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WEATHER

DOGE cuts at NOAA will impact hurricane forecasting and data gathering on storms

MARCH 1, 2025 · 8:32 AM ET

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HEARD ON WEEKEND EDITION SATURDAY

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By Greg Allen

3-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST TRANSCRIPT

Cuts at NOAA mean fewer hurricane hunter aircrafts will be gathering real time data on developing storms and that the team developing computer models for forecasts will be gutted, insiders say.

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SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

Experts who help predict hurricanes were among those who are fired this week in what's expected to be just the first round of terminations at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. NPR's Greg Allen reports that insiders say hundreds of firings at NOAA include key staff who fly planes into hurricanes and scientists who develop computer forecast novels.

GREG ALLEN, BYLINE: NOAA is a federal agency with offices in every state and

U.S. territory. A former NOAA research director says the termination of more than 100 National Weather Service employees at field offices around the country will hamper forecasting and advisories. Congressman Jared Huffman, a Democrat from

California, is worried about the impact the data will have in the West in fire season and in the Midwest and Southeast with the onset of tornado season.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

JARED HUFFMAN: This is Donald Trump making good on a very specific promise from Project 2025, and that is dismantling and privatizing NOAA, forcing Americans to pay for things like weather data.

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ALLEN: In Florida and elsewhere in the Southeast, there are worries about what this means for hurricane forecasting. Several people in departments that support the National Hurricane Center were fired. Former NOAA administrator Rick Spinrad says that includes people who operate the planes and the marine devices that gather data from hurricanes.

RICK SPINRAD: It's not clear whether the airplanes will be able to fly and the

ships be able to go to sea - certainly not at the same kind of operational tempo as they have before.

ALLEN: NOAA wouldn't comment on how many jobs were cut but says it remains committed to its mission to provide weather information and research. James Franklin says the loss of some staff at NOAA's aircraft operation center likely means there will be fewer flights and less data gathered from hurricanes. Franklin is the former head of the Hurricane Forecast Unit at the office in Miami. He says what makes the NOAA flight so valuable is the information they pick up with their doppler radar.

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JAMES FRANKLIN: Those observations are very detailed, high-density observations of the core of a hurricane. They go into the numerical models, and studies have shown that they improve intensity forecasts.

(SOUNDBITE OF WIND BLOWING)

FRANKLIN: Oh. There goes the signs.

ALLEN: On flights like this one into Hurricane Ian in 2022, NOAA staffers released devices called dropsondes into the storm and use the doppler radar to transmit data in real time. In many storms, Franklin says, information from the flights goes to the centers that issue advisories, updating changes in a hurricane's track or intensity. If there are fewer flights this season, he says that will hurt hurricane forecasts.

Of equal concern, Franklin says, are cuts to senior staff at NOAA's Environmental Modeling Center. These are the people who've developed an array of sophisticated computer models that are among the best in the world at forecasting hurricanes and other weather phenomena. Franklin says staffing cuts have gutted the modeling center to the point where he wonders if work there to improve the models will come to a halt.

FRANKLIN: We count on these models improving year after year. That's why, you know, the track errors are so much smaller now than they were 15 or 20 years ago.

ALLEN: He says private weather forecasting companies may be able to replicate some of the work done by NOAA and the National Hurricane Center. But the scale of NOAA's operation from its hundreds of field offices to its fleet of aircraft, he says, would be difficult to match.

FRANKLIN: There are big expenditures that I think would be very, very difficult to duplicate in the private sector. And if the private sector were doing that, are we going to see the data for free?

ALLEN: As a retired branch chief, Franklin says his first reaction to these cuts was anger. One reason, he says, is that many of those terminated were people with a lot of institutional knowledge who will be hard to replace.

Greg Allen, NPR News, Miami.

