ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Electoral Administration

Melbourne—Friday, 12 March 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Lee Tarlamis—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur—Deputy Chair

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Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Tim Quilty

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WITNESS

Associate Professor Yasmin Dawood, Canada Research Chair in Democracy, Constitutionalism and Electoral Law, University of Toronto.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearings for the Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Electoral Administration. I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to our committee or who are watching this broadcast.

I welcome Associate Professor Yasmin Dawood, Canada Research Chair in Democracy, Constitutionalism and Electoral Law, University of Toronto. I am Lee Tarlamis, the Chair of the committee and a Member for South Eastern Metropolitan Region. The other members of the committee who are with us today are Bev McArthur, Deputy Chair and a Member for Western Victoria; Enver Erdogan, a Member for Southern Metropolitan; the Honourable Wendy Lovell, a Member for Northern Victoria; Andy Meddick, a Member for Western Victoria; Cesar Melhem, a Member for Western Metropolitan; and Dr Tim Read, the Member for Brunswick, and some other members may also join us during the broadcast.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action in Australia for what you say here today. However, if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. While you are covered in Australia under parliamentary privilege for any comments you make today, you should note that Australian law cannot give you the same protection with respect to the publication of your evidence in the jurisdiction you are giving evidence from.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to commence with an opening statement introducing yourself and what you consider to be key issues. To ensure enough time for discussion, please limit your opening statement to no more than 5 minutes. Thank you.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Thank you so much for the invitation to take part in this inquiry on social media and elections. I am really delighted to be here today. As mentioned, my name is Yasmin Dawood, I am an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Toronto, and a Canada Research Chair in Democracy, Constitutionalism and Electoral Law.

I have taken a look at the questions that this inquiry is hoping to address, and my brief remarks will be focusing on the first part of question 3, which is: 'What actions have we seen governments take in relation to social media/online advertising and elections?'. I cannot speak to the second part of question 3, which is: 'What results have been achieved by these actions?', since I will be describing some new developments. However, I can briefly address question 4, which asks: 'What are the most effective ways to address any problems with social media and online advertising around elections?'. I will talk about some of the considerations that I think are relevant here. I will be making three brief points in the next 5 minutes.

First, I will describe what I think is the most central challenge to regulating social media. Second, I will be describing Canada's approach to this problem, which I argue is a multifaceted public-private approach, and to do this I will be drawing on my published article which is entitled 'Protecting elections from disinformation: a multifaceted public-private approach to social media and democratic speech'. That is the second thing I will be doing. The third thing I will be doing is I will be describing Canada's approach to dealing with foreign interference, which has an important online component. The main idea here is the concept of an electoral ecosystem, and for that I will be drawing on a published article entitled 'Combatting foreign election interference: Canada's electoral ecosystem approach to disinformation and cyber threats', and it is my understanding that both of these articles have been submitted to this committee.

Okay. The first point, which is the central challenge: the way I see it, social media allows for new and accessible forms of speech, persuasion and association, which is great for democracy, but social media at the same time also gives rise to a host of ills, including disinformation, polarisation, echo chambers, extremism,

radicalisation and so on. This, over the long haul, undermines the health of democracy. So this is the central dilemma, I think, in regulating social media—is to try to deal with the negative effects without preventing the discussion, dialogue and debate that are so crucial for democracy. So that is my first point.

My second point is to briefly discuss the approach in Canada, and I claim that Canada has adopted a multifaceted public-private approach. And this approach employs a suite of complementary tactics including, one, disclosure and transparency laws; two, content-based regulation and self-regulation—by self-regulation, I mean private industry self-regulating, online platforms self-regulating; three, publicly led norm-based strategies; and, four, civic education and media literacy efforts. So these are the four things.

Some of these approaches are in a new law that Canada passed at the end of 2018 called the *Elections Modernization Act*, but some are other kinds of approaches that are not within the four corners of that piece of legislation.

Now, in the interests of time I will not say anything more on the specific policies, because they are all laid out in the article I provided, but I want to say a few more general comments that I think might be helpful. One important feature of the Canadian approach is that it contains a mix of legal regulation. So there is regulation that is imposed by the state; there is self-regulation—that is, regulation by private actors; and there is also co-regulation, which is regulation through cooperation between private actors and the state or public actors. As such the Canadian model is multifaceted in two respects: first, because it employs a suite of tactics, so a lot of different approaches, and second, because it involves a mix of regulatory approaches, it does not just rely on one approach. As I suggest in this article, I think the objective of this multifaceted public-private approach is that it optimises the trade-off I was describing earlier—the trade-off being on the one hand defending against disinformation and on the other hand protecting freedom of speech. Okay?

