

**CENSORSHIP-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: THE NEED
FOR FIRST AMENDMENT SAFEGUARDS AT THE
STATE DEPARTMENT**

HEARING

OF THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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C O N T E N T S

REPRESENTATIVES

Opening Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Bill Huizenga	Page 1
Opening Statement of Subcommittee Ranking Member Sydney Kamlager-Dove	2

WITNESSES

Statement of Nina Jankowicz, Chief Executive Officer, American Sunlight Project	5
Prepared Statement	8
Statement of Matt Taibbi, Twitter Files Journalist, Author, Founder, Racket News	17
Prepared Statement	20
Statement of Benjamin Weingarten, Investigative Journalist & Columnist	23
Prepared Statement	25

APPENDIX

Hearing Notice	56
Hearing Minutes	58
Hearing Attendance	59

MATERIALS FOR THE RECORD

Material for the Record, submitted by Huizenga	60
Material for the Record (1), submitted by Rep. Sydney Kamlager-Dove	66
Material for the Record (2), submitted by Rep. Sydney Kamlager-Dove	69
Material for the Record (3), submitted by Rep. Sydney Kamlager-Dove	73
Letter to Secretary Rubio, submitted by Rep. Sydney Kamlager-Dove	78

QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD

Questions for Nina Jankowicz submitted by Rep. Huizenga	83
Questions for Matt Taibbi submitted by Rep. Huizenga	87
Questions for Benjamin Weingarten submitted by Rep. Huizenga	89

CENSORSHIP-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: THE NEED FOR FIRST AMENDMENT SAFE- GUARDS AT THE STATE DEPARTMENT

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:08 a.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Bill Huizenga (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN BILL HUIZENGA

Mr. HUIZENGA. The Subcommittee on South and Central Asia will come to order, and the purpose of this hearing is to examine the State Department's previous efforts to facilitate censorship of Americans and the importance of establishing permanent First Amendment safeguards for any future State Department activities.

This committee will be passing into law a comprehensive reauthorization of the State Department for the first time in over 20 years.

That was in—2002 was the last time that was done, and as part of this critical endeavor this subcommittee is tasked with examining the public diplomacy functions of the State Department, commonly referred to as the R family of bureaus and offices.

In December 2024, Congress terminated an office within that family, the Global Engagement Center—also known as GEC—after its exposure coming out of an investigation that was done by this committee.

The GEC was initially authorized for the statutory purpose of countering foreign propaganda and disinformation efforts. Despite that mandate, for years the GEC instead deployed its shadowy network of grantees and subgrantees to facilitate the censorship of American voices, especially if those voices were conservative and refused to align with the left-leaning establishment politics.

Worst of all, this was being done using U.S. taxpayer dollars—your dollars. The same month the GEC was terminated the Biden State Department restructured the office into a, quote, counter foreign information manipulation and interference hub, also known R/FIMI.

The question we will be exploring today is whether this restructuring is actually in name only. Put simply, whether you call it

GEC or R/FIMI the State Department should never and if I can help it will never again be in the business of silencing American voices.

Freedom of speech is a God-given right enshrined in the First Amendment of our Nation's Constitution. It is a right that President Trump and his administration are committed to zealously protecting.

On his first day in office President Trump signed the Restoring Freedom of Speech and Ending Federal Censorship executive order.

This executive order makes clear that no Federal Government employees or taxpayers' dollars may be used to engage in or facilitate the unconstitutional censorship of American citizens, and as the chairman of this subcommittee I plan to introduce legislation that will codify that executive order.

I'm hopeful that my colleagues will join me in enshrining these vital First Amendment protections into law. I want to thank the panel for being here today.

Ms. Jankowicz, thank you for your time, and you publicly supported and even spearheaded censorship efforts under the previous administration out of what some called the Ministry of Truth.

Some had labeled you the disinformation czar—I guess technically it should be czarina. It is crucial that the American public receive answers and accountability for the actions taken by their own government to silence their voices.

Mr. Taibbi and Mr. Weingarten, your valiant reporting helped unearth the GEC's role in the censorship of Americans. Mr. Taibbi, your groundbreaking work on the Twitter Files pulled back the curtain on how the Federal bureaucracy colluded and, in some cases, pressured social media companies to target American citizens engaged in protected political speech.

Mr. Weingarten, your impactful work has unearthed how the GEC and its implementing partners deployed blacklists to obliterate conservative news publications that the Biden Administration disagreed with.

We, as Americans and as policymakers, must never allow these dark days of mass censorship to happen again and that is my goal.

With that, I am going to yield 5 minutes to the gentlelady from California for her opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER SYDNEY KAMLAGER-DOVE

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here for our first South and Central Asia Subcommittee hearing.

I look forward to working with the chair in a bipartisan way on the critical issues that we are charged with overseeing.

Unfortunately, we are not having a hearing about any of those issues. Instead, this subcommittee is wasting taxpayer time and resources on the fifth such hearing Republicans have held across multiple committees on the so-called censorship-industrial complex.