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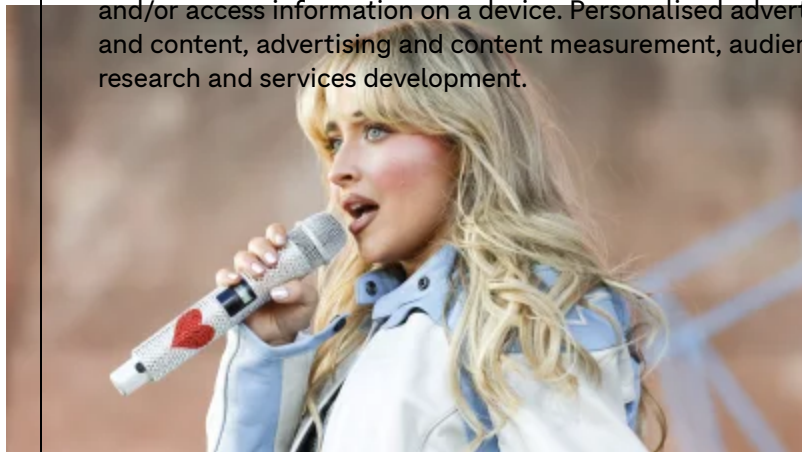
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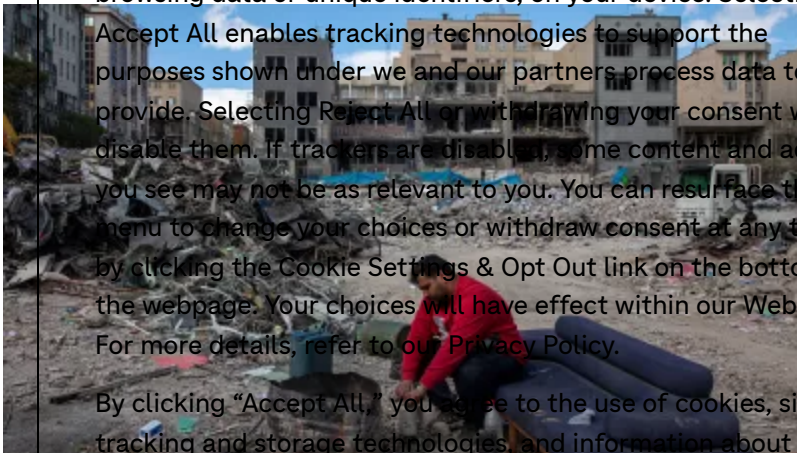
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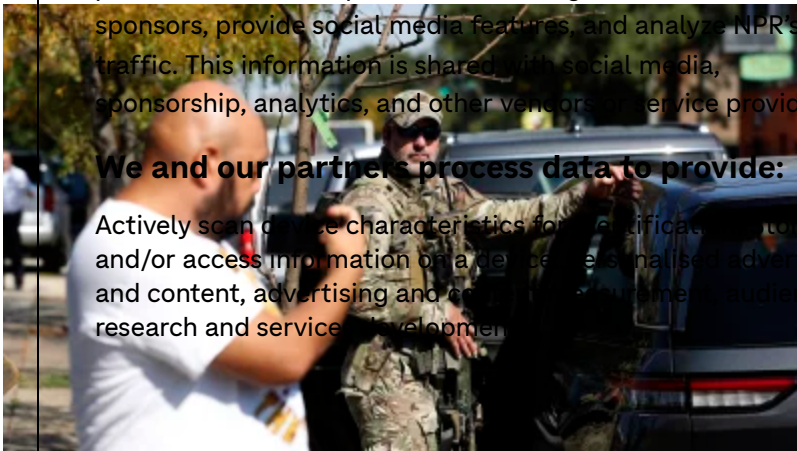
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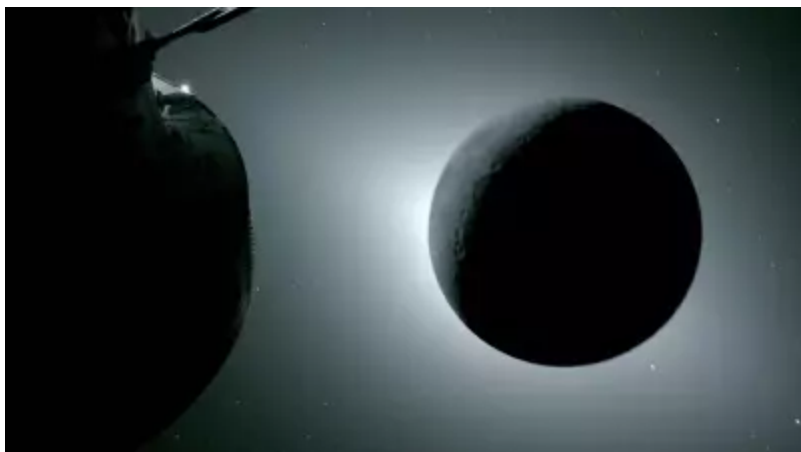