Removing all disinformation from social media in my view would be far too costly to free speech. So the idea then is to deploy several measures, each of which is flawed. As I discuss in the paper, there are problems with all of them, they are not perfect, but it is the combined and interactive effects of a multifaceted approach which provides help for protections against some—not all, but some—of the harms of disinformation while still protecting freedom of speech. The other thing I think is really important here is that this kind of approach does something else. Even if it does not get rid of all the disinformation, it helps to shore up the public's trust, because then the citizens can see that the government is trying to do something in terms of making sure that there is not massive disinformation. I think that public trust is actually indispensable to democracy.

All right, my third point: I think it is also helpful to see an election process as taking place within what I am calling an 'ecosystem of institutions'. Now, I am not going to go into any detail here—this in the second published article I mentioned. I think that this electoral ecosystem idea or model is helpful because it sheds light on the fact that a good electoral system is actually dependent upon and the product of an interconnected network of institutions, processes and actors, all of which must coordinate together to ensure electoral effectiveness and legitimacy. So if we see this electoral ecosystem as being comprised of multiple institutions and actors, including governments, political parties, voters, third parties, online platforms, electoral management bodies and the interdependent and interconnected nature of this, it also sheds light on all of the multiple points of vulnerability. It is very easy to perhaps miss how complicated the system is and all the things that need to be thought about, but once you think about it in terms of an electoral ecosystem it becomes I think a little bit more clear.

So this kind of approach does not depend on one line of defence, and similar to what I said earlier, there is a multiplicity of strategies that protect the institutions and individuals within the ecosystem. Canada in my view has had three principal approaches, and there are a range of measures under each one: first of all, campaign finance regulations directed at foreign interference, which as I understand it Australia has, at the national level anyway; various measures to limit disinformation, which I already briefly mentioned; and also a number of tactics to strengthen cybersecurity, which is also connected to the problem of disinformation when we consider the problem of influence campaigns. Now, although any single tactic cannot on its own solve the problem given all these multiple points of vulnerability, the idea here is that the use of multiple measures across an electoral ecosystem enhances cyber resilience. All right, so those are my three points, and I am happy to elaborate further or answer any questions that you may have.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Professor. I might go to our Deputy Chair, Bev McArthur, for the first question.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Yasmin. Thank you so much for being with us today. It is enlightening. How has the polity responded to the approach that Canada has taken?

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: It has not responded. I think these kinds of rules do not get a lot of attention, generally speaking, for the average person. They are also quite recent. There have been several newspaper articles saying that we did not have any major problems in our 2019 federal election, so from that perspective I think that is positive, right? But I do not know that your average citizen is going to necessarily tie that back to the *Elections Modernization Act*. I think more so there is a general sense that the election went smoothly, that there were not massive problems, which I think again is important for just that sense of trust and faith in the democratic process.

Mrs McARTHUR: No further questions at this stage, Chair.

The CHAIR: No worries. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms Dawood. It was a great presentation and an extraordinarily in-depth submission that you made there. It took a lot of digesting. I have got a question that really surrounds the anonymity of Facebook and Twitter—this ability for people to create false identities, many of them even under the same person—given that Facebook's community standards are somewhat fluid. The mention of one word can have a person banned for a couple of weeks, but a tirade of some sort of racism, for instance, can see them promoted across several platforms. It does not seem to have any sort of consistency—and Twitter is no better. This is a question that I put to a previous witness in terms of regulation of that: if it were possible—and I understand that the online world is completely different to what we work in everywhere else—to completely eliminate the ability of people to create accounts that were not themselves, would that eliminate a large segment of misinformation around elections, for instance? Those people would then be able to be held to account for things that they were saying that were inherently incorrect or outright lies. And harassment as well—because clearly a person being themselves on an online forum or platform and saying something that is threatening or derogatory about a person would open them up to legal proceedings. Do you think that that would work and eliminate so much of this problem? Is it possible? And this is what I asked the previous witness: if that were possible, could it be in an international code of conduct that every country signs up to, or would it have to be regulated from within an individual country? Are any of those things at all possible?

