of approximately 1,500 Canadians. These surveys are used in order to assess the impacts of events within the information ecosystem on Canadians. While the circulation of information in the online ecosystem is itself an “impact”, the more significant question is whether that information changes individuals’ views or behaviours. Surveying attempts to address this question.

[60] **Media monitoring** is done by a team of researchers who spend time reading online information in order to obtain more qualitative data about the ecosystem. This includes monitoring non-English or French content, such as Simplified Chinese communications on WeChat. The media monitoring function identifies and tracks trending true and false stories. This information helps to contextualize the empirical data obtained by the MEO and to describe specific information trends that occur.

4.3 Incident Response Framework

[61] Within the framework of the Network, the MEO has been developing its core analytic model into something that can rapidly respond in a sophisticated way to information incidents that occur, including during an election. The objective is to permit the network as a whole to serve an incident response function. The MEO role is primarily related to data collection and dissemination, as well as coordination of the Network.

[62] An information incident is defined as a disruption to the information ecosystem, including both sudden and prolonged interruptions, which significantly impact the normal flow of information or the integrity of information, leading to potential or actual harm to the public, government, democracy or the information ecosystem itself.

[63] When the MEO detects or otherwise becomes aware of an incident, subject matter experts from within the Network conduct a rapid evaluation in order to determine whether the framework should be activated, and if so what resources are required for a response. A range of criteria are used, such as the number of platforms that are involved, or whether the incident is occurring during a key democratic moment.

[64] MEO collects and distributes data to members of the Network who are called upon to rapidly analyze the information and produce reports analyzing the incident. Multiple Network members may provide their own perspectives on the event in question, with the aim of shedding as much light as possible on the event.

[65] For each incident, the Network releases an initial incident notification, which includes a timeline of events and describes key questions that the Network seeks to address. It also shares incident updates, which are rapid findings from Network members that are shared as they are produced. Ultimately, the MEO produces an incident summary,

which summarizes the research findings of the Network members involved in the incident response and reflects on the overall findings that have been produced.

- [66] All three types of reports are made publicly available on the Network's website.
- [67] Where possible, the Network will attribute an information incident to a source, including a foreign government source. However, this will not always be possible.
- [68] The Network has tested out versions of the incident response framework on a small scale, including in response to the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023, and the bot network campaign connected with a Conservative Party of Canada event in Kirkland Lake, Ontario in August 2024. The Network intends to pilot the incident response framework in the electoral context during the 2024 British Columbia provincial election.

4.4 Methodological Challenges

- [69] Accessing data at scale from platforms has become increasingly difficult for researchers. Platforms used to be significantly more transparent in publishing or sharing their data. Some platforms used to give academic researchers free or low-cost access to their Application Programming Interface (“**API**”). This permitted researchers to obtain direct access to detailed, large-scale data about activity on the platforms.
- [70] More recently, access to high quality data has been significantly limited. Facebook and Instagram data is no longer accessible through API access. The Meta Content Library and API only permits “sandbox” access to user data: researchers can examine data on a particular platform's system but cannot export that data in order to conduct their own independent analysis. Twitter/X went from providing researchers free API access for 10 million users to charging \$5,000 USD per month to access a limited set of data for 1 million tweets. Access to network data, such as information about which users follow each other, now requires an enterprise account costing \$50,000 USD per month.
- [71] There are various reasons why data access policies for platforms have changed over time. Professor Bridgman noted that it does cost platforms money to provide large scale data to researchers, and that charging fees is a means of cost recovery.

- [72] Professor Owen noted that there are also political and market incentives that play a role. Facebook opened up its data in 2016 in response to political pressure following allegations of Russian disinformation in connection with the United States presidential campaign. It then closed down access in response to some of the information being identified. At the same time TikTok opened up their API as a means to differentiate their policies from Facebook's and to be perceived by policymakers as a good actor. Twitter/X originally branded itself as radically open, but more recent developments have led to both significant ideological changes in the platform's ownership and significant financial pressures due to decreasing ad revenues.
- [73] The effect of the more restricted access to data is that the MEO is unable to access certain types of valuable data entirely without spending unrealistically large amounts of money. Instead, researchers, including the MEO, have to obtain more limited data through their own means. Developing and maintaining the digital tools necessary to perform this work in the absence of API access is also resource intensive.
- [74] Commission counsel asked about whether researchers are able to attribute online misinformation or disinformation to foreign states. The witnesses indicated that attribution presented significant challenges. Professor Owen referred to his earlier comments about the anonymous nature of information generation that characterized the modern information ecosystem. This makes identifying the source of misinformation or disinformation to a particular entity, such as a state actor, extremely difficult.
- [75] Professor Bridgman added that, given the MEO's focus on the Canadian information ecosystem, it is not important to detect what propaganda exists outside of Canada generally. Rather, what matters is when and how such propaganda enters into the Canadian ecosystem. Using the MEO's methods, it is not always possible to identify a particular foreign account as the source of a misinformation or disinformation narrative that penetrates the Canadian information ecosystem. The MEO instead focusses on the Canadian importation of the content.
- [76] There will often be questions about the ultimate source of information that does circulate in Canada. It may be that an account that is a known proxy for a foreign state, but frequently this will not be the case. Similarly, it will often be unclear how the "source"

