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The Education Department is being cut in half. Here's what's being lost

UPDATED MARCH 13, 2025 · 5:57 PM ET

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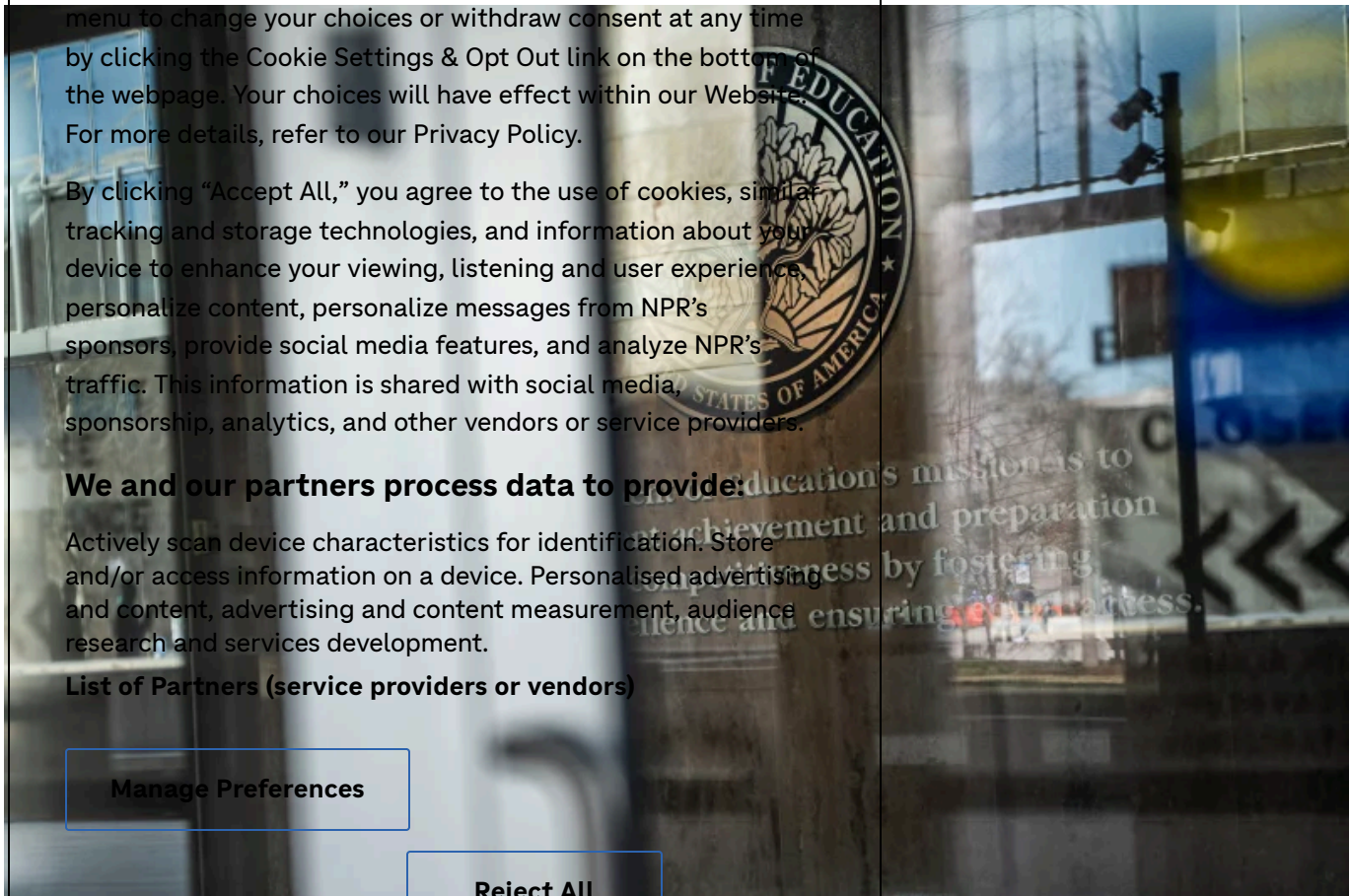
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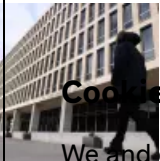
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A view through the doors of the U.S. Department of Education, in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday, the day after the agency said it would lay off nearly half its staff.

Nathan Howard/Reuters

President Donald Trump inherited a U.S. Department of Education with 4,133 employees, according to the administration's own numbers. Nearly 600 workers have since chosen to leave, by resigning or retiring. And this week, more than 1,300 workers were told they're losing their jobs in a Tuesday purge.

That leaves 2,183 remaining department staff, according to the administration. Which means the Education Department will soon be roughly half the size it was just a few weeks ago.



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U.S. Education Department says it is cutting nearly half of all staff

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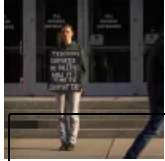
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What those numbers don't capture is the toll these cuts will take on the work of the department. With roughly half the staff on the way out, what half of that work will fall by the wayside? Using department data obtained by NPR, including a spreadsheet of nearly 1,000 laid off members of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) local 252, as well as interviews with a dozen employees who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution by the Trump administration, NPR has compiled this list of department responsibilities hit hardest by these staffing cuts.

Civil rights enforcement has been dramatically cut

In the department's own language, its Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the attorneys who work there are tasked with "preventing, identifying, ending, and remedying discrimination against America's students" based on race, national origin, sex, age and disability.



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What parents, teachers and school choice groups think of Education Department cuts

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According to department data, at least 240 OCR employees were laid off Tuesday, most of them attorneys who investigate complaints from parents and families who believe a school has discriminated against their child. The number of layoffs is likely higher, as that 240 does not include non-union employees. As of last September, 508 people worked in OCR, according to the FedScope federal workforce database.

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A revised department organizational chart obtained by NPR shows that more than half of the OCR's 12 field offices will also be shuttered – in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, San Francisco and Dallas.