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: I think the challenge here is that there is the government and then there is the online platform, right? So I think the challenge is that the online platforms are often the ones that are actually in some sense the regulators of their own product, and they are very careful to guard that prerogative in terms of how their product, which is the thing that they are selling—Facebook or Twitter or whatever it is—is run. That is, I think, the first challenge, that the regulatory framework tends to be quite laissez faire, especially in certain countries, right? So the international dimension is very challenging, I think, and the fact that these online platforms do have an international presence makes it much more challenging to try and come up with a local rule that is going to work. The other difficulty too, I think, is that the problem to my mind is not just people pretending or not giving their real name, it is the fact that they are not even real people; it is the whole bot army. That I think is a very challenging situation. I do not know what percentage of the people on Twitter are actually not even people, they are just software. Bots have become increasingly realistic in terms of how they self-present as actual people. So there is that.

The other challenge, I think, is the regulatory framework for actually following up and making sure. Let us say, for example, in some hypothetical world the online platform agreed to prohibit anonymous accounts. Who is going to police this? Who is going to make sure that this is happening, right? Most of the regulation that occurs of online platforms is notice and take down; there is not continual monitoring. It is usually because some user has noticed something and complained. That is another challenge I think that government faces. I mean, there are billions of accounts and just the logistical challenge I think is significant and not one to be dismissed. I think that is really quite a significant challenge.

There also are potentially other kinds of worries that might appear in different countries—you know, this idea that there is a certain privacy element. Some people will take on a different identity because they have been harassed and so the only way they can participate is by not using their real name, by having some other identity. They are concerned or they are trying to hide from people that have been harassing them. Then it starts getting

more complicated that way in terms of how to manage it, but I agree the problem is a significant one. It is just very difficult to figure out what the most effective way to address that is.

Mr MEDDICK: I am hoping to be educated here, because as my colleagues here will attest, I am probably the worst person in the world as far as IT is concerned. You know, laptops have been known to self-combust in fear when I walk into the room. Do bots originate from an individual IP address? Is that traceable?

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Sometimes it is traceable, but now things have become so sophisticated that it is not necessarily. The bot is just a piece of software. It is just code. I think it has now become so sophisticated that the bot—the code—could be originating in another country.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay, great. Thank you. Thanks so much.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Ms Lovell.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks very much, Chair. Thank you very much for your presentation, Yasmin. I will just follow on from what you just said about these things could be originating in another country. How does Canada deal with that—the borderless world of the internet and of course social media? How do you deal with the comments or the advertising or initiating of things through bots from other countries?

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Again we have taken an approach which is, as I described, multifaceted. I do not know if you want me to go into the weeds. Would you like me to explain some of the tactics that are used, or is that too much in the weeds?

Ms LOVELL: That would be useful I think, yes.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Oh, okay. Sure. I am just going to start with—I do not know if you have it in front of you—the 'Protecting Elections' paper. I do not know if that has been made available.

The CHAIR: We have that.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Oh, you do have that? Okay. If you see on page 645 of that paper—this is the paper entitled 'Protecting Elections from Disinformation'—the first thing that they have done to combat the problem of disinformation is to use basic transparency and disclosure requirements. So this is shedding light on things. It is not necessarily engaging in content discrimination or content regulation. You are not saying, 'You can't say this. You can't say this'. It is more about making sure that the transparency is there and disclosure is there, right? For example, parties have to identify themselves using taglines on partisan advertising. This is mostly in the context of an election. It is not the everyday chitchat between people, right? It is when it is electoral advertising—that is how it is being set up.

The main mechanism, as I described, is that the government has required online platforms to publish what they call a digital registry of all electoral and partisan advertising. It is not automatic that every single thing has to be put on this registry, but there are thresholds in terms of the size of the online platform. Once you hit a certain threshold, then you are subject to this registry. And the idea here is that there is a way to keep track of all the electoral and partisan advertising that is coming up on these platforms with the sense that by having that transparency hopefully you will decrease disinformation because people will then know, 'Oh, this is actually going to be stored somewhere for five to seven years, and it can be looked at'. There are all kinds of requirements about what kinds of information you have to give and how long the registry has to last for and so on. There are pros and cons, and I can describe those if you wish, or I can go on to some of the other things that have been done.