account identified by the MEO itself obtained the information in question. For example, it may come from an alternative online platform that the MEO does not monitor.

- [77] Professor Owen added that there are crude strategies that can be used to attribute the spread of information to a particular source, including a state. For example, if researchers see a number of accounts that are known government actors or proxies acting in concert, it may be possible to infer intent on the part of a state. However, even when this is possible, it can generally only be done in retrospect. It is not a means to intervene in real time to counter this type of activity.
- [78] Commission counsel asked about the capacity of researchers to identify inauthentic online activity, such as targeted influence campaigns, even if they cannot be attributed to a particular actor. Professor Bridgman indicated that there are methods that can detect some kinds of inauthentic online activity. However, given the difficulties in accessing data directly from platforms, there are limits to researchers' ability to do this. In his view, the types of influence campaigns that might be the most impactful could be very difficult or impossible to detect given current limitations on data access.
- [79] Commission counsel asked whether there were any blind spots in the ability to monitor non-English or French language platforms. Professor Bridgman noted that the MEO has staff able to perform this work at an ethnographic scale, though not at a large-data scale. He referred to the Rapid Response Mechanism at Global Affairs Canada as also performing this function. He indicated that there is no special technique for this type of monitoring. What is required is an individual from a particular community to do so manually. He noted that academic institutions are relatively well positioned to perform this kind of monitoring due to the presence of linguistically diverse student populations who can engage in media monitoring.
- [80] However, he noted that there are still resource challenges linked to monitoring the non-English/French segment of the Canadian information ecosystem. Linguistic-minority communities frequently use their own distinct sets of online platforms. Every additional platform a researcher attempts to monitor requires additional resources, both in terms of technical tools as well as skilled researchers with the relevant linguistic abilities. Furthermore, public opinion surveys have a relatively difficult time reaching minority

language/diaspora communities. While this work can be done, it presents its own challenges and limits. Researchers generally need to pick and choose what linguistic/cultural segments of the information ecosystem to monitor. For example, the MEO did monitor Chinese-language platforms during the 2021 General Election, but not Russian language platforms.

- [81] Professor Loewen noted that there is a related issue of detecting the targeting of individual candidates during elections, particularly in specific ethnic communities. He noted that the type of targeting that has been alleged in this respect can often involve highly nuanced messaging that can be difficult for an outsider to appreciate. The cultural nuances involved in this type of event may be difficult to detect.
- [82] With respect to the Network's incident response framework, the witnesses indicated that its most recent application, related to the Twitter/X bot activity surrounding the Conservative Party event in Kirkland Lake, the Network's response started off more slowly than they would have liked. [The Kirkland Lake bot activity was first detected on 3 August 2024. The Network's incident response was activated on 9 August 2024. Its Incident Notification was released on 14 August 2024, and its Incident Debrief was released on 28 August 2024.⁵] However, they indicated that the incident served as a proof of concept and demonstrated that the Network was able to do what it was designed to do.

4.5 Possible Improvements

- [83] Witnesses were asked to identify how some of the limits in researchers' ability to effectively monitor the information ecosystem could be addressed.
- [84] Professor Bridgman and Professor Owen both discussed data access regulation as a critical area for change. The resources currently being expended to collect data from platforms is a significant limit on MEO's ability to discharge its mandate. Legislating a set of rules that would require data access to be provided by platforms that operate as

⁵ COM0000500, COM0000502, COM0000503, COM0000504, COM0000505, COM0000506, COM0000507, COM0000577.

privately-owned public squares would advance the public interest. Without rules requiring platforms to provide access to data, researchers will continue to struggle to buy and extract adequate data on their own. This is particularly challenging given the rapidly changing systems that platforms use, which require researchers to constantly modify their technical tools or develop new ones.

