PRINT TRANSCRIPT

The Current Transcript for September 3, 2025

Host: **Matt Galloway**

STORIES FROM THIS EPISODE

Prologue

[Music: Theme]

SOUNDCLIP

MIRIAM TOEWS: I still ask myself the questions that was asked of me from conservative religious men: who do you think you are? You can't do this. This is just lies. You know, this is just self-indulgent, self-absorbed nonsense.

MATT GALLOWAY: Miriam Toews is one of this country's best, most celebrated writers, and yet she still asks herself why she writes and whether she's any good at it. These are questions that run through her new memoir, “A Truce That Is Not A Peace.” In 30 minutes, Miriam Toews on family and the debt she owes her sister, why it's so hard to explain why she writes and whether she'll continue. Also this morning.

SOUNDCLIP

SPEAKER: My own opinion is that we're not going to hit the climate goals anyway, but I'd rather bet on AI solving the problem than constraining it and having the problem.

MG: The former CEO of Google is bullish on the prospect of AI solving the climate crisis. He also has good reason to be concerned. AI requires enormous amounts of energy and water to answer

the questions you ask ChatGPT and create those cute photos and videos you prompt it to design. In an hour, fueling the data centres that will power AI and whether it's possible to make that technology more sustainable. But we begin in Alberta with the backlash over banned books. Good morning. I'm Matt Galloway, and this is The Current.

[Music: Theme]

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ALBERTA BOOK BAN

Guests: John Hilton-O'Brien, Laura Winton

MG: Well, as you've been hearing, Alberta's order to pull books with sexual content from school libraries is being shelved for now. The change comes after the Edmonton Public School Board said it would remove more than 200 books from its libraries, books including "The Handmaid's Tale." Margaret Atwood pushed back in her Margaret Atwood Way, posting a widely shared satirical story on social media. And so after days of international attention and in some quarters, ridicule, yesterday, the Alberta government paused the order and is promising revised rules that will keep the classics in libraries and, in Premier Danielle Smith's words, take pornographic images out. Jon Hilton-O'Brien is executive director of Parents for Choice in Education. This is an Alberta-based not for profit advocacy organization. It supported the original order. He's in our Calgary studio. And Laura Winton is on the board of the Library Association of Alberta. She is also the vice chair and Alberta representative of the Canadian Federation of Library Associations, and she is in Edmonton. Good morning to you both.

JOHN HILTON O'**BRIEN:** Good morning, Matt.

LAURA WINTON: Hi there. Thanks for having us.

MG: Thanks for being here. John, you had helped call for this order from the Alberta government. Now, there's a pause. Do you feel let down?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: Not at all.

MG: Why?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: Look, the Alberta government stepped in because parents found sexually explicit materials in school libraries, material no reasonable person thinks belongs in front of kids. They issued guidelines, not bans, saying take the sexually explicit images out of your libraries. And they offered guidelines. EPSB, the Edmonton Public School Board, chose to interpret this with a bit of malicious compliance. They said, oh sure, we will, but we're also going to pull "The Great Gatsby." And,

you know, that's just not on. The Alberta government is pausing, just like a parent does when a child chooses to willfully misinterpret them, so they can be more explicit and say, no, you do this. So I'm glad to see the Alberta government will be more clear, and I'm glad to see that they'll do their best to make sure that libraries will make sure classic works of literature are left on the shelves while they still protect kids.

MG: I'm going to come back to some of the things you said in just a moment. Laura, the premier, Danielle Smith, I mean, in some ways, using the language that John has used there, said that what the Edmonton School Board had done was vicious compliance. The Edmonton School Board said that it was removing material with explicit sexual content. That included “The Handmaid's Tale”, also “Brave New World”, “Jaws”, “The Great Gatsby”, books by Judy Blume. What did you think of that? Is that malicious or vicious compliance?

LAURA WINTON: In my opinion, the Edmonton School Board, with very little time and very little resources, did the best that they could to comply with a confusing and unclear ministerial order. You know, John is saying that that order really just addressed images in books. That's absolutely not true. The order spoke of images and texts. It was very explicit about any sort of explicit sexual content being removed. And frankly, all of those titles, and including many, many classics, absolutely include sexually explicit materials because they deal with difficult and controversial topics, including sexuality.

MG: Do you think the Edmonton School Board maybe was also trying to prove a point here, saying that it's a bit difficult to determine, I mean, books that acknowledge the existence of sex are one thing, but it's difficult to determine whether that is or is not appropriate in a school library.

LAURA WINTON: Yeah. I mean, the position of the Library Association of Alberta, and certainly the Canadian Federation of Library Associations as well, is that these are complex questions, and that's why we have trained, educated teachers and librarians who are in schools writing policies, thinking carefully about this and making those selections. This has always been a role for professionals, and it is not a role for government. And it's not a role for, you know, parental advocacy groups.

MG: John, you had said that what the Alberta and Edmonton School Board did in particular was leading toward, in your words, book burning roulette. So just to be clear, do you think that books like “The Handmaid's Tale” and “Brave New World” should be pulled from school shelves?

JOHN HILTON-O’BRIEN: Certainly not. And that's not even implied in the ministerial order. One of the things I'd like to address here is the claim that only professionals such as librarians should decide what goes on those shelves. But here's the issue, Matt. Real professionals don't override the people they serve. Their role is to inform parents and politicians, not to impose personal values. That's part of what professionalism means. Professionals advise, not decide. The moment that librarians decide to replace parents, they've crossed the line.

MG: I mean, but it's interesting. Before the Alberta government put forward this order, they had done a survey to parents in Alberta. And the survey showed in part that one of the questions was, have you ever been concerned about a book in a school library being inappropriate for a certain age group due to sexually explicit content? 60% of those responded. One of the other questions was how supportive are you of the government of Alberta setting consistent requirements for school boards in terms of how they select and manage a school library? 46%, the majority, said they're not at all supportive. What does that tell you?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: What that tells me is that they didn't know what was in the libraries, neither did the minister. We actually had a large team of volunteers working for months and months and months cataloguing to show actual call numbers that, yes, these books really are in schools because nobody could believe it.

MG: But if 60% of the people surveyed by the government itself say that they aren't concerned about that material, that suggests that, I mean, is there actually an issue here?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: Yes. And the reason that so many people were concerned, over 40%, is that those people had an inkling that there was a problem. The rest of us really didn't.

MG: Well, 31% said that they were concerned. What are you concerned about? What are you afraid that children will read and see?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: Well, look, I am holding in my hands right now a journal article from Child Abuse and Neglect. And what it explains is that kids and teens exposed to sexual content are one and a half times as likely to develop problematic sexual behaviours. Now, the books that the government of Alberta is particularly interested in are not innocent novels. These are not coming of age stories. We're looking at graphic novels with clear depictions of sexual organs going into orifices, and those orifices belong to children. They're right to be concerned. We had no idea this was going on in our school libraries.

MG: Have you read these books?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: I have.

MG: You yourself have read the books.

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: Unfortunately, yes.

MG: Laura, what do you make of what John has just said?