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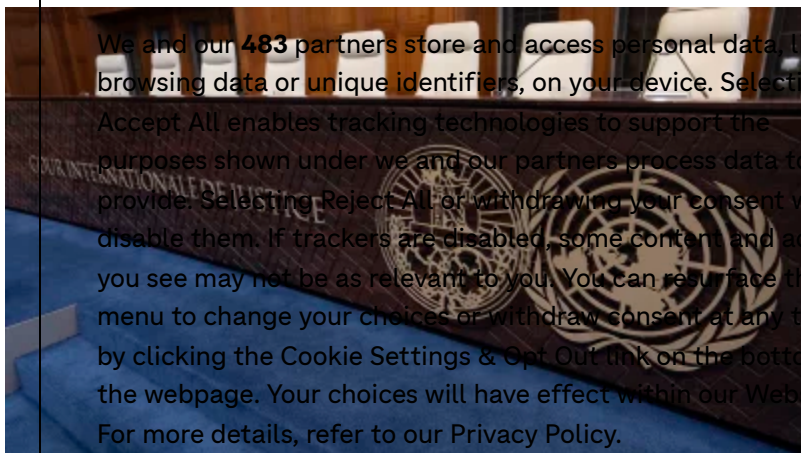
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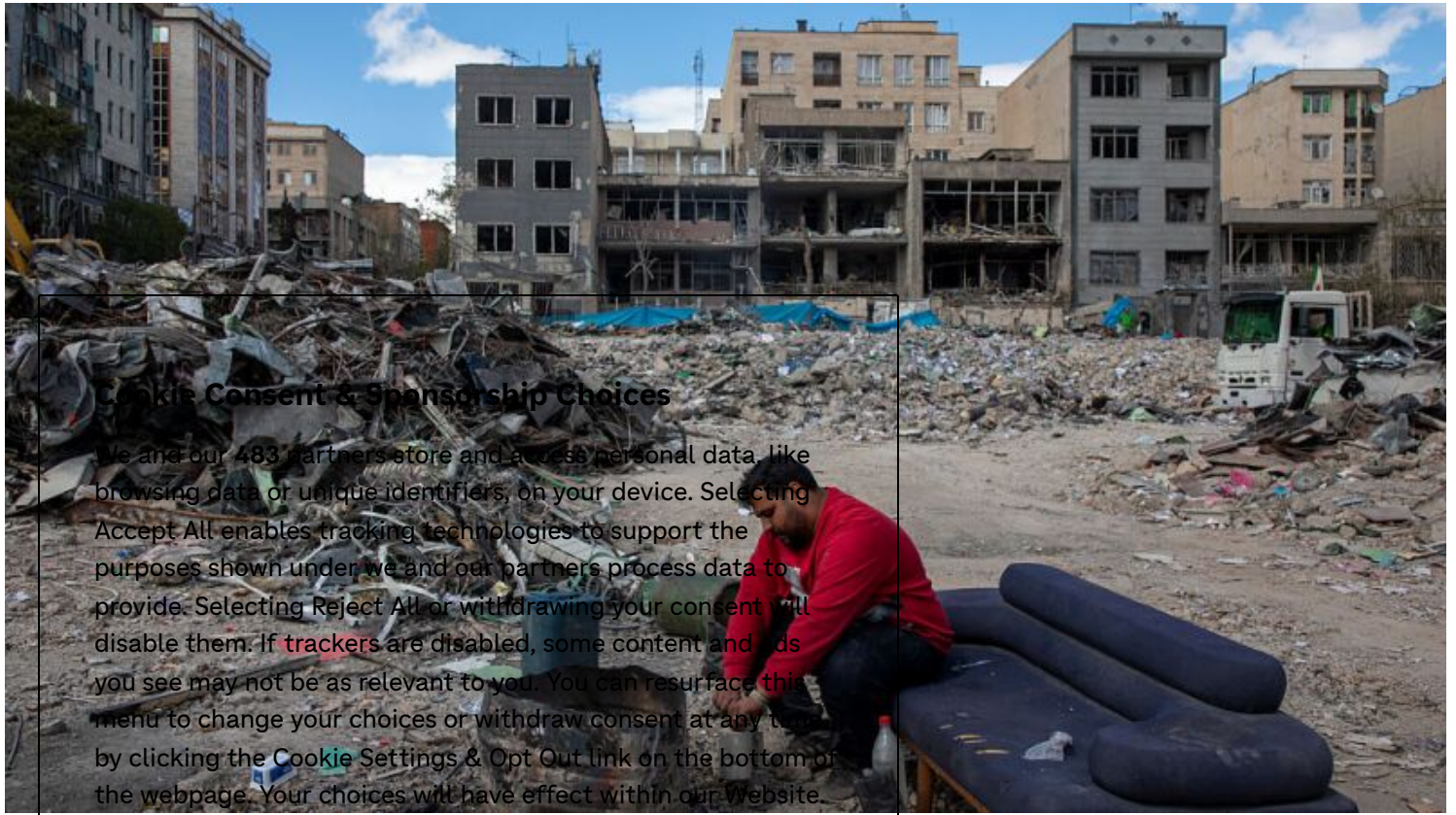
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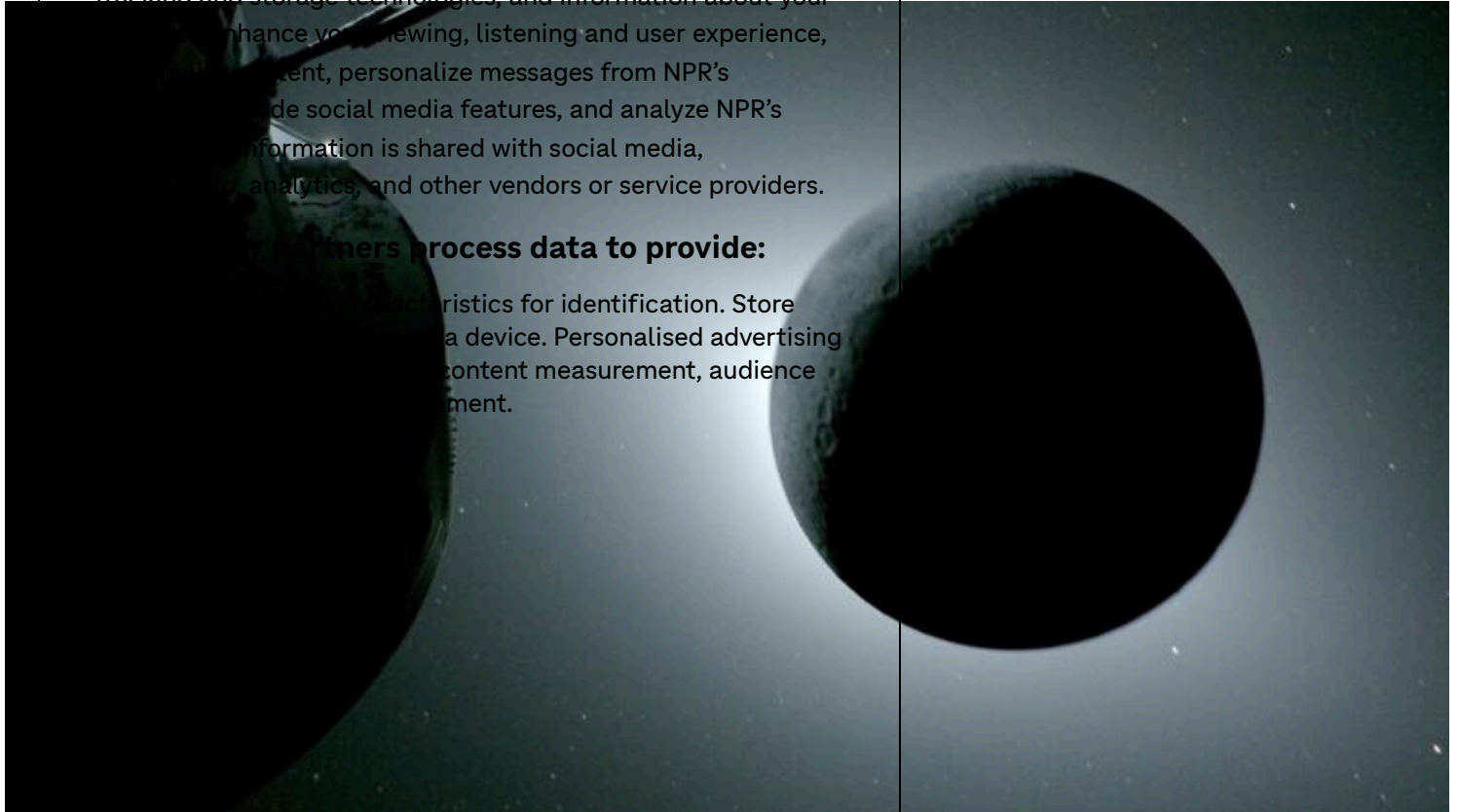