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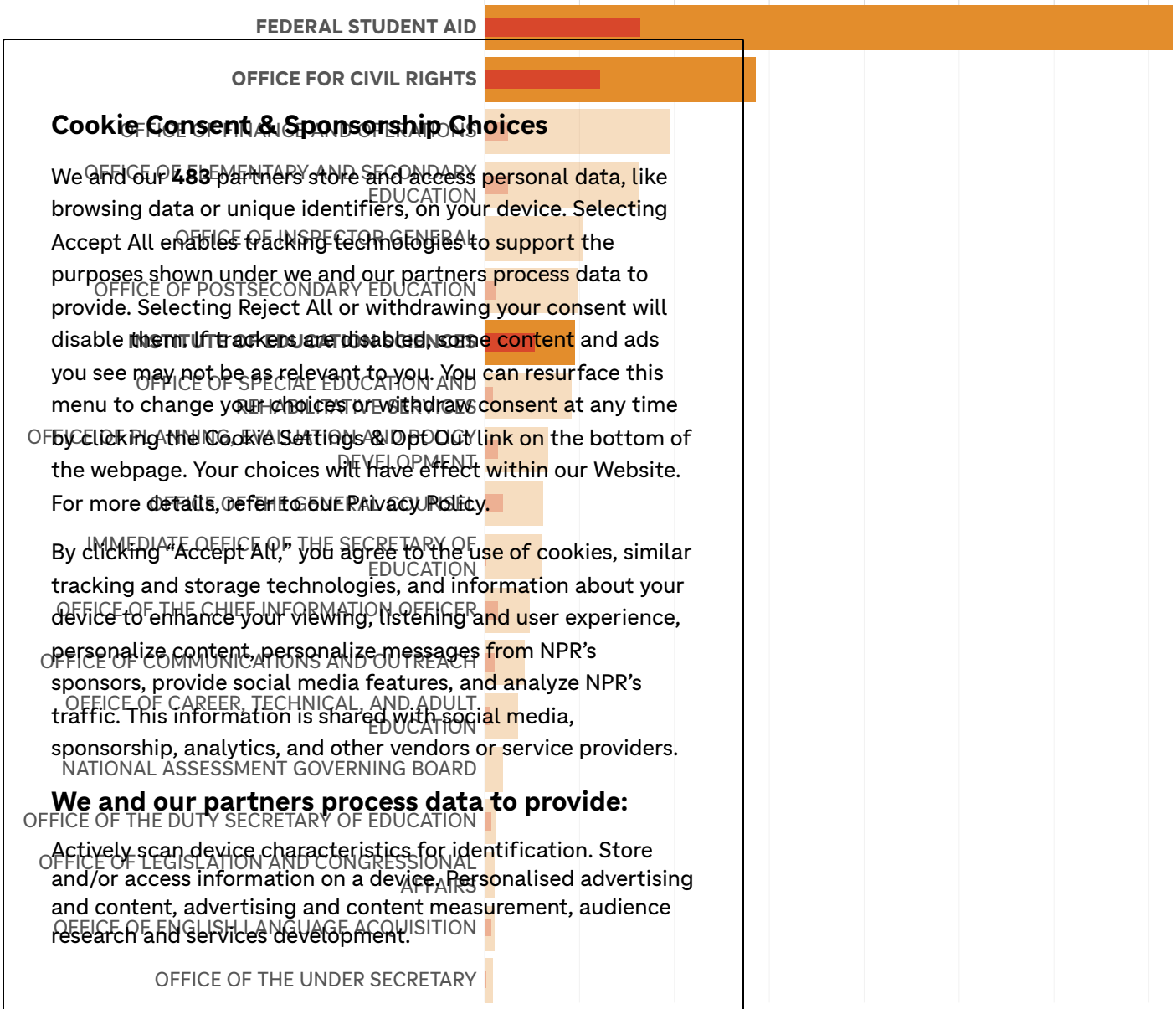
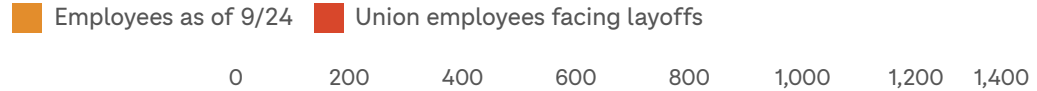
Catherine Lhamon, who ran the civil rights office during the Obama and Biden administrations, says these cuts are an absolute walk-away from our longstanding, bipartisan commitments to civil rights and our belief that every one of our kids is a valuable learner.

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Education layoffs disproportionately target financial aid, civil rights and education research teams

The Trump administration announced it is cutting the U.S. Education Department's workforce by nearly half. The latest layoffs include more than 1,300 employees, among them roughly 1,000 union members.



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Source: Education Department data, FedScope Employment Cube (September 2024)

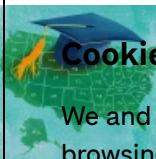
Credit: Stephen Fowler/NPR

Still, the Trump administration clearly plans to utilize this office: The day before the layoffs were announced, OCR sent letters to 60 colleges and universities,

threatening to withhold federal funding if they do not protect Jewish students on their campuses.

"U.S. colleges and universities benefit from enormous public investments funded by U.S. taxpayers," Education Secretary Linda McMahon said in a statement. "That support is a privilege and it is contingent on scrupulous adherence to federal antidiscrimination laws."

Now though, the office has at least 40% fewer staffers to enforce those laws.



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A guide to what the U.S. Education Department does (and doesn't) do

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"I'm open to the idea that losing half of the attorneys at OCR is a good decision," says Rick Hess, of the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute (AEI), "but being open to it doesn't mean I believe it."

Hess says staffing cuts this large should have to be explained, with full transparency, by the administration doing the cutting. In this case, that hasn't happened yet.

It's the Trump administration's job, Hess says, "to be transparent about what's going on, to explain how this is going to work, and ideally to have done that before the cuts were made rather than after the cuts were made."

Money will still go to the most vulnerable students, with fewer guardrails

The Department of Education administers two large, decades-old funding streams to schools to help educate the nation's most vulnerable students: Those living in poverty (Title I) and children with disabilities (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA). Both funding streams were created by Congress and are protected by law.