LAURA WINTON: Well, you know, I would, I would disagree with what John… I have also read all these books. In fact, so has School Library Journal, Publishers Weekly. And reviews of these books from those sources, for example, "Blanket" says Thompson manages to explore adolescent social yearnings, the power of young love, and the complexities of sexual attraction with a rare combination of sincerity,

pictorial lyricism and taste. These books are not pornography. These are works of literature that are coming of age stories. And frankly, it's fairly difficult to tell a coming of age story without dealing with the topic of sexuality. That's a huge issue that teens are grappling with and struggling with. I think it's also worth noting that, you know, librarians absolutely agree that parents have an incredibly important role in helping their children decide what to read. Individual parents have the right to decide on their children's reading, but they do not have the right to oppose it on everyone else. And when we're lobbying and seeing governments put together policies that remove wholesale large amounts of material from collections or, frankly, even small amounts of materials from collections, that's what's happening, the rights of parents and children are being violated. I am absolutely a librarian, and I'm professionally passionate about this. I'm also the mother of an eight-year-old, a six-year-old, and I've got a third on the way. I'm equally passionate about this as a parent, so this is not a one-sided story where librarians are fighting parents on this. Librarians and educators are parents. And as that survey showed, the vast majority of them feel that decisions about what ends up on school shelves should be made by educators, by librarians, and by school administrators.

MG: The government is rewording this order. What will you be looking for, Laura?

LAURA WINTON: Well, I mean, what I've heard from the premier when she's talked about rewording this is that they're looking to target pornographic images now. This is, I mean, not particularly less concerning for us. It is still an explicit act of censorship, which is not something we ever want to see in our children's schools. I think the other thing that we need to think about is, you know, the Parents for Choice in Education and the minister and the premier have been, have said all along the way many times that these four titles in particular qualify as pornography. And that's just not true by the very definition of pornography. We're talking about, once again, award-winning coming of age graphic novels that absolutely have a few pages in them where there is some sexual content that is, that content is presented in the context of a rich story of a child grappling with sexuality. It is not an image of nudity that is intended to arouse, which is the definition of pornography.

MG: What should schools do with a title like that if it has those sorts of images in it, though?

LAURA WINTON: Well, I think what schools should do and what schools have been doing is catalogue them in the appropriate collections. So “Blankets”, “Gender Queer”, “Flamer” and “Funhouse” are they're wonderful titles. They're certainly they shouldn't be on shelves in K to six schools, and the minister's own list of schools shows that they're not on shelves in K to six schools. Some of them, like “Flamer”, which can be classified as a juvenile novel, is in schools that could run up to grade nine. And a couple of the other ones, they're we're seeing them in high school collections. So that's where they belong. They belong in those, those, those areas where teenagers of the appropriate ages are going to be able to access them. And frankly, if parents have concerns, schools also have processes in place where parents can bring those concerns forward and see that material move if it is for some reason misclassified in the wrong area.

MG: John, would you be comfortable in having those books, again, your organization proposed a list of the books that you said you were concerned about for the government to remove. Would you be comfortable in having those books shelved in secondary schools, in libraries there with access to older students?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: What my correspondent neglected to mention is that the libraries that were holding these books were K to nine schools that included elementary schools. And the fact is that the study I'm holding shows that children and teens exposed to such material are one and a half times as likely to find themselves with problematic sexual behaviours.

MG: So would you be comfortable in having those books accessible to secondary school students in a high school library?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: No, I don't think any parent would. As soon as you put those books into the library, you're giving them to children and you're taking away the right of parents to say, I'm not going to provide that to my child. They're the people who are insisting on deciding who gets this. And this is not censorship. School libraries are small. You don't have the whole Library of Congress in your local high school.

MG: But you are making intentional decisions as to what is and is not there. I mean, you said that this isn't a ban, but in saying that no student has access to these books, is that not by default a ban?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: No, these are guidelines. The Government of Canada has also for almost as long, well, perhaps as long as we've been a country, has also said there are certain books you aren't going to publish at all, right? We're not going to publish certain kinds of pornography, for instance. We just won't allow it.

MG: But we're not talking about publishing. We're talking about access to books in a library. And if you say and if what the government has said is that all books with sexually explicit content, that that access to all of those books would be eliminated for students in all grades, by definition, is that not a ban?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: No, this is about selection. These were guidelines. And they said, be mindful of the age appropriateness of what you put in front of students. Now, librarians have no special expertise in this area. My correspondent is not a specialist in developmental psychology, nor is she licensed to practice psychotherapy, nor is almost any librarian.

MG: I apologize for interrupting, but who should then? If you believe that librarians are not qualified, who should decide what kids read and what specific content that may, as we say, acknowledge the existence of sex, is age appropriate?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: The people who ultimately have to decide that are the parents. And librarians, at the end of the day, Matt, are not elected. The government is elected by those parents. And isn't accountability the real issue here?

MG: And so what would the threshold, just finally on that, what would the threshold be? How, if you had parents who said we don't like this book or we don't like that book, that that would be enough to have that book removed from a school library.

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: The government's basic idea is the right one. We should have some criteria. All of these arguments are about saying we should have explicit images in libraries. There's been a whole lot of excuses made for that today, and that's an objective line that we probably shouldn't cross. We should not have pictures of sexual organs entering children in our libraries in any school, full stop.

MG: Laura, what role, and I'm not sure whether there are images of what John just described, sexual organs entering the orifices of children in these books, but what role should parents have in determining what is in a library?

LAURA WINTON: Well, I mean, I think parents should have the role that they currently have, which is that, you know, I as a librarian would absolutely encourage parents to be involved in what their children are reading, to ask about that, to take a look at what comes home from school with them. They, if they have concerns about the materials that they're seeing on their school library shelves, they should go speak to their principals and teachers, use the processes and the reconsideration of library material processes that are already in place at schools to have those robust discussions. But once again, you know, I certainly don't claim to be a psychologist here, but neither are most parents. And so, and certainly neither is Danielle Smith or Minister Nicolaides. And so, you know, I don't think that's the threshold here. And the answer is not to wholesale take away resources. We've seen the government attempt that. Part of the reason it doesn't work is because coming up with very clear guidelines on exactly what can and can't go in a library is really difficult. It's confusing. They didn't get the result they wanted, and now they're going to try again. And really, the answer here is to leave this work to professionals who absolutely are trained in how to evaluate material for age and developmental appropriateness and make decisions about where that material ends up in a library. I think it's also important to note that, you know, yes, K to 12 libraries contain material for children and material for teens. It's not all together. There is a picture book collection, there is a juvenile collection, there are separate graphic novel collections in lots of cases, and there are high school and teen collections, and certainly no kindergarten teacher is taking their children into those teen collections. They are in separate spaces for a reason.

MG: John, do you worry at all, we just have a couple of minutes left. Do you worry, books can be life-changing things. Do you worry that in not having access to books that might be about something that kids are going through, that something can be lost if they don't see themselves in those books and they don't have access to those books?

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: Well, we've been able to do coming of age stories for millennia without graphic depictions of sexuality. And I think it's reasonable for us to give resources for parents and tell them, if you'd like to go a little further, why don't you have a look at those? Perhaps we could have a section for parents in the library where they can take things out. That would seem more reasonable. But

I'm sitting in a city, Matt, where the average man, woman, child and dog has two years of post-secondary, and it goes up to three years if you take out the dogs. I'm being literal here. 40% of Calgary's adults have a bachelor's degree or higher. That means almost two thirds of family units have someone with a bachelor's degree in the family. Any suggestion that parents lack the education necessary to decide what their children should read is simply fatuous.