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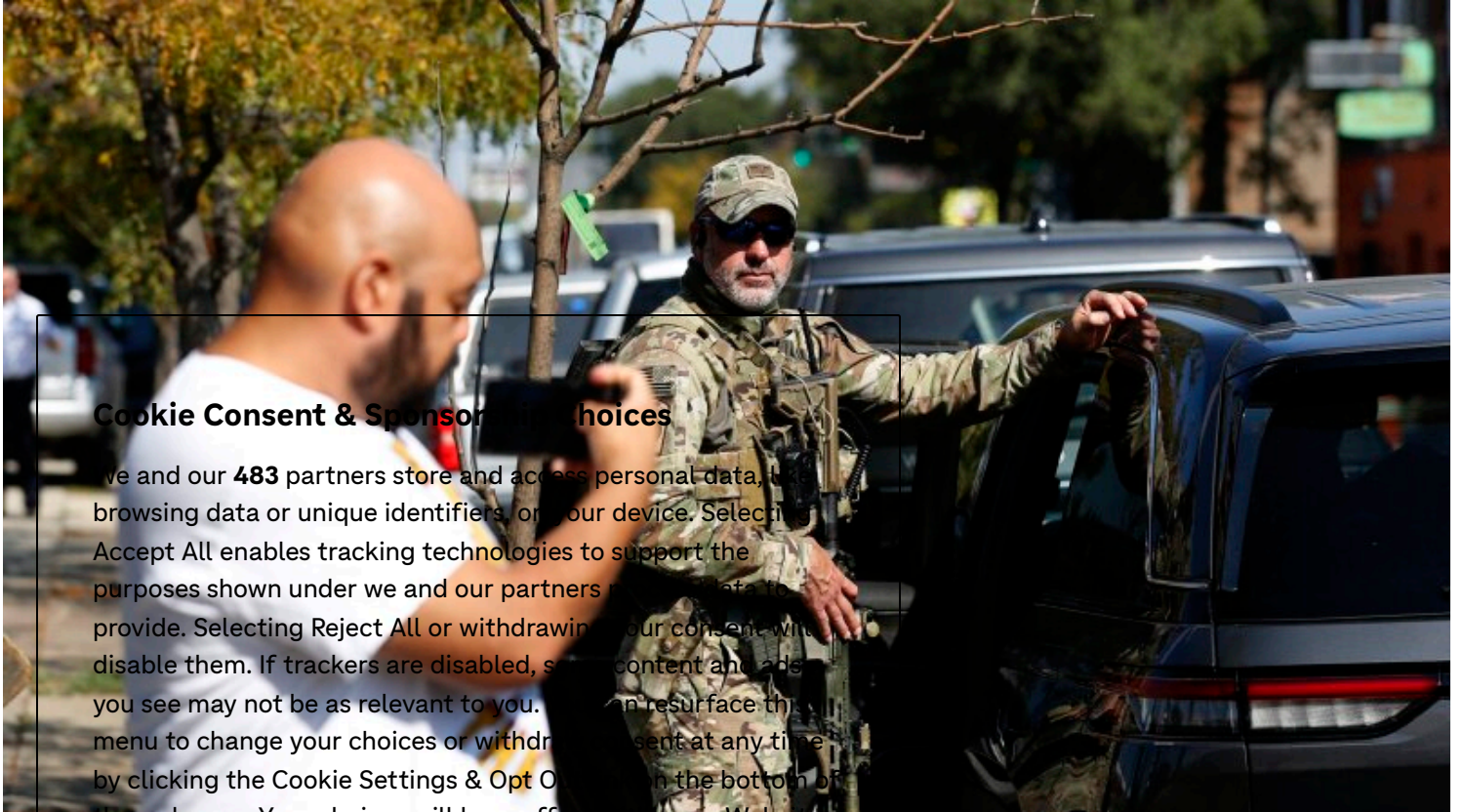
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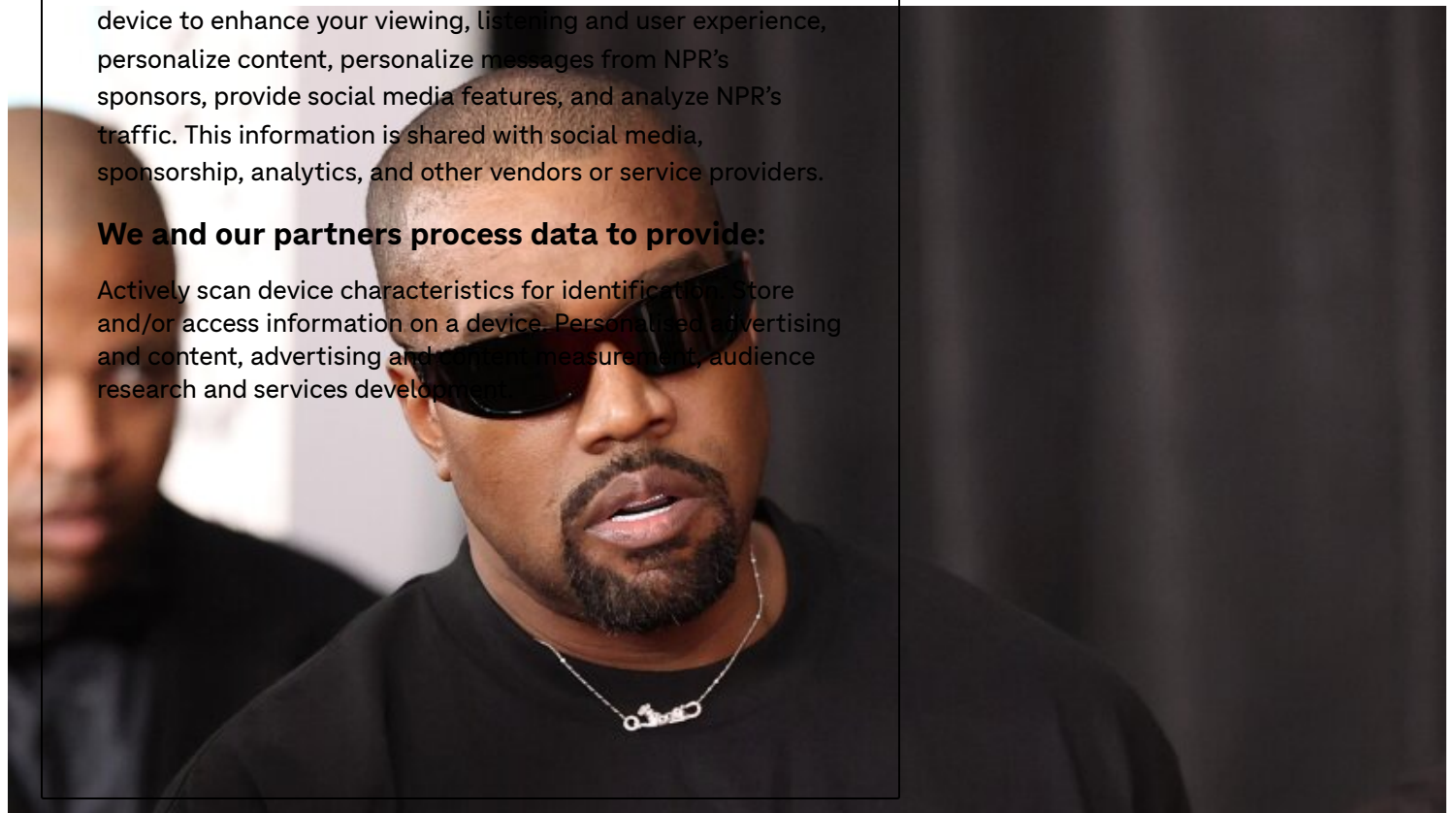