While Tuesday's layoffs do not directly affect those federal dollars, four sources with direct knowledge of the inner workings of the department's Office of General Counsel tell NPR the Trump administration has fired every attorney responsible for helping states and school districts understand how they can and cannot use their federal K-12 money and who raise red flags when a state or district appears to be in violation of these funding laws.

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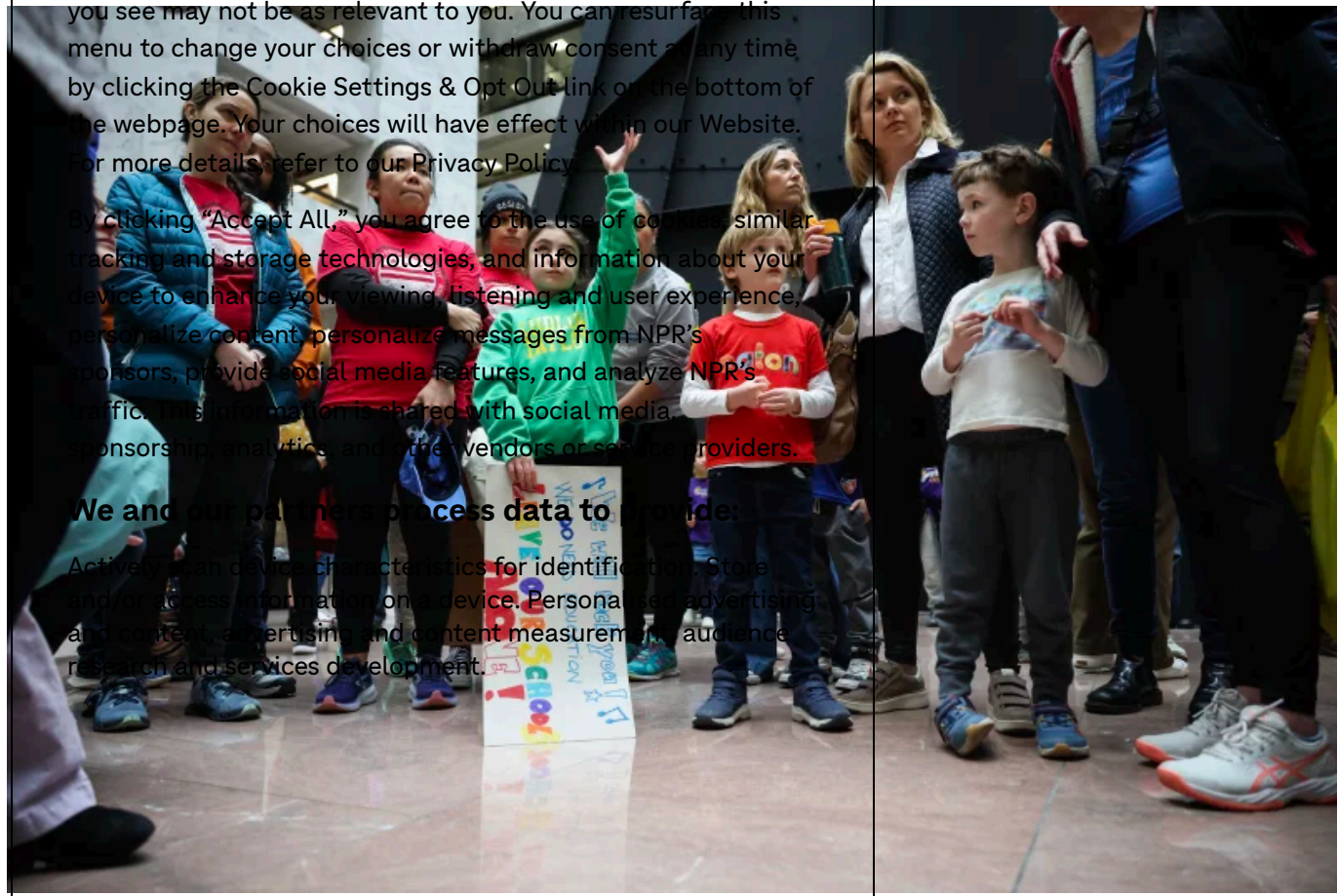
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Children, parents and teachers gather on Capitol Hill in support of the U.S. Department of Education on Thursday. Kayla Bartkowski/Getty Images



These layoffs still allow states to continue receiving vital federal funds, including money for homeless students and rural schools, but they strip away the U.S. government's ability to offer either legal guidance or guardrails — to guarantee the money is being used to help the children it was intended to help.

"That will have very negative effects on communities around the country that currently don't really even understand that their child's [special education], or the supports that they receive for their child, are directly connected to the U.S. Department of Education," says Patrice Willoughby, chief of policy and legislative affairs at the NAACP.

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On Wednesday, speaking to reporters, President Trump made clear the rollback of federal oversight is meant as a sign of trust in states' ability to manage their own affairs.

"We have a dream, and you know what the dream is we're going to move the Department of Education — we're going to move education into the states, so that the states, instead of bureaucrats working in Washington, so that the states can run education."

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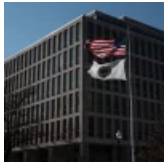
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Another blow to education research

In early February, Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) made deep cuts to the Education Department's research division, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).



EDUCATION

Trump administration targets Education Department research arm in latest cuts

DOGE said it cut dozens of research contracts worth roughly \$900 million. These cuts included large-scale efforts to study everything from the best ways to teach literacy in the early grades to how to help students with disabilities make the sometimes difficult transition from high school into the working world.

"This is a decimation," one source with knowledge of IES' inner workings told NPR, "the destruction of knowing what works for kids."

On top of these research cuts, on Tuesday, the Education Department terminated more than 100 IES employees, including many research analysts who specialize in K-12 studies and adult and career education. As of last September, 186 people worked at IES, according to FedScope.

There will be fewer resources for student loans and college financial aid

The Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA), which administers the sprawling federal student loan portfolio, was hit especially hard in Tuesday's cuts, losing more than 320 unionized staffers. That's on top of other big staffing losses, which were discussed during an internal FSA meeting held Wednesday morning, sources told NPR.