MG: Laura, just last word to you. We just have a few seconds left. What are you worried about in terms of, as I said, access to books that, I mean, books can change kids' lives. If those books aren't available on the library shelf, what are you concerned about?

LAURA WINTON: I mean, I'm hugely concerned that children are going to have limited access to stories that can help them understand themselves and the world around them, that can help them grapple with the difficult topics that they're, that they're, they're trying to figure out and sort through as they develop their identities. You know, again, I'm a parent myself, and I want to make sure that my children have access to a wide breadth of information. It is a fundamental pillar of democracy that we all have that, and my children have a right to that as well.

MG: It's good to speak with you both about this. Thank you very much.

LAURA WINTON: Thanks so much.

JOHN HILTON-O'BRIEN: Thank you, Matt.

MG: Laura Winton is on the board of the Library Association of Canada. John Hilton-O'Brien is executive director of Parents for Choice in Education. You are welcome to comment on this, as you are welcome to comment on anything you hear on the program. Do get in touch. The email address is thecurrent@cbc.ca. Your CBC news is next, and then another story about writing. Why do you write? That's the question Miriam Toews has been grappling with her entire life, and it's a question that runs through her new memoir. It's called "A Truce That Is Not A Peace." We will speak with the great Miriam Toews coming up in six minutes. My name is Matt Galloway, and this is The Current. Stay with us.

[Music: Theme]

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MIRIAM TOEWS

Guest: Miriam Toews

MG: Hello, I'm Matt Galloway, and you're listening to The Current. If you have ever read a novel by the award-winning Canadian author Miriam Toews, you probably feel like you know a little bit about her. Her books tell the stories about growing up in a conservative Mennonite community, which she did. One

novel describes the relationship between two sisters and how one struggles to keep the other alive, and that parallels what happened with Miriam and her sister Marjorie. Another novel features a multi-generational family headed by a formidable, funny matriarch who just happens to share the same name as Miriam's own mother. Miriam Toews's highly anticipated new memoir does away with the mirror of fiction and tells her story head on. It's called "A Truce That Is Not A Peace." Miriam Toews is with me in studio to talk all about it. Hello.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Hello.

MG: Nice to see you.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Nice to see you.

MG: As I said, I think a lot of people probably think they know a little bit about you or a lot about you. Why did you want to write this book now?

MIRIAM TOEWS: I think it was, I guess, well, the, you know, the things that I was thinking about. And the feeling when I started writing the book, or when I, or just right before I started writing the book were I was struggling. I was struggling with the, the, you know, this question of why am I writing? I was thinking, you know, why am I writing? I don't know, I don't know if I was going through some weird crisis, something that, you know, is that a normal thing at my age? I'm not sure. You know, it was and just doubt and just sort of struck with the kind of futility of it all. And maybe I was, you know, maybe I was a little bit depressed, but I guess I was in a type of funk, in a way, thinking about writing. And so, and that's what I wanted to write about. And I wanted to, I wanted to attempt to answer that question, why do I write, the question that I had been asking myself, the question that I am asked so often. And I think that non-fiction seemed to be the, the best Container, you know, for that, you know, just using my life in an attempt, I guess, to answer that question.

MG: What do you make of, I mean, is it a memoir? Is that what you call it? Because it's not, it's not like this is the story of my life. It begins and ends. You're not doing that.

MIRIAM TOEWS: No, no. Yeah. No, not at all. It's not an autobiography. It's not a sort of, you know, A to B to… It's, you know, I guess my publishers are calling it a memoir, and I guess it has to have a label.

MG: What do you call it?

MIRIAM TOEWS: I mean, I, I don't know. I call it, you know, the thing, the latest thing. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I mean, it's a, I guess you could say it's a hybrid memoir. I guess I think of it also very much so as an argument with myself, maybe as a type of confrontation.

MG: What are you arguing about?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Maybe it's an argument about writing. Should I write? Why do I write? Do I need to write? Maybe I shouldn't write. But also, just arguing about, you know, a sense of, and this sounds so

heavy, and I'm not in this place anymore, this headspace, but, you know, just the idea of life. I mean, what is, you know, what are we doing here? Why, you know, all of this, all of these questions. So maybe it was an argument, you know, of between, you know, my demons and better angels. Who knows? Who knows? Maybe I think of everything as an argument with myself, everything that I've written.

MG: Can you tell me about the title? This comes from this poet, Christian Wiman.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah.

MG: I mean, I want to ask you about him. He's amazing.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Chris, He, yeah, no, he is. I love.

MG: Christian Wiman.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Christian Wiman. Yeah.

MG: And the quotation is, we might remember the dead without being haunted by them to give our lives a coherence that is not closure and to learn to live with our memories, our families and ourselves amid a truce that is not a peace.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Right.

MG: What does that mean?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, for me, when I read that, I, I thought, yeah, that's it. That's exactly it. And a truce that is not peace, that's how, that's how it feels. I think, I think that's where I was trying to get. I mean, I wrote the thing and then gave it that title because I had read this writing by Christian Wiman and others. I mean, he's just brilliant. Everybody should read his stuff about faith and belief and art and, you know, and non-belief.

MG: And despair.

MIRIAM TOEWS: And despair and pain and suffering, sickness. Yeah. So it just seemed to me that that's what it was, you know, reaching, that that's what the book sort of represented to me at, you know, at the end of it, when I was finished, when I was thinking, okay, what am I going to call this thing, that it was that I had reached a truce, you know, perhaps with myself if it was an argument with myself or a confrontation with myself, and that was not peace. It was, you know, there's no sense of peace of mind or closure or anything like that. I don't even believe in those things anymore, you know, but it certainly was a type of truce.

MG: What is interesting to you about him? I mean, he pops up a couple of times in this book, and as I said, he's got this fascinating story where he should be dead. He was diagnosed with this terrible form of cancer and thought he was going to die. Didn't die, came from a very religious community, left that

community, went back to faith at some point in time and wrote this book that is sort of, I mean, he's written a lot of things, but one of the books that he wrote is about this fight against despair in some ways. What is interesting to you about what he has pulled off?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Well, he goes to that, to that subject fearlessly, and I'm inspired by that. I feel as though this despair that is the thing maybe at the heart of, you know, just of what I write, of probably what everybody writes, you know, the despair, or what's another word for it, that sort of existential fear or dread or whatever it is, just simply by virtue of being human. And he also, he has a faith in, you know, he is a Christian, but he's filled with doubt, and yet, you know, this, this faith that he has also, you know, sustains him. And I feel, I feel closeness to him, to his work because I feel I, I understand that faith and I understand the doubt. And I'm at a point in my life where, or maybe I always have been, but just still struggling with that maybe because of my background, because of my, you know, the religious community that I come from. You know, so I can just relate to the stuff, to the stuff that he writes about.