Ms LOVELL: I think it might be a little bit different here in Australia. The parties and the MPs understand the need for at least an element of truth in what they are saying. The information that is concerning here is the commentary from individuals and stuff that is generated through bots to sort of spam through people's social media. And that is where a large amount of the disinformation comes from. I am interested in how you deal with that sort of stuff.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: This is such a tricky area. The kind of false information or divisive information that is circulated by ordinary citizens is a real challenge. Here is the problem: if you start regulating intensely that kind of thing, it has a really chilling effect on speech, right? So that is always a challenge. There are some

countries that do it—China, Singapore and other countries which have very strict rules—but Canada thought, 'Okay, we don't want to be in that particular category'. So what we did instead was we picked two very narrow, content-based rules. I will describe them very briefly. The first one is a prohibition on misleading publications, and this is a very narrow thing. Basically what the Act says is if you impersonate someone from Elections Canada—Elections Canada being our non-partisan electoral management body—or you impersonate an Elections Canada publication, that goes against these rules. It is trying to keep ordinary citizens from giving misinformation about the basics around voting, like where to go to vote or who is eligible to vote. So that is a very narrow rule. They are trying to get rid of people impersonating Elections Canada. However, there are all kinds of exceptions. There is an exemption for parody, for satire. They have other exemptions built in as well because in Canada there is a very strong constitutional protection of speech, and so there is care taken to make sure that there are these exemptions.

The second prohibition is a prohibition on false statements about basically candidates and political parties. This is on much more uncertain constitutional ground. They tried to narrow it by saying that it is only for certain kinds of false statements like about certain biographical details of the candidates or the candidate's affiliation. This has been challenged in court, and just a few weeks ago actually a lower court struck down the second thing I am telling you about, this section 91, for violating the freedom of speech because it lacked a knowledge requirement. So in other words the concern here is, let us say, your aunt posts something on Facebook. It is a story. And you look at it and you think, 'Oh, this is kind of interesting', and so you click on it and you share it with your friend. Let us suppose that that was actually misinformation or disinformation, but you had no idea. You just innocently replicated it and sent it to others, not intending to misinform. You actually thought it was fine, and it was sent to you by someone you know and trust, but you just sent it forward.

So you do not want to capture that kind of person, just sort of the innocent person who was just replicating things that have come into their social media accounts, right? That is where it gets tricky, because there is the person who is deliberately trying to flood the system with false information and then there are the people who just innocently replicate it. So the court struck this provision down on the grounds that it did not have a knowledge requirement. In other words, did not say, 'You knowingly distributed this false information or this false information about the candidate'. So that is where we are at now. It is at the lower court level. I do not know whether the government is going to appeal it. I do not know whether they are going to try and reinstate section 91 or not. But that is where the challenges come up when you are trying to regulate content of speech, at least in Canada.

Ms LOVELL: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you. Certainly in South Australia, one of our states in Australia, they have truth-in-advertising laws which have been in operation for quite some time. And it has that 'knowingly', 'if you knowingly'—it has that term in there. A number of other states have flagged that they are actually looking at going down that path as well. We have spoken to the Electoral Commissioner as part of our hearings about that model as well. And that has been through the court system and has been upheld through the court system in South Australia as a model that does not impinge on freedom of political communication as well in South Australia. Dr Read.

Dr READ: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Professor Dawood, for your submission and presentation. I would like to go now to your second article, on the electoral ecosystem and combating foreign election interference. There are a number of really interesting points in that. You have got a different regulation of campaign finance in Canada than we do here in Australia. I wonder if you could just briefly outline that. In Victoria here we have got fairly new limits on political donations, but there are a number of loopholes and we have no limit on spending. At a federal level we have got no limit on donations or spending. I am curious to know what impact you think your finance laws have on the social media impact on elections.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Yes, I think there is a huge difference between Canada and Australia when it comes to campaign finance regulation. We have tons and tons of regulations on every aspect of it, right, so individual donations, party spending limits, how much you can contribute to your own campaign. There are just pages and pages of rules on campaign finance in Canada at the federal level certainly, and even at the provincial level we are seeing more and more rules come up on campaign finance. So yes, it is a very different regime as compared to Australia, I agree with that.

I think that the campaign finance on the foreign interference, basically what has happened here is they have done a few things. They have beefed up their rules on foreign donations in all kinds of ways, right? There are four new rules that they have brought in when it comes to, for example, third parties that donate, third parties which are foreign parties that donate, foreigners that donate to third parties, and they have a new rule about undue influence, which is a bit vague and it is kind of hard to know how that is actually going to be operationalised. So one thing that they have tried to do to deal with foreign influence is to have these new campaign finance rules.