In the meeting, top Education Department officials said they will lose more than 450 employees to this upcoming restructure – and a combined 727 when you include probationary staff who've been terminated as well as veterans workers who have agreed to retire or leave voluntarily.



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by clicking the Cookie Settings & Opt Out link on the bottom of the webpage. Your choices will have effect within our Website. A student works in the Perry-Castaneda Library at the University of Texas at Austin. The Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA), which administers the sprawling federal student loan portfolio, was hit especially hard in Tuesday's cuts, losing more than 320 unionized staffers. For more details, refer to our Privacy Policy.

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Sources familiar with the inner workings of FSA, who would not speak publicly for fear of retribution by the Trump administration, said these layoffs, coupled with steep numbers of veteran staff who have chosen to leave, have been devastating.

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"We've lost hundreds of years of institutional knowledge," one FSA employee told NPR.

Also lost in the layoffs, according to multiple FSA sources, were staff who helped oversee the companies that manage the federal student loan portfolio, as well as a large group of IT specialists who help maintain FSA's online presence, including cybersecurity compliance.

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Millions of college students need to be reminded of what happens when FSA falls short. Many no doubt remember the Biden administration's troubled rollout of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and are hoping these staff cuts don't mean a return to FAFSA chaos.

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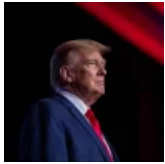
Are these mass layoffs legal?
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That question does not have a clear-cut answer, according to Kenneth Wong, a professor of education policy at Brown University. Wong says Trump "is pushing the boundary of executive power" by making deep cuts to staff that work on programs created by Congress.

Some states are already fighting the legality of the cuts. On Thursday, New York Attorney General Letitia James led a group of 20 other state attorneys general suing to stop the Trump administration from dismantling the Education Department.

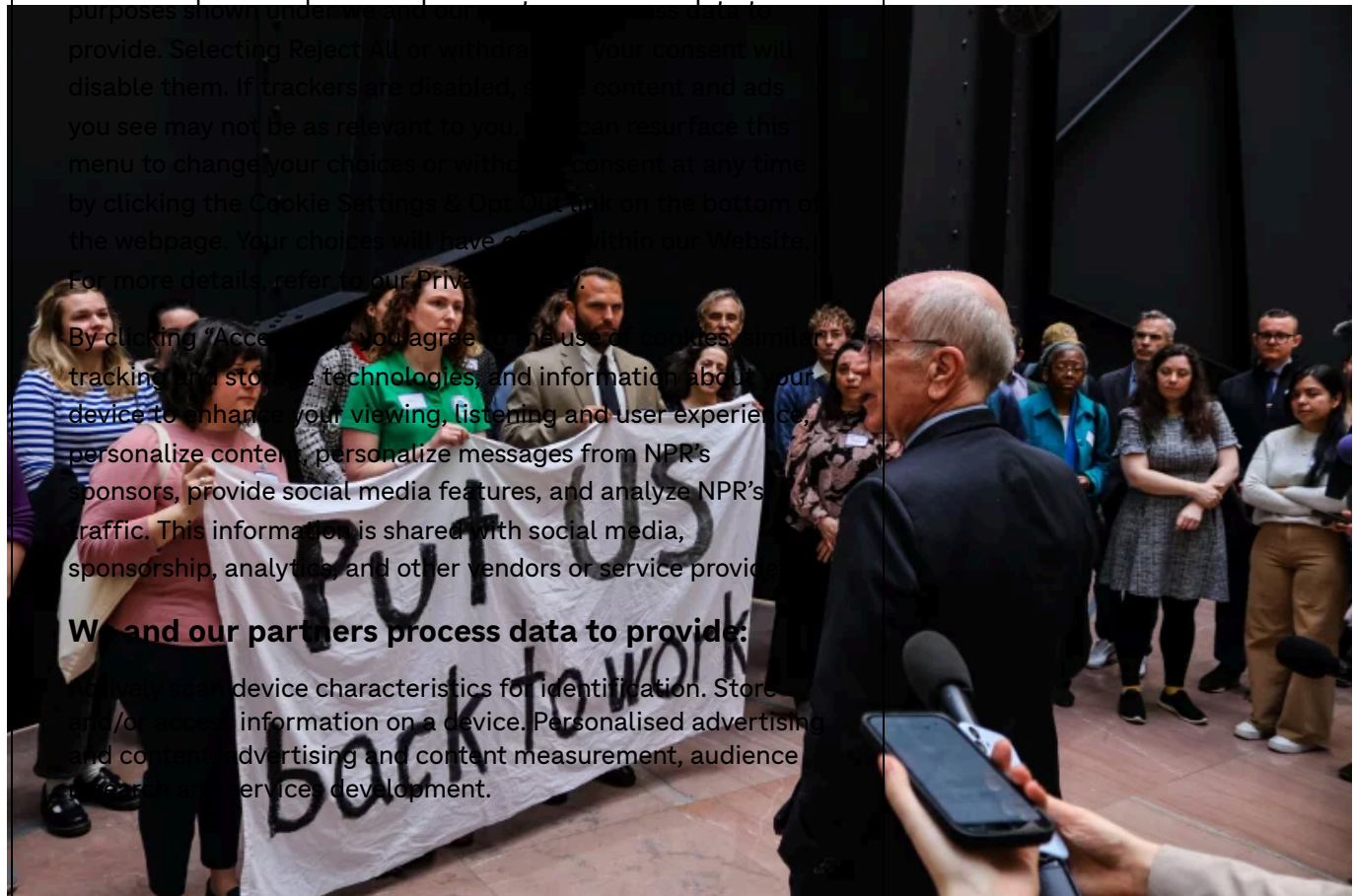
EDUCATION

Republicans' love/hate relationship with the Education Department



"Firing half of the Department of Education's workforce will hurt students throughout New York and the nation," James said in a statement, "especially low-income students and those with disabilities who rely on federal funding. This outrageous effort to leave students behind and deprive them of a quality education is reckless and illegal."