MG: You talked about this question of like why you write. And I mean, the book starts with this, this request from this festival in Mexico City where the organizer says, you have to figure out, give us a paragraph or something as to why you write.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Right.

MG: What do you think this person was looking for? Because it turns into a bit of a nightmare in some ways.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah, it's a kind of a, you know, thread throughout. And that Mexico City thing, that's a pastiche of all the, of all the festivals and literary events, etc., then, you know, interviews and conversations that I've had where that question is asked of me and of so many other writers.

MG: You call it a bit of a douchebag question.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah, I guess I use that word douchebag often. That was, yes.

MG: Trying to…

MIRIAM TOEWS: I was just, yeah, because, you know, it has a really specific meaning for me in terms of how I apply it. I was in the UK recently and touring this book and they didn't, they don't use the word douchebag in the UK apparently. So, you know, I spent a lot of time while I was there describing what a, you know, what it means or what I think it means, which is, you know, very specific kind of. It's not, you know, a** hole. It's not, you know, all the other things. Like it has a very specific meaning. And, you know, for a person who's pretentious, authoritarian, entitled, you know, and I guess just that notion of even putting myself into a position of answering certain questions or thinking about certain things, you know, made me feel like a douchebag. There's something so pretentious to me or self-indulgent or just imposter re about writing. It's something that I'm so embarrassed about, so mortified by, and yet, you know, I can't stop doing it. I need to do it. You know, other people's books, I mean, reading, that's my

whole world, you know, books and reading, and yet I have this. And maybe it's from my background. Maybe it's, you know, growing up where I did, when I did, as a Mennonite girl on the prairies, without any sort of understanding that being a writer was something that, you know, anybody could be. I still ask myself the questions that was asked of me from maybe conservative religious men. Who do you think you are? You can't do this. This is, this is just lies. You know, this is just self-indulgent, self-centred, self-absorbed nonsense.

MG: You still ask yourself those questions.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah. You know, and it's just that thing that like it doesn't matter how old I get. And I'm really old now, Matt.

MG: You're not really old, but continue.

MIRIAM TOEWS: You know, you just can't get away from that.

MG: When did you know that you could do this? I mean, because you almost, you could have been something else. You could have been here on the radio delivering the traffic.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Is it too late? Yeah, that's right. I did have a very, very, very, very short radio gig, yeah, as a traffic girl.

MG: Lisa Cook.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Lisa Cook.

MG: The traffic girl.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah. So I write about this in the book. I had finished journalism school and got this gig in Manitoba, a tiny little radio station. And they said, okay, yeah, we're going to hire you to do the, to do the weather. What is your name? And I said my name. And they said, no, no, no, no, no, that's, that's, that's a crazy name. You're going to be Lisa Cook.

MG: Lisa Cook.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah.

MG: When did you figure out that perhaps that was not what you wanted to do, and that despite all those voices that were coming at you, you could write, that this could be something that you could do?

MIRIAM TOEWS: If I think back to my childhood, my father encouraged me to write things down. When I was bored, you know, he would say, hey, why don't you write a little bit? He was a teacher. You know, write a paragraph of whatever it is that you want to write. And so, and I would do it sometimes, sometimes I wouldn't. And it felt good. I remember it feeling good. I remember just the process, just putting words onto a page, you know, seeing that sort of, you know, synthesis of whatever it was that

was going on in my head. And that, that, you know, that was exciting to see that, to see that I'd made something. But it wasn't until I, I was in my late 20s, really. And I was actually, I was working on a radio documentary about mothers on welfare. And it occurred to me then in that process that, hey, you know what, I might be able to maybe write, yeah, a novel. I mean, even saying that. I remember actually somebody out on the, when I did write the novel and it came out, and a guy on the radio was reviewing it, I suppose, and said, yeah, but is it really a novel? You know, and I remember thinking the same thing. Yeah, maybe, maybe it's not. I mean, it's just basically a sort of fictionalized version of my own life. Maybe that's not what a novel is. Maybe I didn't just write a novel. And I remember my sister, you know, being so angry and indignant on my behalf. You know, it's like, yeah, it's a novel.

MG: You had a deal with your sister, you talk about this in the book, when this question comes up of why do you write, and they want you to submit some sort of thing. One of the things you submit is these letters that you'd sent to Marjorie when you were travelling through Europe. Tell me a little bit. Why did you send that, and what was the deal that you had with her?

MIRIAM TOEWS: So yeah, those letters, I was 18, so it was the first time that I was leaving home, really, where I was going to travel to and did with a boyfriend of mine at the time. We were cycling. And my sister, who was six years older than me, had basically left university, was very sick, depressed, and had moved back home with my parents, and she asked me if I would write her letters. She begged me, you know, please, please, you have to, you know, write letters about your trip. And I took it very seriously. I thought, yeah, okay. You know, and the deal was, and I said it, you know, jokingly but not jokingly at the time, okay, okay, I'll write you letters, you know, and you, you just, you know, stay alive. And of course, you know, okay, deal. Deal. Which is obviously in retrospect, you know, a ridiculous pact to make. But that's when I first started writing, you know, and understanding that it occurred to me as I was writing and I enjoyed it, oh, you know, here, here, it's fun. I mean, it feels good. I know that sounds so crazy in terms of describing what writing means, but, you know, it was just that way of taking everything and getting rid of it in a way. And I was also trying to entertain her. You know, so I was conscious of the things of writing, you know, the setting where, where were we, who were we talking to, you know, trying to get in all those details, trying to really paint a picture for her.

MG: You say in this book that she taught you how to stay alive.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Absolutely. And with that, you know, maybe not a conscious thing, but it was, it was certainly a gift. She gave that to me by asking me to write and then, you know, discovering that, ah, this was, this was a thing that, you know, made me feel alive.

MG: She died by suicide, and people who have read your fiction will know that. Your father also died by suicide. How much of this book is about trying to, not understand that, but do you know what I mean, try to wrap your head around that?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Oh, so, so much. I mean, I think that it's, yeah, suicide. They're suicides. I mean, I mean, it's the thing that I'm, you know, forever now for the rest of my life, attempting to understand, and

not only to understand, but to get to a place where I can respect, really, really feel that absolute respect for their choice, which is different than understanding. It's different than compassion. It's different.

MG: What does that mean, to respect?

MIRIAM TOEWS: To say, you know, I respect your choice. I, I can get to a place where I can say this was, this was the decision that you made. You were in so much pain, you needed to find a way of ending this pain, and this was what you decided would end the pain. And I can respect that. It's not something that we would have wanted to have happened, of course. And when you think of the, you know, the violence of it, the violence of the act, the aloneness of it, I mean, just the profound sadness of it, you know, when somebody kills themselves, they're alone, obviously. But to get past that, you know, because if you sort of, you know, go too far into that, to thinking about it, to thinking, you know, to walking through to the end with them, I mean, it could really make you a little bit crazy. So I think it's just really, really important to, yeah, just to feel it, you know, to get to that, that truce that is not peace in a sense, you know, of, of respecting, of respecting a choice.

MG: That's a hard place to get to.

MIRIAM TOEWS: It is a hard place to get to, but it's, it's, it's, you know, it's, it's vital.