The other thing to keep in mind with the Canadian system is that these rules, all of them, only apply during the election period which is approximately at the most 50 days, and the shortest period is 37 days. So the rest of the time it is basically a free-for-all, right? It is only during that period where you have got these rules. What they did with the 2018 *Elections Modernization Act* is they in effect extended the election period by coming up with a new thing they are calling the 'pre-election period'. The pre-election period though has different kinds of rules to campaign finance rules. The election period has what we might call issue advertising rules. So if you are talking about issues that are relevant to an election, you come under these rules. By contrast, in the pre-election period is what they call partisan advertising and those are rules that deal with things like, for example, what we might call express advocacy—'Vote for Smith. Don't vote for Jones', that kind of thing. It is a more narrow category. But what they have done is taken an extra four months and tacked it onto the election period in order to try and have a greater influence of that kind of speech that leads up to an election, with the idea that you can then have more control over disinformation and foreign interference.

Dr READ: Okay. That is really interesting. In your article you have really talked about this in terms of its impact on foreign interference, but I guess when we are talking about campaign finance regulation I imagine Canada, like Australia, has one or two billionaires who are keen to influence electoral outcomes. Can you comment briefly on the impact of your finance regulation there?

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: So the billionaires are out of luck in Canada. We have such strict rules that they would not be able to influence. We have really locked that down. The donation limits are actually quite modest, I would say, and then there are also all kinds of other limits. Elections Canada I think does a very good job in making sure that these limits are abided by. So it is a very different situation from the United States. You do not have the billionaire problem. However, I will say this: those restrictions are only during the election period. Now that we have got a fixed election system—somewhat fixed; I mean, the Governor-General could still call an election at any time, but we have now moved into this fixed election model where every four years we have a date on the calendar, which can be changed if the Governor-General so calls it—that also means that you are entering more into a permanent campaign kind of scenario where it is not just campaigning that is taking place in that election period and therefore you can shut out the billionaires. Suddenly there is manoeuvring and campaigning so that basically politics always happens in the shadow of the next election, and now that we know when that is going to be, there could be concerns. I am sure there are concerns around that kind of undue influence due to wealth in the off-season when you do not have all of these rules kicking in.

Dr READ: Great. Thanks for that.

The CHAIR: Mr Erdogan.

Mr ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Dawood, for your article and your presentation; I found it very informative. I just had a question, probably a bit of an outlier in this sense, but sometimes could there be unintended consequences of more rules being implemented, greater regulation, in terms of is it dangerous for democracy that it might have compliance costs that might hinder political participation?

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Yes, I agree. I think there always are trade-offs that you have to consider very seriously. I think one of the most serious negative unintended consequences to regulating social media is a chill on speech, which is why I think that the disclosure transparency route is good. Having very narrow, content-based regulation, so not really going after most disinformation, only the kind that would actually confuse people about the election or the basics of voting.

The other thing that I had not mentioned but I think is also relevant here is to sort of develop a set of norms, so this goes to your question. Canada has adopted two norm-based or best practices, to go to your issue about the fact that there is more to a democracy. There are these values and principles that we care about. So they have done two things. There is the digital charter, and this is on page 663 of the first article I sent, the one that is

'Protecting Elections from Disinformation'. There is also the declaration of electoral integrity, and what that does is lay out exactly the things you are talking about—the values that matter in a democracy that we do not want to give up and how those can be protected. The values are integrity, transparency and authenticity, and sort of saying no matter what we do we are going to stick within these guidelines. They also have a digital charter. And the digital charter, again, announces—it is on page 664—what are the kinds of principles that we care about here: citizens' privacy, communication, all the different principles that matter, universal access, control and consent, transparency, open and modern digital government, a level playing field. So I think doing it this way, having a set of ideals or principles which they have asked online platforms to sign onto and the governments are using as a guideline, helps to address exactly the concerns that you are talking about, because you are actually setting out in writing, 'This is what we care about, and no matter what we do we have got to make sure that we protect those basics'.

Mr ERDOGAN: The online platforms are obviously a great source of misinformation and concern, but also in some, I guess, authoritarian regimes they are an important source of alternate information from what you might call state-sponsored information. Would you agree with that?

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Absolutely. Again, it is that double-edged thing. On the one hand, it is great and it allows for debate and dissent; on the other hand, there are many things which are non-transparent and we do not actually know what is going on there. But I think that, for example, Facebook is taking steps to try and clean out the disinformation. In house they have got now new rules on terrorism and violence which they are trying to filter the content within. There are debates about whether this is the way to think about it, because of course there is a conflict of interest for them because they also want to sell their products. So how much can we trust them? I think that is definitely the case.

Mr ERDOGAN: Thank you for that.