The executive branch has the authority to manage federal personnel; that's not in doubt. The question of the moment is: At what point does managing personnel undermine or even endanger a program that is protected by statute?



U.S. Sen. Peter Welch, D-Vt., addresses federal workers who were recently fired at the Hart Senate Office Building on Tuesday.

Tom Hudson/ZUMA Press Wire via Reuters

For example, the Office for Civil Rights' mandate to enforce federal civil rights laws is protected by statute. Eliminating the office entirely would likely be

considered a violation of federal law, but is cutting the office's staff nearly in half?

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Also, AET's Rick Hess points out, there are basic civil service policies in place for the hiring and terminating of staff.

"Are these layoffs being done in a way that's consistent with what Congress has authorized? To me, as an education guy, it's not immediately clear," he says.

The White House, Wong says, is essentially asking Congress, "Do you agree with us in the executive branch, that this is OK for us to do?" So I think the ball is now in the hands of Congress."

While some congressional Republicans have voiced concern over changes at the Education Department, especially around safeguarding services for children with disabilities, it's unclear the party, as a whole, will have any interest in pushing back, even if the downsizing continues.

Without congressional intervention, Wong says, the fight over whether these massive cuts have gone too far will most likely play out in the courts.

Reporting contributed by: Stephen Fowler

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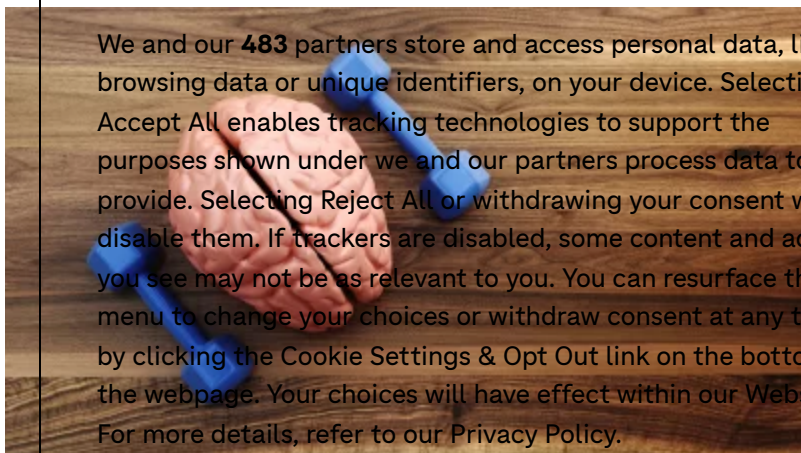
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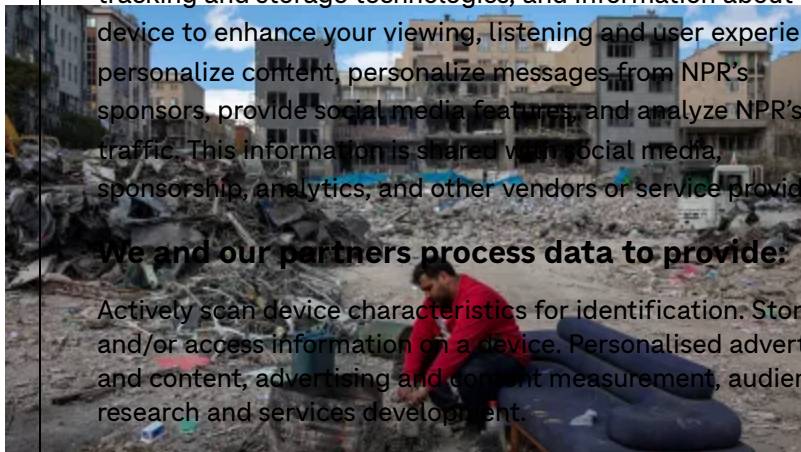
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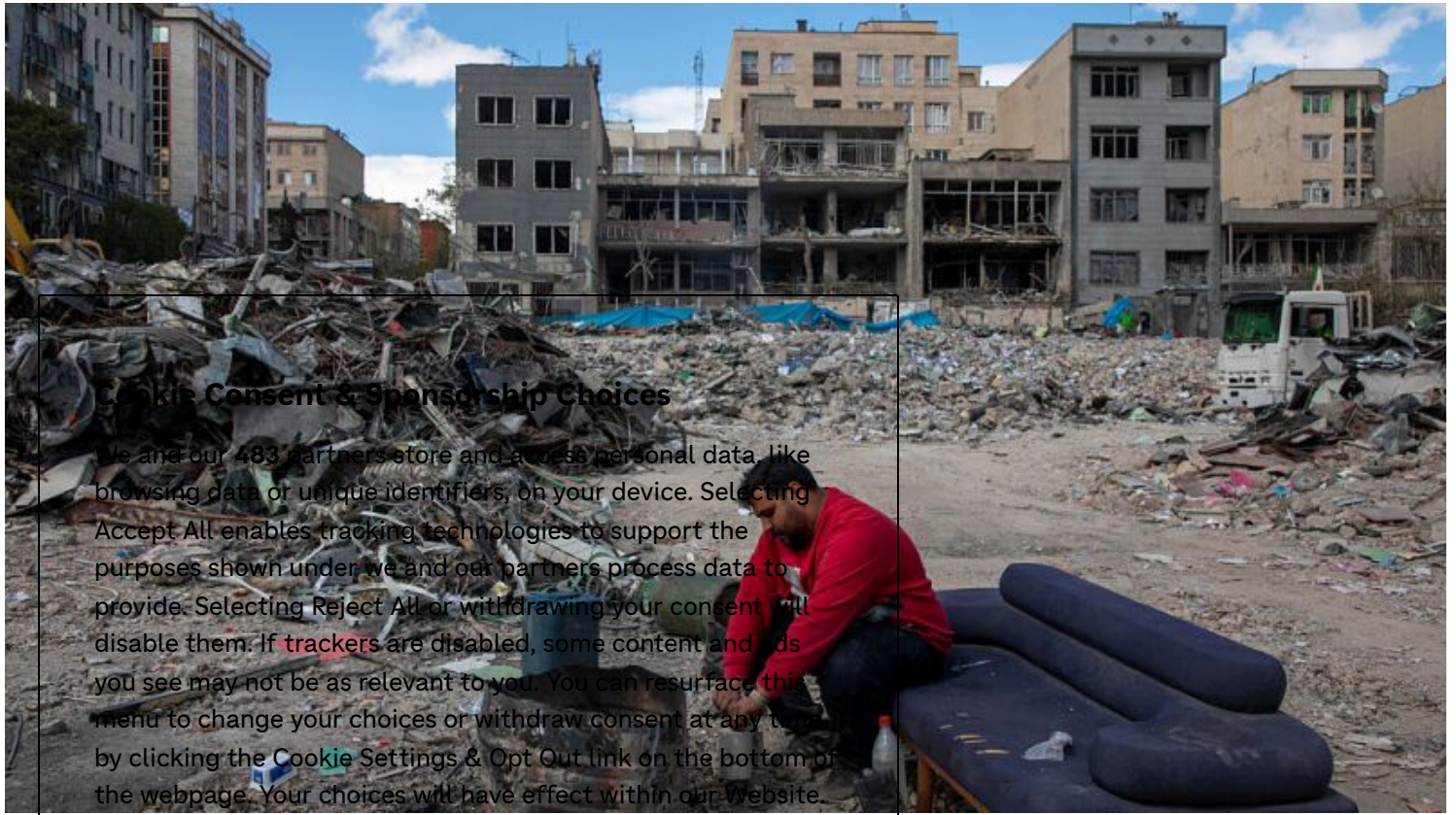
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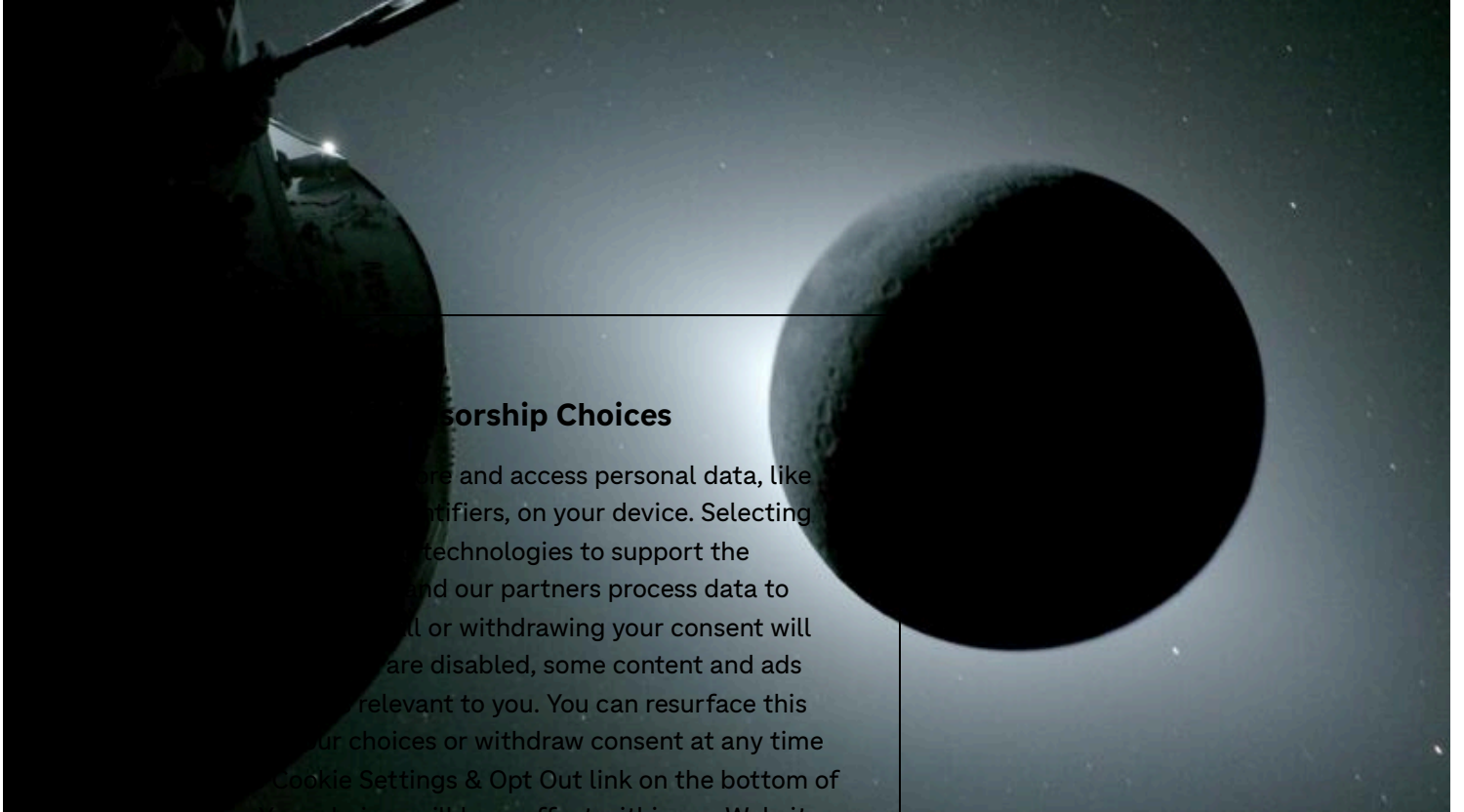
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The Artemis II crew saw parts of the moon never seen before. Here's what they said