MG: Is that easier in part because, I mean, you write in this book, and I haven't heard this before, about your own thoughts of suicide, that you went to the edge of the river. You threw your phone.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah, yeah.

MG: Into the river.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah.

MG: But you're here.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah.

MG: So you didn't follow through on that. What was going on?

MIRIAM TOEWS: It was a really dark, dark, dark time in my life. Everything, everything seemed to be falling, falling apart. Every, every part of, every part of my life. And, you know, now, looking back at it, you know, maybe things weren't falling, falling apart. But at the time, it felt, it felt that way. And I was, I was grieving all sorts of different types of losses, and my marriage was ending. My sister, you know, was so sick. Everything just seemed dark. And I think people who, you know, there will be people who understand what, what, what that is. And it seemed to me, you know, that maybe everybody would be better off if I wasn't around. And of course, you know, maybe that is true, but, you know, I decided, I decided to stay and then, of course, you know, realizing afterwards, talking, therapy, getting healthy again, getting away from that darkness that, you know, in fact, what I was thinking was, wasn't real. And,

and, you know, if you take that and maybe, maybe I was attempting to get to, you know, closer to, you know, my, my father, who at that time, you know, was gone, and a close cousin who had also taken her life, and maybe it all just got to be a little bit too much. But what I do know is that, and again, this goes back to the, you know, the idea of respecting the choice of, you know, my sister, my father, to end their lives. I had a glimpse of, you know, of that, just that, just that pain, that psychic pain, that darkness. I don't know how else to describe it.

MG: How are you now?

MIRIAM TOEWS: How am I now?

MG: Yeah.

MIRIAM TOEWS: I'm good, thank you.

MG: Good. No, no, no, I was just wondering.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah, no, I feel, I feel fine. Yeah.

MG: Part of that is also, I mean, and maybe it speaks to… Can you just describe the living conditions that you have right now?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Oh, yeah.

MG: You keep your family so close to you, and we talk about this intergenerational living kind of thing. But I mean, you live here in Toronto. Describe, describe the setup that you have in this home.

MIRIAM TOEWS: I do keep my family close to me. When my sister died in 2010, my mother was in, was in Winnipeg. I was in Toronto at the time with my daughter. My daughter and I had moved to Toronto. And my mum and I were on the phone and almost simultaneously, you know, we said, okay, now we need to, you know, circle the wagons and be together. We just needed to live together. We just needed to be together. So my daughter, my mother and I were living together, and then, you know, along the way, over the years, various people, you know, were added, were added to that. My grandchildren, my partner. So yeah. So now, there are four generations of us living in this, you know, two, two houses, the bigger house or the main house and then the little laneway house. And for me, it's, you know, it's the best thing. It's the best thing in the world. It's I wish that, I wish, you know, that my son in Winnipeg could also come in and live there and his partner and children, my granddaughters.

MG: I mean, it doesn't, and this is what you write about in the book. I mean, it's not always easy. It sounds like kind of messy, sometimes chaotic.

MIRIAM TOEWS: It is. It is

MG: But like gloriously messy. Do you know what I mean?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah. And I love that. I mean, you know, I had kids when I was young. Those, those were, you know, really in some way just the best years of my life. I love the chaos. I love the noise. I love the friends of theirs coming and going. I love the drama of it all, and I'm not worried too much about the mess. And yeah, but it is chaotic. Absolutely.

MG: How do you feel about writing now? You said this earlier that part of this is about thinking about should you keep writing, what does it mean to write, what have you. There's a scene in the book in which you're, or a couple of scenes. You're walking on the frozen river in Winnipeg, and you're trying to figure out why you do what you do. And you talk about how you just want to be retired from everything, that you've written enough things, and that you believe in some ways, maybe you were like a bad mother because you were off kind of thinking about things rather than being focused on what was in front of you, that you were a million miles away in your own head. How do you feel about writing now?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Well, very much the same. You know, I do feel that kind of just that constant, and I think writers will get this, you know, where you're always like just every, every experience, every interaction, every conversation, there's this part of the brain that's always kind of, you know, taking it and putting it in, you know, that it might be fuel, it might be material, right, and how to sort of switch it around, how to craft something from it, and how to impose some kind of narrative on it. And I wish, and I know that, you know, friends of mine who are writers would, you know, that we weren't that way. When I think of somebody like my mother, for instance, who just seems to just, you know, go into life fully, 100% really in the moment, you know, this thing right now.

MG: She's like a fire. She just seems like she's just kind of like this roaring fire.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah, absolutely. You know, the fire that we all gather around, that's for sure, for her warmth. But yeah. And she doesn't have that need. You know, it doesn't occur to her to write, to write something down. And I think that's so beautiful. And I wish I also was, you know, that it wasn't occurring to me.

MG: Do you really think about stopping, though?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Oh, every day. Every day. Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I mean, it's just to turn oneself inside out, you know, I can't do this again. I'm too old to do this. I can't even though I know, okay, I know I'm not that old, but older ish. And, you know, I just don't have the mental, I just don't have the focus anymore. I can't turn myself inside out anymore. But then, you know, having said all of that and going through all that, you know, histrionics of that, I am just inevitably, yeah, well, there I am, writing something again. And that seems to be, you know, impossible to avoid.

MG: Is that the answer to that question? I mean, you say in the book, the writing is the reason.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah.

MG: That you can't not do it.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Right.

MG: As hard as it is, and as much as it creates carnage and chaos that you, I mean, what's the alternative?

MIRIAM TOEWS: You tell me.

MG: Could you not? Could you imagine stopping?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Well, I do imagine.

MG: Could you stop?

MIRIAM TOEWS: Yeah. Well, probably not. It probably wouldn't be a good idea. And maybe just to write, you know, at least to just, just the physical action, just the, you know, the process of, of writing words, of making words, of using language, of choosing certain words and making a sentence and then a paragraph, I mean, just that act itself is something that, you know, maybe like for somebody else, it would be the same as picking up a guitar or, I'm not sure, windsurfing or so, I don't know, but for me, you know, it is just the best feeling.

MG: I hope you keep doing it. In the meantime, this is wonderful. And it's the story of your life, but not perhaps the way that people expect it to be told. Thank you for coming in.

MIRIAM TOEWS: Thanks a lot for having me.

MG: Miriam Toews's memoir is called "A Truce That Is Not A Peace." It is a fantastic book and one of many fantastic books. This is the busy time for books coming out. A lot of reading going on this fall, and we will be speaking with a number of great authors coming up on the program in the weeks ahead. Memoirs, a big thing at this time of the year. Brian Stewart has a memoir that is about to come out. Longtime, of course, CBC foreign correspondent. He writes about Ethiopia and more. We'll hear from Brian Stewart. We'll also hear from Arundhati Roy, who won the Booker Prize for her novel, "The G** of Small Things." She has a memoir about her relationship with her mother. It's called "Mother Mary Comes to Me." It is incredible the relationship and the way that she paints that relationship. A very difficult relationship, but also one that is at the centre of her life. Looking forward to speaking with Arundhati Roy about that and about what it means to be a writer now in 2025. That's coming up in the weeks ahead as well here on The Current. Well, coming up after your regional update.