- [85] Professor Bridgman identified funding stability as a significant problem. The MEO relies on staff who are highly skilled and are sought after by the private sector. These skilled workers are able to obtain higher salaries working in the private sector than at an entity like MEO. MEO relies on the public interest nature of its work to attract qualified staff. This is challenging when the MEO cannot offer permanent positions due to the fact that they rely on government funding agreements that expire and may or may not be renewed. Professor Owen agreed that it is extremely difficult to employ highly skilled staff when all that can be offered is a time-limited contract.
- [86] A closely related problem is that funding is not adequately coordinated across government departments. The MEO, Network partners and similar organizations rely on funding from a range of departments, including Canadian Heritage, Public Safety, and Global Affairs. Within each department there may be multiple funding streams. Both Professor Bridgman and Professor Owen noted that funding is provided on different cycles with different criteria for essentially the same work. Professor Loewen also identified accessing federal funds as a significant challenge.
- [87] Professor Owen pointed to the approach taken by the European Union (“EU”) as a better approach to addressing both data access and funding challenges. Under the *Digital Services Act*, platforms operating in the EU are required to pay a fee to the European Digital Media Observatory, an independent, non-governmental body that performs a function similar to the MEO. The European Observatory is empowered to require platforms to produce data to it, which it then collates and distributes to researchers. This system provides for stable funding and meaningful data access, while at the same time keeping the monitoring function outside of government.
- [88] Professor Owen noted that one limit in the EU model is that only the data collection function is funded by platform fees. Data analysis has to be separately funded.

5. The MEO's Analysis of the 2019 and 2021 General Elections

5.1 The 2019 General Election

- [89] The MEO's first substantive activity was monitoring the media ecosystem in the lead up to and during the 2019 General Election. It monitored Facebook and Twitter, as well as news from approximately 20 news outlets. It also conducted nine surveys, and purchased metering data from approximately 1300 individuals.
- [90] The MEO's findings suggested that the Canadian political information ecosystem was likely more resilient than that of other countries, in particular the US, due to a populace with relatively high trust in the traditional news media, relatively homogenous media preferences with only a marginal role for hyperpartisan news, high levels of political interest and knowledge, and — despite online fragmentation — fairly low levels of ideological polarization overall.
- [91] Specifically with respect to disinformation, the MEO found that it did not play a major role in the election. This finding was consistent with the findings of other investigations by journalists, academics, government agencies and officials and the private sector. This is not to say that there were no instances of disinformation. Rather, it meant that it generally did not appear coordinated and had a limited impact on the information ecosystem.
- [92] The witnesses were asked to discuss an incident involving a story published on the Buffalo Chronicle Website, which was addressed in the MEO report. Both Professor Bridgman and Professor Loewen identified this as an example where media fact checking and hyper-vigilance may have had an effect of amplifying rather than countering disinformation. They noted that only an extremely small number of Canadians were exposed to the allegations contained in the Buffalo Chronicle article.
- [93] Based on small-sample metering data, it was estimated that approximately four times as many Canadians were exposed to the content of the article through mainstream media reporting on the Buffalo Chronicle. (The metering data is imprecise because of the small sample size, and the true number is thought to be much greater.) However, both

Professors also emphasized that even taking this amplification into account, the reach of the Buffalo Chronicle story was extremely limited.

5.2 The 2021 General Election

- [94] The MEO monitored the information ecosystem during the 2021 General Election through social media monitoring, large-scale data collection from Facebook, Instagram, Reddit and Twitter (all of which at the time granted API access), broadcast media monitoring and surveying Canadians before, during and after the election.
- [95] Compared to 2019, the MEO found a significant amount of misinformation circulating in the information ecosystem, particularly related to COVID-19 health measures and claims of widespread voter fraud.
- [96] The MEO concluded that the misinformation that was circulating had a limited impact on the election. Misinformation incidents prompted relatively little discussion, and Canadians were generally able to detect false stories. True stories were more likely to be believed by voters.
- [97] The MEO did find that Chinese officials and state media commented on the election with an apparent aim to convincing Chinese Canadians to vote against the Conservative Party. There was misleading information that circulated on Chinese-language social media platforms. However, the MEO found no evidence that Chinese interference had a significant impact on the overall election. The MEO could not, however, fully discount the possibility that some riding-level contests were influenced by these activities.
- [98] The MEO did not detect evidence of Russian interference in English or French-language media. However, the MEO did not monitor Russian-language social media posts or the Russian-language platform V Kontakte, and so could not exclude the possibility that the Russian-language community in Canada was subject to a low-scale campaign of Russian influence. However, it did not detect any evidence to support this possibility.