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THE PICTURE SHOW

Photos: NASA releases first images from moon flyby



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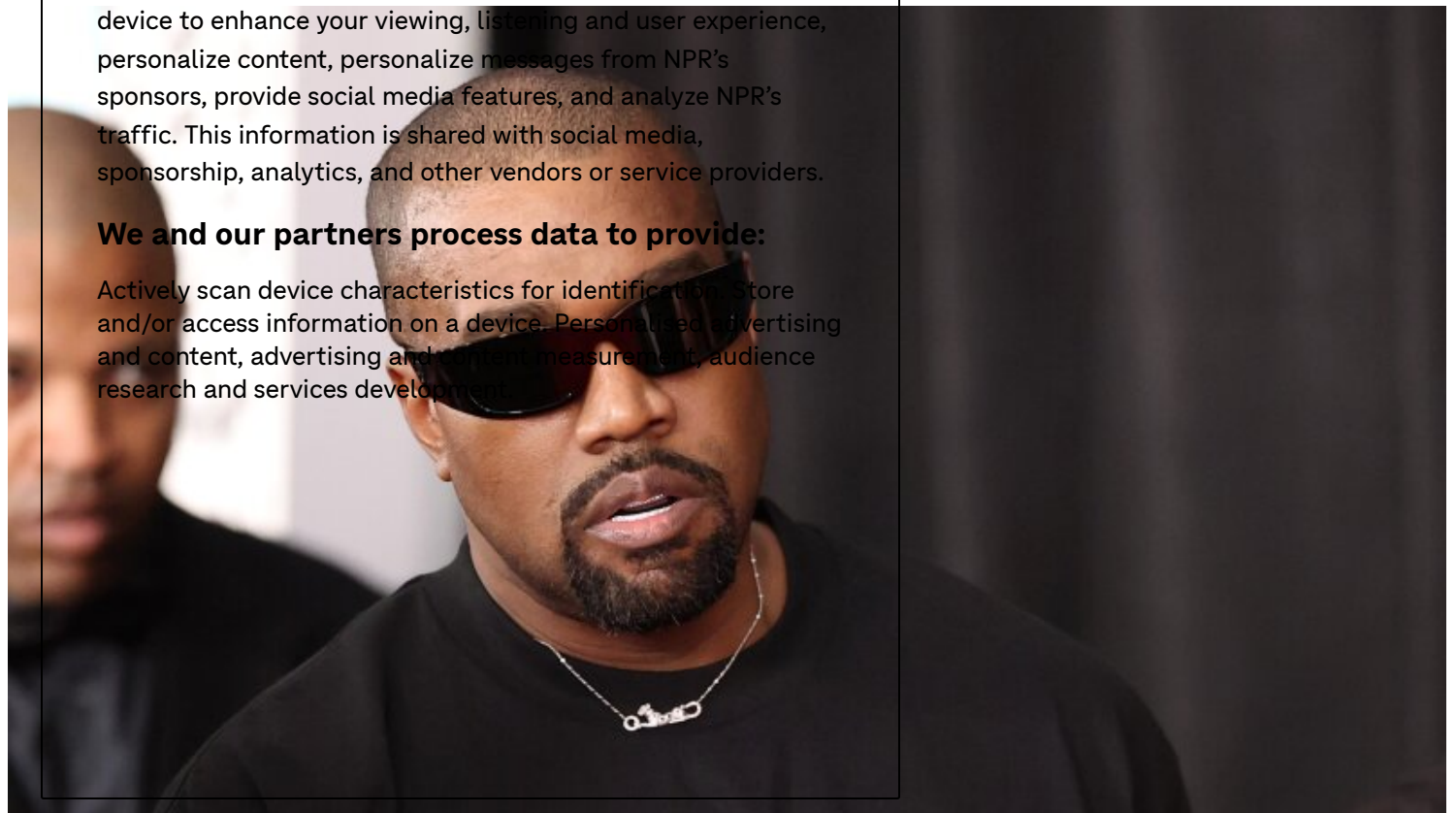
POLITICS

Congressional Democrats raise alarm over Trump's comments on Iran

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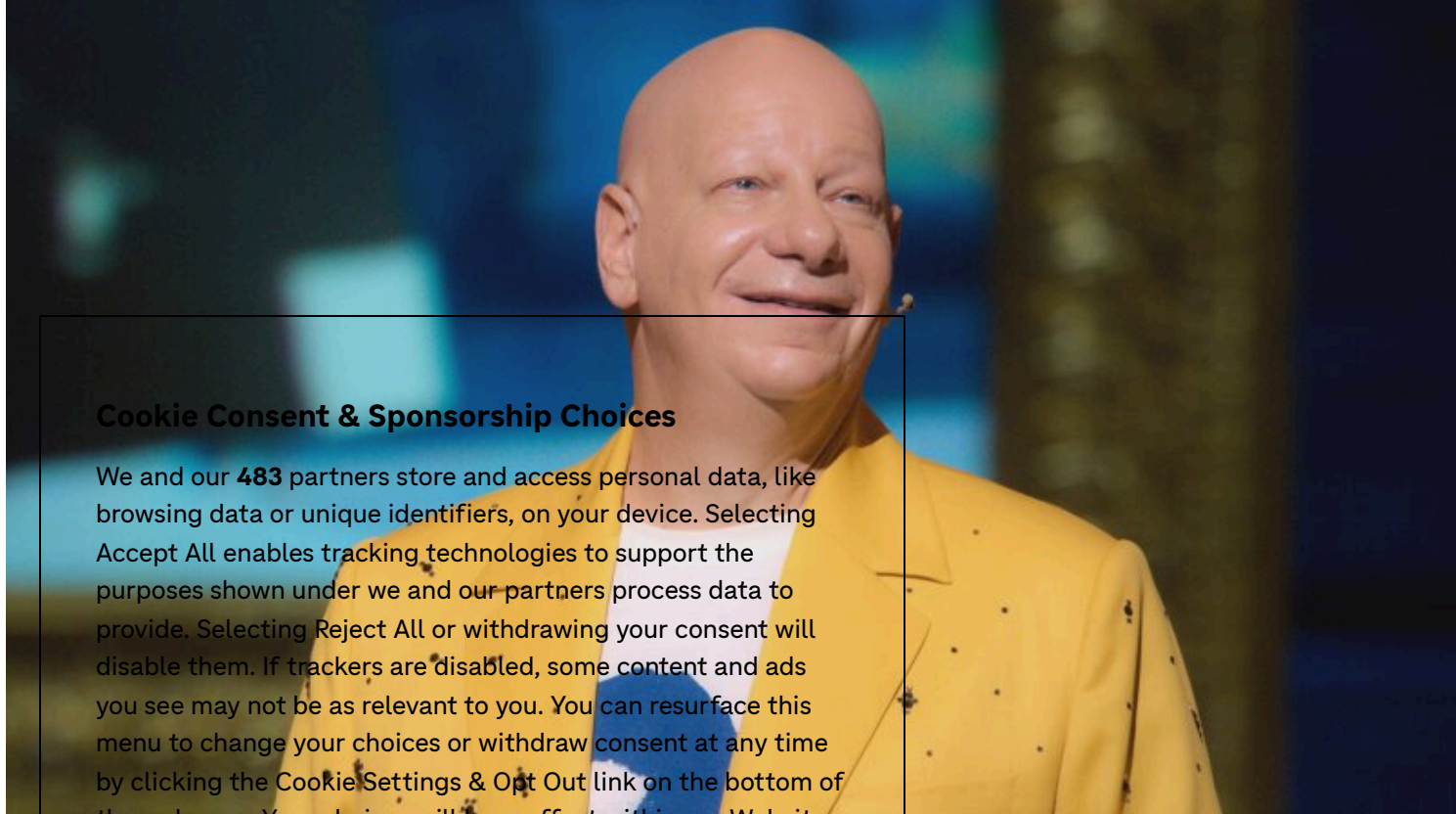
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MUSIC