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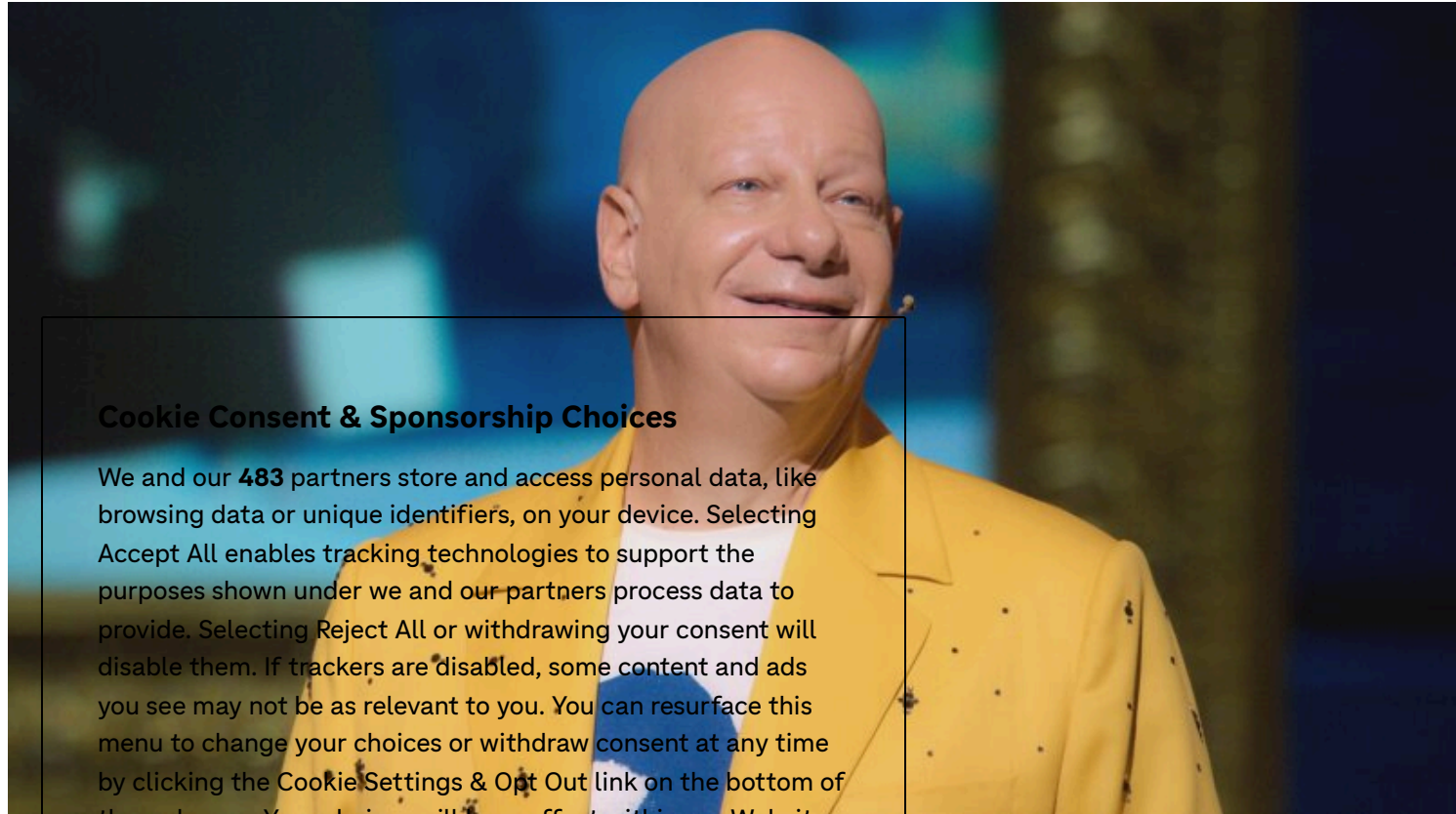
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