The majority is relitigating a made-up conspiracy theory about a part of the State Department that no longer exists to distract from the dumpster fire foreign policy this administration is pursuing

and elevating a serial sexual harasser as their star witness in the process.

Mr. Chair, I request unanimous consent to enter into the record two articles about the Republican witness Matt Taibbi. The first is a Chicago Reader article entitled "Twenty years ago in Moscow Matt Taibbi was a misogynist a-hole and possibly worse" and a Washington Post article titled "The two ex-pat bros who terrorized women" correspondence in Moscow.

Mr. HUIZENGA. Without objection.

[Please refer to the Appendix for the above information:]

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. This hearing could not be more out of touch with the concerns of everyday Americans. People's retirement savings are being decimated as Trump's arbitrary temper tariffs tank the stock market.

They are staring down the barrel of cuts to their Social Security and Medicare because the Republican majority wants to give a tax break to billionaires like Elon Musk who have deep financial ties to our adversaries.

Meanwhile, Trump is siding with Putin against our national security interests and risking the lives of American soldiers in a Signal group chat.

I've been to the State Department and I do have concerns about censorship, censorship of the employees who are terrified to say the wrong thing, to say anything, or have the wrong word in their job title and be terminated by an administration that publicly relishes punishing people for their speech.

If we want to talk about censorship we should begin with Trump's unprecedented assault on the First Amendment and rule of law. Here are a few examples that should send shivers down all of our spines.

Trump banned the Associated Press from the Oval Office and Air Force One because they kept using the name Gulf of Mexico, something that none of us would have hesitated to do a few months ago. And by the way, the Gulf of Mexico it was assigned that name at birth.

Trump signed executive orders targeting law firms for representing clients that opposed or investigated him, upending the fundamental principle that lawyers should not fear to represent their clients, and most terrifying Trump ordered ICE agents to arrest and detain Mahmoud Khalil, a green card holder, and snatch off the street a Tufts University student and visa holder Rumeysa Ozturk for protesting and writing an op-ed for exercising their right to free speech.

I would like to play a video.

[Video shown.]

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. So now we're raiding college campuses to silence thought and dissent of the students.

As you can see, Trump is brazenly weaponizing the government to intimidate and silence any part of American society that disagrees with him. Countering disinformation from hostile foreign powers should not be a partisan issue.

Yet, this administration has crippled our capacity to respond to these threats while aiding, abetting and amplifying our adversaries' influence operations.

The PRC has invested billions in pumping out propaganda, weaponizing the world's largest online disinformation operation to silence critics, discredit lawmakers, and harass U.S. companies who are at odds with China's interests, and Russia maintains a sophisticated and sprawling disinformation apparatus to manipulate American public sentiment to Putin's advantage, even paying conservative influencers to create and amplify pro-Kremlin content.

And how has Trump confronted these threats? He shut down independent media broadcasters like USAGM and Radio Free Asia, a move that was actually celebrated in Chinese State media, and he dismantled the FBI's Foreign Influence Task Force which his own administration first created in 2017 to uncover disinformation and propaganda targeting Americans.

We should be exploring more real, partisan solutions to this pressing national security on behalf of the American people instead of perpetuating cultural wars and divisions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I yield back.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentlelady yields back.

I had done a brief introduction to our witnesses prior. I do want to note that the gentlelady well knows we have done a series of round tables within the jurisdiction of this subcommittee and, yes, this is the first hearing that this Congress is doing on this particular issue.

Obviously, our witnesses, you can see the tone and tenor of what's going to be happening today here, sadly.

But Mr. Taibbi, I'm going to give you a brief moment to answer some charges that were put against you here. But I also want to note that there are some who don't believe that the censorship-industrial complex exists.

In fact, I think our other witness this morning on Bluesky had said, quote, I'm going to tell them it doesn't exist; it's a lie peddled by those who seek power and profit and a dangerous distraction from the real threats we face.

I won't bring up the dissent cables that weren't allowed to be sent out of Afghanistan and a number of other things that happened in the last administration.

But, Mr. Taibbi, there are those who don't believe that this actually exists and is going on. Can you explain what the Election Integrity Partnership is and what its relationship to GEC is?

If you can turn your mic on, please.

Mr. TAIBBI. The Election Integrity Partnership was an organization run out of Stanford University. It had four nongovernmental partners.

There was a Stanford Internet Observatory. There was a company called Graphika. There was the Center for an Informed Public from University of Washington, and a fourth—I'm sorry, I'm blank. I'm sorry—the Digital Forensic Research Labs of the Atlantic Council. They also partnered with the Global Engagement Center, and if I'm remembering correctly the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency at DHS.

We came across EIP in—when we first got access to the Twitter Files. When those documents were made known to us we didn't have any guidance at all. We didn't know what we were looking at. We just simply saw big pile of complaints——

Mr. HUIZENG. Clearly, you uncovered it, literally, right?

Mr. TAIBBI. Hmm?

Mr. HUIZENG. And you just uncovered it. You came across this.

Mr. TAIBBI. They just said you can start searching and gave us access to a search engine. We started looking at various documents and we found these complaints that would essentially be referrals from this nongovernmental organization that was partnered with governmental organizations about various types of content related to the 2020 election, and these complaints would go into what was called the Jira ticketing system after which there would often be a recommendation to remove or deamplify or place some kind of restriction on the account.