SOUNDCLIP

SPEAKER: I mean, like theoretically, at some points, you can see that like a significant fraction of the power on Earth should be spent running AI compute. And maybe we're going to get there.

MG: How much power does AI need? A lot. An awful lot. According to the CEO of OpenAI, Sam Altman, maybe eventually, the bulk of all energy on the planet will be used to power artificial intelligence. What does it take to power that AI? We will find out coming up in 90 seconds. I'm Matt Galloway. You're listening to The Current. Stay with us.

[Music: Theme]

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AI DATA CENTRES

Guests: Casey Crownhart, Phil Harris, Kate Harland

MG: Hello again. I'm Matt Galloway, and you're listening to The Current. You know, you can ask AI tools just about everything.

SOUNDCLIP

[typing]

SPEAKER: What's the episode of “Star Trek: The Next Generation”, where nobody on the ship can see them?

SPEAKER: I want to expand my painting company service offerings. Act as my business advisor and list three complimentary services we could provide.

SPEAKER: Can you update me on the most recent news on tennis that happened in Toronto along with the weather I'm expecting today?

MG: Simple AI prompts like those ones produce instant results. But behind even basic answers is a lot of computing power. And that in turn is powered by electricity and processed in data centres. Up until now, the big tech companies weren't really saying publicly how much electricity is actually consumed when people use AI. And that has been a concern because as the industry grows, so do the demands on power grids around the world, and also potentially the carbon emissions

associated with generating all that power. But now, Google has released publicly estimates about the energy consumed when people use its Gemini AI. Casey Crownhart is the senior climate and energy reporter for the MIT Tech Review. Casey, good morning.

CASEY CROWNHART: Hi. Thanks so much for having me.

MG: Thanks for being here. What did we learn from the data that Google shared? We'll get into some of the specifics, but just broadly, what was your big takeaway?

CASEY CROWNHART: Yeah, I mean, I think this was the most transparent estimate yet that we've seen from one of these big AI players. So I mean, just off the bat, it's really, I think, a good move. Ultimately, the amount of energy that one query to Gemini uses, a typical one, you know, it falls within the range of some other previous estimates from researchers and some of our own reporting. But it's a pretty small amount if you're just looking at one kind of typical query. It's, you know, about 2.0.24, 0.24 Wat hours, which is about the same as using a microwave for about one second.

MG: A microwave for one second. That's just for a simple query.

CASEY CROWNHART: Exactly. Yeah. That would include something like an image, generating an image or a video or using these kind of more complicated models, but one of those kind of easier ones, like you said.

MG: And the point is that, I mean, people use AI for all sorts of things. It's not just asking for jokes. It's, you know, creating a travel itinerary, it's making a video, it's making an image. And so in looking at what is being consumed, what did you learn through getting, I guess, a better handle on how much AI energy is being consumed?

CASEY CROWNHART: Yeah. So through our own reporting, you know, we worked on this big project at MIT Technology Review through the first half of the year. My colleague James O'Donnell and I found that there is this really big range. You know, we were looking at open source models. So things that are publicly available. And we found that, you know, these text models, it can be even smaller than this estimate from Google down to, you know, almost a 10th of that energy consumption up to, you know, many, many, many times more if you're generating a high quality video. So I think we all want kind of one easy number about, you know, how much energy is it when I ask AI for something? But ultimately, what we found is that it matters what kind of the guts of the model, what those look like and what that something is that you're asking AI to do.

MG: So there was a scenario, and we talked a little bit about kind of some of the examples and how people might use AI, but there was a scenario that you set out involving, what, a hypothetical person doing a charity fundraiser, and they're using AI to help with that. Walk us through that and talk about how much electricity would be used.

CASEY CROWNHART: Absolutely. So if say you were running a marathon and you want some help with, you know, asking for funds for your social posts. So maybe you ask a text model 15 questions to kind of get some ideas about how to fundraise, you generate 10 images to get a couple to post on something like Instagram, and then you try to make a five second video, and you do that a few times until you get one that you're happy with. Altogether, that would add up to 2.9 kilowatt hours of electricity based on our estimates. And that's enough to run a microwave for about three and a half hours. So, you know, like I said, it really depends. The video really drives a lot of that based on our estimates, but these things can add up for sure.

MG: What did you learn about the source of the power? I mean, that's important as well, right?

CASEY CROWNHART: Absolutely. So I mean, this would be one conversation if, you know, all data centres were hooked up just to wind and solar and ran totally clean. But that's not the reality today. One preprint study from Harvard's public health school found that in the US, on average, data centres use 48% dirtier electricity than the average. That's partly because in the US, they tend to be concentrated in areas that have a lot of coal power, a lot of natural gas. So the emissions here are definitely a cause for concern as we see these data centres pop up and use, you know, a lot, a lot, a lot of electricity that's coming with a lot of emissions.

MG: It's also not just electricity. Water is used to help cool the computers that are in these data centres. And in reading your report, I mean, each prompt would consume something like five drops of water. Is that right?

CASEY CROWNHART: Yep, five drops of water. You know, it's a fraction of a millilitre. So, you know, ultimately, again, this estimate shows that every one of these queries is maybe a small amount of electricity, of emissions, of water, but that can be, you know, a really big, again, it can add up to a lot when you're in water stressed areas in particular.

MG: We are in very early days, it feels like, of the AI eruption. People are talking about how much this is going to grow, how exponentially it will grow. Beyond the individual actions, what are the estimates about how much energy AI will need in the years ahead?

CASEY CROWNHART: Yeah, projections at this point are definitely set to take off. So the International Energy Agency this year released a report. And they found that electricity use for all data centres, so AI is only a subset of that, but electricity use of data centres is set to double between now and the end of the decade. So just a few years from now. And they projected that it would reach 945 terawatt hours, which is the entire electricity consumption of Japan today. And AI is definitely a significant force there, with AI specific demand set to quadruple. So, you know, these are big numbers, and it's also in places like, you know, the US and these, you know, advanced economies, data centres are going to be a lot of the growth in electricity demand. You know, we're seeing, everything needs more electricity, from EVs to air conditioners to factories, but data centres will be a really big chunk of that in certain parts of the world.

MG: As a climate reporter, what do you understand about what that means for carbon emissions?

CASEY CROWNHART: I mean, it means that we have a big task ahead of us to really consider how this technology gets rolled out, how, you know, data centres, how we expect them to work with the grid, how we expect them to, you know, be part of hopefully cleaning up the grid. This, this all, you know, if these electricity estimates come to pass, that's hundreds of millions of metric tons of carbon emissions every year. So, you know, it's a little bit daunting, but I think, I hope that we can look at this as an opportunity that these companies can be part of, you know, trying to decarbonize our grid and try to be part of the energy transition.

MG: I guess just finally, before I let you go, is your sense that those companies, I mean, Google released this information, you have governments that are shoveling money into AI and creating these data centres, luring the companies to build the data centres there. Are governments and these tech companies actually paying attention to the energy use that's associated with this technology?

CASEY CROWNHART: I think so, and I think that, you know, ultimately, this came from a lot of questions. Google said, you know, we've been getting a lot of questions, including from our pestering at MIT Technology Review. So I think that, you know, if people care about this, they should continue asking, you know, the governments and companies to, you know, be more transparent, to share more information and to ultimately, like I said, be a driving force for the energy transition through this.