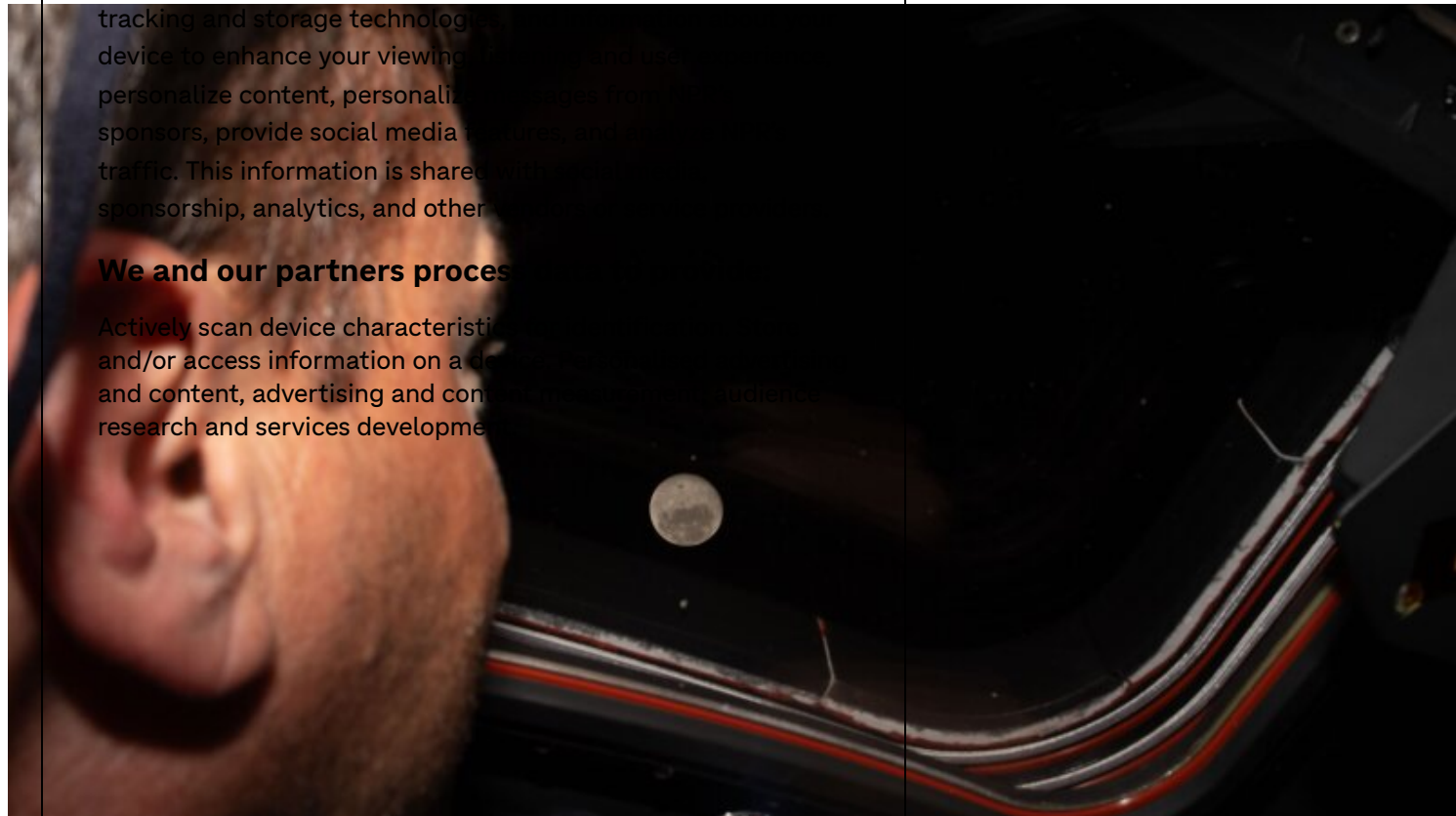
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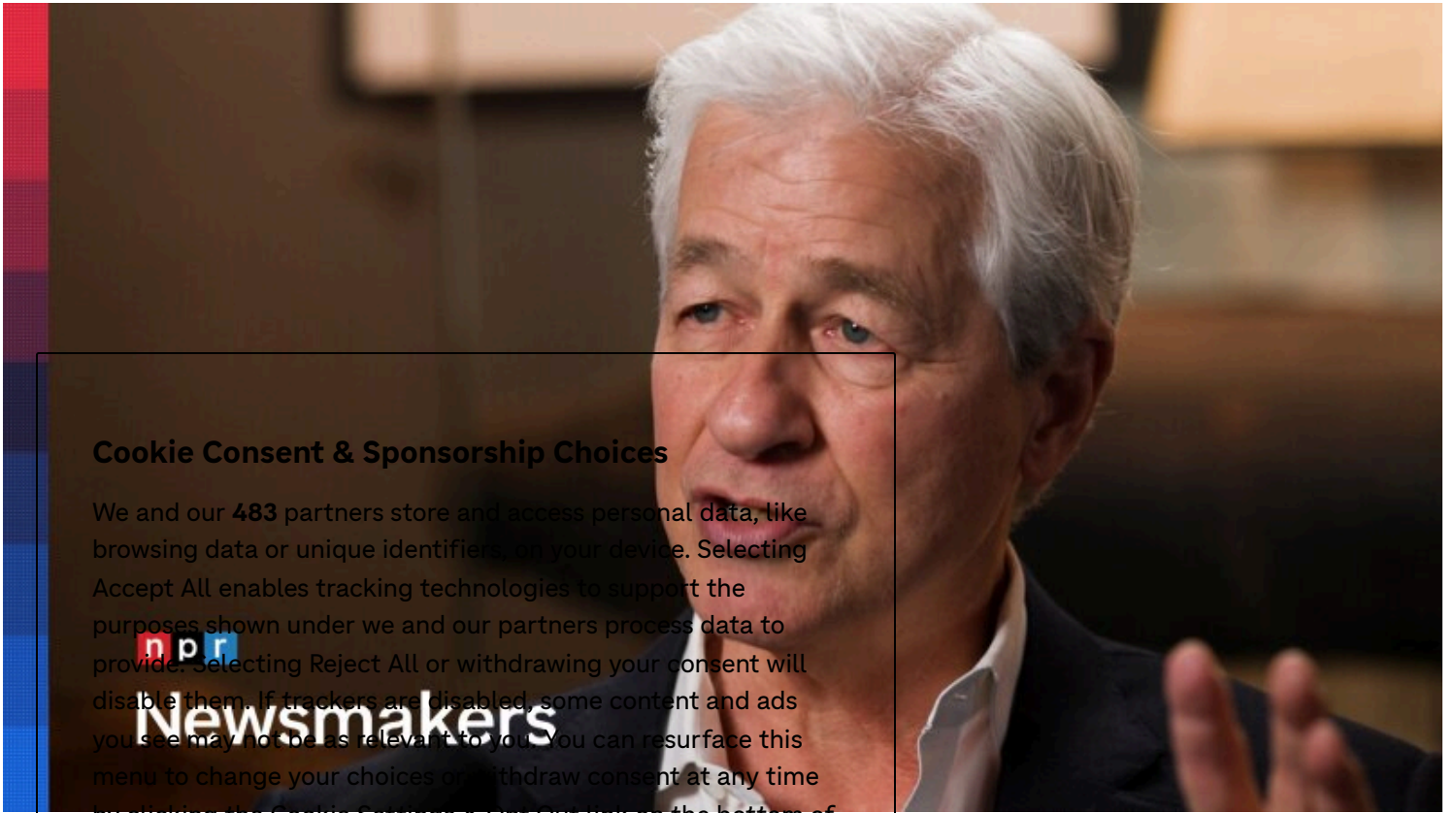
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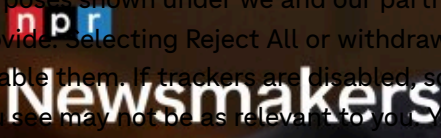
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