The CHAIR: Mr Melhem.

Dr READ: I am not sure if we have lost him.

The CHAIR: He may have dropped off. Okay, no worries. Professor, I have a question. In your submission you talk about the trial that Twitter announced in July 2019 around hiding some responses to tweets so that the readers would have to click on them to actually read the content, which I think is the concept called friction, to slow the spread of information. I was wondering if you had a comment about how effective that is, has that been used more widely and if you think that is something that is beneficial in rolling out through the platforms as a tool.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: I think it does help. Again I do not think any one measure is going to solve the problem, so I really think having this multiplicity of approaches—each one is not perfect on its own but tweaks it a little bit and all of them together hopefully tweak everything enough that you at least deal with the most severe problems. WhatsApp had another thing where they were limiting how many people you could forward things to, again to create friction because they were trying not to have these cascades of false information riling people up, so to try and limit how many people you could actually forward your disinformation to. All of these things work on the margins, but that does not mean that we should then ignore them. The fact that they are not perfectly effective—I guess that is the point I am trying to make in the papers—does not mean that we should just toss them out because they are not perfect. They are not. They are flawed. All of these mechanisms have flaws, but the hope is that in combination it is better than having nothing.

The CHAIR: I was also interested in the Digital Citizen Initiative—I know the Canadian government invested quite a bit of money in that—around media literacy. Can you tell us a little bit about the work that has been done in media literacy and what has been effective in that regard? If we were looking at media literacy programs, what could be some consideration around what are effective tools in that space or models?

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: We did put a lot of money into media literacy, and the idea behind it is that you want citizens to be equipped with the tools to not fall for the disinformation. It is trying to address the problem from the other end, saying, 'Be a bit more sceptical. Don't believe everything that you see in the media', so to try and do that training. We did have pilot programs in Canada but they were not widespread across the nation. These were targeted programs. I do not know whether there was follow-up in terms of your question as to

whether they were effective, but they were not widespread enough to be effective I think in the way that you are speaking of. I do not think the whole population is now suddenly all over this and alert to these things.

The other thing Elections Canada did a lot of was to do their old multimedia campaign constantly throughout the election, again to try and head off any sort of disinformation that was out there. That was another thing that was done in terms of enhancing literacy, but I think that it is a positive approach and maybe a more effective way is actually to start it much earlier, to start it in schools, to get children to be more aware that not everything they read is true and to be a little bit more sceptical and before they hit 'share' or whatever it is to think about whether this is real or not or to have a more sceptical approach. My sense is it probably would be easier to start younger rather than once people are much older.

The CHAIR: Are there any other questions from committee members?

Dr READ: I guess I would just be keen to hear any suggestions for what additional research would be most helpful in answering some of these questions.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: So in terms of this committee, like what additional things to look at; is that what you are asking?

Dr READ: No, more generally. One of the problems is we have got lots of suggestions, but it is more a case of efficacy.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Yes, I think part of the problem is that it is a dynamic space—you know, the online platforms are changing by the day, disinformation is changing by the day. The way in which even just the hardware behind how these things happen is constantly in flux. So it is a very challenging space to try and figure out effectiveness, because the goalposts are just constantly in motion, right? So it is hard to keep things still enough so that you can actually see: is this thing working or not? That is why to my mind I think another factor is actually crucially important here, apart from effectiveness, which is citizen trust—people's trust in the system, people's sense that the government is doing things. So even if it is not the most efficacious approach, the fact that you even have this committee, the fact that you are looking into it I think is very important, because it shows a level of concern and care around citizens' trust and the integrity of the process. That is how I see it. I kind of think that we may never actually have the level of knowledge that we would like until many years from now in terms of the exact efficacy of various programming. But the fact is that it sends sort of a symbolic message, which I do not think is unimportant when it comes to electoral integrity.

Dr READ: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Any other final questions? No? All right. Can I thank you very much for your time today and also your submission. It has been really helpful and really insightful and I think will help us greatly with our deliberations and consideration of these matters going forward. We would appreciate it if we could call upon you if we have any additional questions or we require some information. We would appreciate your assistance, and that would be really helpful as well. But thank you again for your time today.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: It was my pleasure. It was great to chat about Canada, and I hope it was helpful. Good luck with your deliberations, and I am happy to help again if you should need it.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Assoc. Prof. DAWOOD: Have a great day, everybody.

The CHAIR: You too. And that ends our session today. Thanks.

Witness withdrew.

In camera evidence follows.