MG: Thank you for your pestering and thank you for talking to us about the results of that. Casey, thank you.

CASEY CROWNHART: Thank you.

MG: Casey Crownhart is senior climate and energy reporter for the MIT Tech Review. Here in Canada, there has been a lot of talk in recent months about the need to build our own data centres and get in on that AI boom, but there are also questions about what that means for our electrical grid and climate. Phil Harris is president and CEO of a company called Cerio. It works with tech companies to help make data centres more efficient. He's with me in studio. Good morning.

PHIL HARRIS: Good morning, Matt.

MG: How difficult is it, I mean, Casey was talking about this disclosure from Google, but how difficult is it to get a grip on how much energy these data centres are actually using?

PHIL HARRIS: Yeah, I think this is, and I try to put this in sort of terms that everyone can understand. Let's take ChatGPT. We were talking about Gemini earlier, but let's take ChatGPT. Probably the more well-known generative AI platform. If we think from December of 24 to today, about nine months, from ChatGPT to ChatGPT-5, the usage has gone up from one billion of those prompts a day to about two and a half billion prompts a day. The power required, though, has gone up 60-fold. Why? Because AI is becoming more complex. There’s agentic AI. There's different types of AI now that are being required in

these platforms. So I think we have to look at the overall impact and think, what's this scale going forward and how do we address that? Just to put that in context, if we were to drop ChatGPT-5 into Ontario today with our power grid, it's the equivalent of about a million very efficient gasoline powered cars a day.

MG: That's a lot.

PHIL HARRIS: That's a lot.

MG: And that's going to grow more tomorrow, more the day after that, more after that.

PHIL HARRIS: That's right. And that's just ChatGPT.

MG: Yeah. In this country, are we thinking, I mean, and Casey was talking a little bit about how these countries and jurisdictions that are luring AI have to think about this. Are we thinking about this enough? Do you think we are?

PHIL HARRIS: We are. And I think it's something that both at the provincial level here in Ontario, we're here in Ontario, but I think across other provinces too, and certainly at the federal level, you know, the appointment of Evan Solomon as the AI minister at the federal level, Stephen Crawford here at the provincial level, are taking this very seriously and working with companies like Core Data Centres in Brampton, here again in Ontario, who are really trying to figure out how to build that really efficient data centre that is not only effective, but it's so it's competitive, because we're competing with some very, very deep pockets.

MG: Is it possible that that power can be sustainable, that what's fueling these centres can, I mean, sustainable is this word that different people have different interpretations of, but is that possible?

PHIL HARRIS: Well, I think first of all, we've got to figure out, are we building efficient data centres, to start with? And that's what Cerio's mission is, is to try and make sure that we're using the technology that makes AI happen. AI has been around since the 1950s. The first AI languages that were used in software came around the late 50s. Then GPU technology from companies like Nvidia came around in the late 90s. That only really came together in the last five, six years. So as we've put these technologies together, we're using a 30-year-old system model to power AI. We've got to look at that system model, and that's what we've attempted to do at Cerio, to build technology that can really optimize those data centres.

MG: How are you doing that? How does your company help these companies try and use less energy if that's possible?

PHIL HARRIS: The first thing is, are we using these very expensive resources in the most effective way? If you look at a typical data centre, we spoke about these huge data centres, typically, they're about 60% efficient. Meaning at any one time, 60% of the equipment in there is being used. 40% sitting

idle or redundant or stranded is another way of looking at it. What if we could make that 100% available? That's what we do. We make sure that all the resources are 100% available at any point in time.

MG: So that if you're going to be using that, you use it to its most efficient ability.

PHIL HARRIS: That's right. And use it to the point where the system itself can evolve fast and using new technologies without us having to do these big forklift upgrades, as we call them, every time, because they're expensive, they're disruptive. And quite frankly, it means that data centres tend to be, over time, ever more inefficient. We should make them ever more efficient as time goes by.

MG: Are those companies actually thinking in that way? I mean, there have been nightmare stories of, you know, these enormous data centres. And water is a part of this, right? Suddenly, people's wells go dry because we're sucking up all the water to help fund the technology and fuel the technology of the future. People worry about, you know, whether the lights are going to be able to come on because we're using so much energy to help power this tech. Are those companies, there's a real, there's a lot of money that's here. And so you wonder whether those companies are actually thinking that this is important or whether the technology will figure it out down the line.

PHIL HARRIS: So I look at the investments. I mean, look at Microsoft. They've just taken a 20-year lease on Three Mile Island and nuclear power generation. So basically, these companies are becoming power generation companies themselves because they're recognizing the grid won't keep up. And however much investment we put into the national grid to distribute power, generate and distribute, and by the way, Canada is an immensely efficient place to build data centres compared to, say, California. We're about a 10th of the emissions of carbon dioxide into the air compared to, say, California, which is one of the most efficient in the US.

MG: You mentioned Evan Solomon. There's a lot of talk in this country right now. The fact that we have a minister of AI is one thing, but there's a lot of talk of digital sovereignty, that we need to be able to control our own, and you're nodding as I'm saying that, we need to be able to control our own data and be in the race, be in the game.

PHIL HARRIS: Yes.

MG: What does that mean in terms of how much energy, how do you square that in terms of how much energy is going to be used, if we are going to be aggressive as a nation, to try to build these data centres?

PHIL HARRIS: Well, I think, and I've spoken to Minister Solomon about this, small modular reactors so we can distribute more energy and create more scale of energy is certainly critical. But if I look at data centres themselves, I think, again, we've got to figure out, are we going to do very small, sorry, large numbers of very concentrated data centres or are we going to distribute them? And I think the question is, can we distribute data centres across Canada? Because data sovereignty isn't just about where the data is, it's your accessibility to the data. It's the reliability of that data. Reliability becomes really

important here. We've got to rethink that. And I do think the provincial and federal government take this seriously. Governments don't work as fast as we would like them to, certainly at the pace of technology. They're trying hard, and I give them credit for the pace that they're trying to get to, but there's a lot of catch up to do here.

MG: What do you make, just finally, of the arguments, I mean, we're talking about the climate impact of this energy consumption, the arguments that, you know, Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google and others make that, he says, we're not going to make the climate goals anyway, but he's betting on AI to help try and solve the climate crisis. I mean, he has a number of layers of skin in that game. One is the investment that he has put in and the concern that this is creating, exacerbating the climate crisis. But is that possible? Do you think that this technology will help us?

PHIL HARRIS: You know, it's a funny, it's a bit of a recursive argument. To use AI to solve the problems of AI will only exacerbate the problems of AI if we're not thinking about how we build AI differently. So I think he's right if we take the right approach, which we haven't been taking up to now, but we can if we invest in the right technology.

MG: And you honestly believe that that's possible, again, to build at scale, but also to build at scale and find efficiencies that are really going to make a difference.

PHIL HARRIS: If we don't, then the digital divide that we saw with the internet in the early 2000s is going to be exponentially worse. If we think about what AI is doing for the world, we have to make this a win story. And to do that, again, we've got to take a step back and say, where are we putting investments? Both private and public investments have to be hand in hand to do this right.