U.K. issues Ye travel ban over antisemitism, leading to festival cancellation



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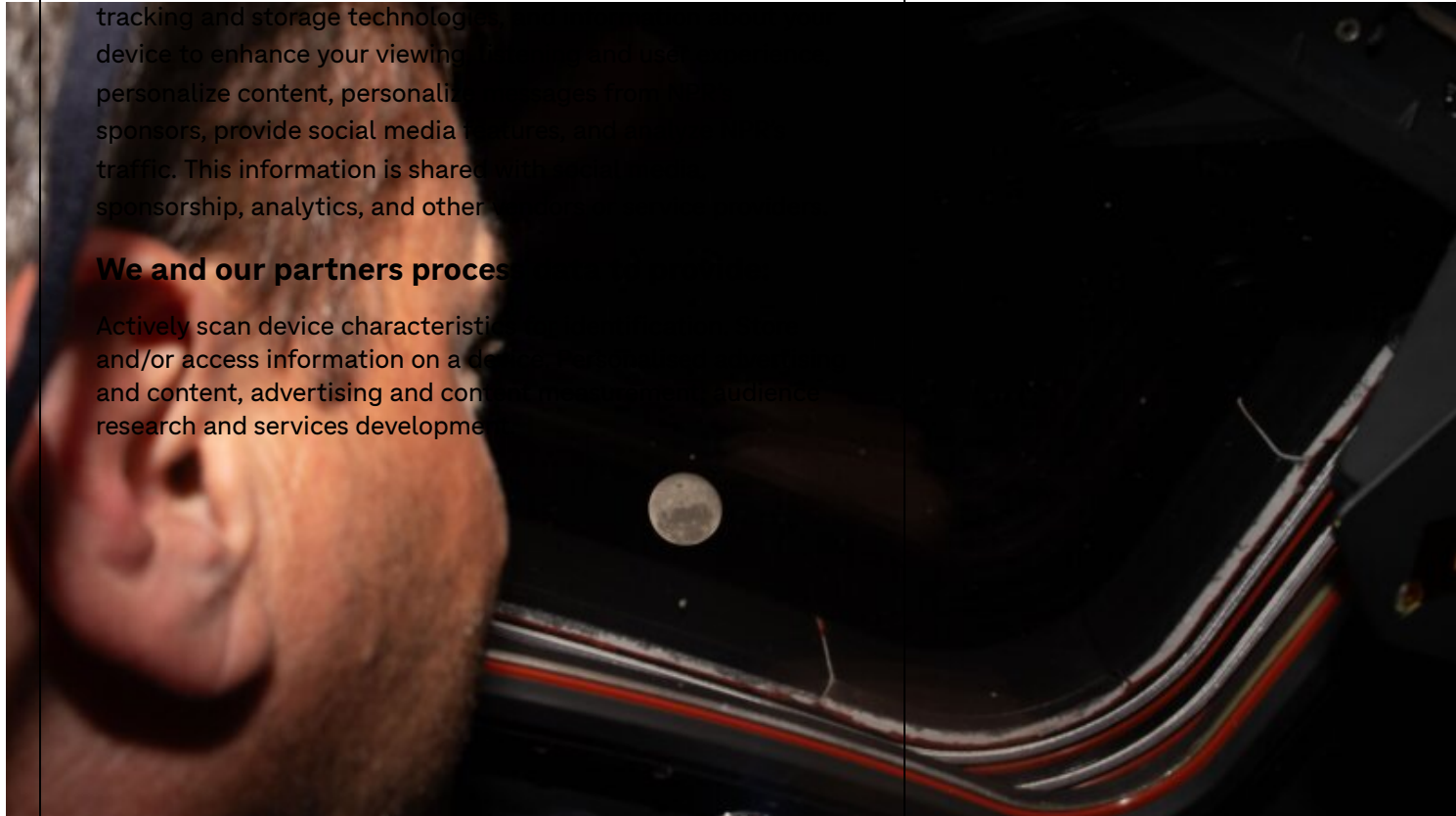
TELEVISION

Now cancer-free, 'Roastmaster' comic Jeff Ross still finds humor in loss

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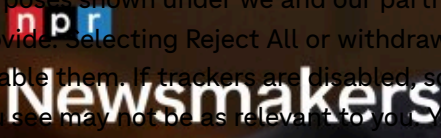
SPACE

Astronauts suggest naming a moon crater 'Carroll' after their commander's late wife



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NPR'S NEWSMAKERS

CEO of nation's largest bank says Iran war raises risk of 'bad economic outcomes'

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Drive slower, go electric, don't drive at all? Americans weigh options for saving gas

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