MG: And not destroy ourselves in the long run.

PHIL HARRIS: Exactly.

MG: Phil, thank you very much.

PHIL HARRIS: Thank you, Matt.

MG: Phil Harris is president and CEO of Cerio. It's a company based in Kanata, Ontario. It helps tech companies make their data centres more efficient. Kate Harland does research on clean growth at the Canadian Climate Institute. She is in Langley, British Columbia. Kate, good morning to you.

KATE HARLAND: Good morning.

MG: You've been listening. How well equipped do you think this country is to deal with a potential boom in data centre construction here?

KATE HARLAND: Well, obviously, the demand for energy use from AI is growing. It's kind of a step up on our digital world and our potential footprint and how much electricity we need. But I guess the real question we have is, is how do we choose to power any data centres here in Canada? We are increasingly interested in that for a host of reasons. These data centres, they run 24/7 typically. And so there's a lot of consumption, electricity consumption that's needed to supply those centres.

MG: I asked Phil about that word sustainable. Green is another one of those words that, I mean, the definition is in the eye of the beholder in some ways. How much of that energy being used to power data centres could be considered green energy?

KATE HARLAND: Yeah, I mean, we, from across Canada, the grid is more than 80% non-emitting. There's different definitions of clean and green. But in terms of emissions, we have a lot of hydropower. And what we've actually seen is provinces like Canada moving off coal fired power fast and expected building out wind and solar. And so that's been a bit of a success story in Canada that we've reduced our emissions substantially over the past decade in terms of emissions from our electricity sector. The question now is, though, if we have new large loads coming on, like data centres that are supporting AI, if we build new gas fired power stations to support those centres and they use that power, you know, all day, every day, not just for the kind of peak needs, we could lock in quite a large amount of emissions for decades because a new plant we expect to last over 40 years.

MG: I mean, this is happening in Alberta right now where you have a data centre strategy that revolves around electricity that's powered by natural gas, right?

KATE HARLAND: Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of interest in Alberta for data centres, and there's a long queue of potential projects. So if you built, for example, all of those projects and they were all fired with new gas plants, then that would raise the kind of carbon gains that we've seen in terms of phasing out coal, you know, in Alberta. So there's a real and is a real issue here, but fortunately, we do have a clean path forward. There are alternatives. We can pair new wind and solar with batteries so the data centres can run for the most part on clean electricity, maybe not for all peak times, but for the bulk of their use. And we can also look at how better we connect provinces. So we connect Alberta with BC or Quebec and Manitoba, which also have good hydro resources with their neighbouring provinces as well.

MG: Is that realistic to rely on renewables for something that is going to be consuming this much energy?

KATE HARLAND: Well, one of the advantages of renewables today is that they're really fast to build compared to, say, a new gas plant. They're actually quite a long wait time right now for new gas turbines. So.

MG: But just in terms of scale, just in terms of the amount of energy that's going to be gobbled up.

KATE HARLAND: Yeah. Well, one of the things we need to think about is how do we run our electricity systems, how do we manage the electricity effectively. And what we have right now is we have big hydro

dams in some parts of the country that can effectively act as batteries and can support wind and solar. So we can kind of play a little bit with our variable wind and solar and our hydro and use our grid more efficiently. And that's a way for us to manage an increased supply of electricity through more efficient use of our system that we do have across the country.

MG: I mean, there are big decisions to be made here, right? Because more of these data centres will be built, and there are enormous economic opportunities in terms of where those centres end up. What do you want governments to be thinking about as they, as they wrestle with, with that decision making?

KATE HARLAND: Exactly. I mean, there is the question of what we have. I think we want to make sure that the electricity remains reliable and it remains affordable for… And so one of the questions I have is at this from a system perspective, let us make sure that data centres pay their fair share of costs of building out the system, that will to help make sure that that happens. And let's ask data centres to be good customers effectively. So maybe they can cut their use at peak times and shift some of their flexible computing to off peak times. We've actually seen this happen a couple of times. Microsoft had an example in Quebec, with some agreements there about, reducing their consumption in the coldest winter days when the electricity system is most strained, and reducing consumption there. And that really saves everybody. It saves, it saves the system money, and it helps with reliability as well. So we can ask them to be good, good citizens, yeah, from the grid perspective too.

MG: What about, just finally, for individuals? I mean, we started this conversation just talking about how much energy a simple query or a video that you're creating relies on. Do you think people think at all about the energy and climate impacts when they hammer something into ChatGPT?

KATE HARLAND: It's a question I've been posed a lot recently, actually. I think interest is growing. I think more, there is more awareness about even off openness about emails and our photos. But I think there is a question here, there's some bigger levers here we can ask for how are we powering these centres that will make, you know, we need more electricity in the energy transition. Even if these energy and these data centres become more efficient over time, we'll still need that electricity for other tech, for other uses as well. So from a listener perspective, Let's ask for the new electricity supply to be clean. And that will, will help us as we transition and also make sure that we have more available power, whether it's for data centres or for other uses, when those data centres become more efficient, hopefully, in future.

MG: Kate, good to speak with you. Thank you very much.

KATE HARLAND: Thank you.

MG: Kate Harland research is clean growth at the Canadian Climate Institute. She was in Langley, British Columbia. That's The Current for this Wednesday, the 3rd of September. Q is up next on CBC Radio One. Yesterday, we brought you a full program from Iqaluit, and tomorrow, we'll hear more from that city. The north, as we said yesterday, is having a real moment. Politicians and industry have their sights set on this part of the country and what it offers. For the people who live in the north, there is real

concern over what the future might hold. And when I was in Iqaluit, I spoke with Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami president, Natan Obed.

SOUNDCLIP

NATAN OBED: Canadians see our homeland as a frontier, the same way that they may have seen western Canada as a frontier in the mid 1800s when there weren't roads or railways or trading connections between Ottawa and Toronto and Montreal and western Canada. But what happened? Canada built infrastructure. It thought big, and it invested, and it imagined that the country was bigger and the opportunities for all were bigger than just in the eastern part. Now, we're faced with a scenario where the Arctic becomes at the forefront of people's minds for security and sovereignty and defence and military, and it also becomes an area where people think of mines and minerals and possible exploitation. But Canada as a whole hasn't thought of the equity question, for what it means for the people who live here, the Inuit.

MG: You can hear our whole conversation with Natan Obed tomorrow on the program. We were sitting in this incredible setting overlooking Sylvia Grinnell Park. The waterfalls are in front of us. There are people fishing for Arctic char. You had Frobisher Bay that kind of spilled out in front of us. It was a remarkable setting for a fascinating conversation, and you'll hear that tomorrow on the program. If you missed our entire program from Iqaluit yesterday, you can find it at cbc.ca/thecurrent, on CBC Listen or wherever you get your podcasts. We were out when we were there picking crowberries with some locals just outside of Iqaluit. We're going to leave you today with the Iqaluit-based band, The Trade-Offs. This is a tune called “Crowberry Hill.” I'm Matt Galloway. Thanks for listening to The Current. We'll see you tomorrow.

[Song: “Crowberry Hill” by The Trade-Offs]

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