So I would characterize the Election Integrity Partnership as a wide scale organization designed to funnel complaints to multiple internet platforms at once.

Mr. HUIZENG. Mr. Taibbi, I'm so sorry. I made a terrible mistake on this where I had fully missed—just missed it, caught up in the moment.

Mr. TAIBBI. It's Okay.

Mr. HUIZENG. We needed to go and have each one of you do an opening statement for 5 minutes.

Mr. TAIBBI. Oh, Okay.

Mr. HUIZENG. So my apologies. Yes, I have some confused colleagues up here. My apologies on that.

So we're going to go to those opening statements. I will then go into the questions that we have. I will take some time off of my time but I do apologize to the folks on the panel and to my colleagues for that.

All right. The committee recognizes the importance of the issues before us and is grateful that you're here today. Your full statements will be part of the record and I ask that you keep—each of you keep your spoken remarks to 5 minutes in order to allow for those times.

So, Ms. Jankowicz, if you would please take 5 minutes and we'll have your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF NINA JANKOWICZ

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Chairman Huizenga and Ranking Member Kamlager-Dove, I appreciate the invitation to speak with you today.

I believe it's my patriotic duty to do so because the premise of this hearing, the so-called censorship-industrial complex, is a fiction that has not only had profound impacts on my life and safety but on our national security.

More alarmingly, this fiction is itself suppressing speech and stymieing critical research that protects our country.

I want to acknowledge the irony we're having this discussion as we witness an assault on the First Amendment we have not seen in decades. The Trump Administration has directed far more egre-

gious violations of our Constitution than the imagined actions of the Biden Administration on which this hearing is premised.

Each one is chilling, but as a Fulbright alumna the recent arrest of Rumeysa Ozturk, a Fulbright Ph.D. student at Tufts University, especially disturbed me.

The Secretary of State seemingly revoked Ms. Ozturk's visa for publishing an op-ed in Tufts' campus newspaper. For using her constitutionally protected right to free speech she was spirited away by plainclothes ICE officers in broad daylight.

This is what I'm used to observing in authoritarian countries that I study and if this had happened in a country in this subcommittee's portfolio I think you'd issue a statement of concern.

But it happened here. So, yes, we do need some First Amendment protections at the State Department but not for imagined transgressions of previous administrations.

We need those protections from this administration today. In pursuing investigations and hearings on the censorship lie Congress has punted its responsibility on national security, opting instead for political theatrics that are high on fantasy and low on facts.

Congress used government resources to attack disinformation researchers, deliberately misconstruing their work, burying them with requests for documents and depositions, and stoking the fires of public rage against them.

These tactics echo the dark days of McCarthyism but with a chilling 21st century twist. Even as America faces unprecedented threats in the information space from our adversaries' increasing capabilities to the exponential growth of emerging technologies, committees including this one continue to waste valuable time and taxpayer dollars targeting American citizens who are doing work in the public interest.

I know this intimately. In my written testimony I explain in detail the lies that upended my life when my appointment to lead the DHS Disinformation Governance Board was announced.

As demonstrated by both the board's founding documents and my 5-hour sworn testimony before your colleagues on the Judiciary Committee the board's mission was to protect civil rights, civil liberties, privacy, and the First Amendment, the very subject of this hearing.

Many continued to lie that the board was a censorship body because it's politically useful to them. That lie was the first chapter in the tall tales about the so-called censorship-industrial complex that have since emerged.

They've been buoyed by the Twitter Files, which falsely allege that Twitter executives were colluding with government to censor disfavored content.

The Twitter Files crafted almost endless fiction based on selectively edited email and text excerpts between researchers, platforms, and Federal agencies. They're riddled with errors and outright falsehoods.

The allegation that researchers are somehow committing acts of censorship by conducting independent research and sharing it is outlandish and it's harmful. Research is speech, government funded or not.

The only reason the censorship lie has been perpetuated is because it's politically and financially beneficial to those who peddle it. Actions like this hearing are a dangerous distraction from the real threats we face.

My organization, the American Sunlight Project, has identified plenty of foreign interference we could be talking about today including a pro-Russia content aggregation network point pushing out 3.6 million pieces of content a year, poisoning LLM-powered chat bots. China and Iran are also actively targeting the U.S. as we sit here.

But our capacity to respond to these threats has been eviscerated based on conspiracy theories, sending a signal to our adversaries that America is weak.

Beijing, Tehran, and Moscow interpret these partisan attacks on counter disinformation work as a sign that their interference is likely to succeed.

Our adversaries use information operations to undermine democratic values. We must act not only as the staunchest defender and guarantor of those values abroad but fight just as hard to preserve them at home. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Jankowicz follows:]

Statement of

NINA JANKOWICZ

Chief Executive Officer, American Sunlight Project

Former Executive Director of the DHS Disinformation Governance Board

for THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

Concerning

“Censorship-Industrial Complex:

The Need for First Amendment Safeguards at the State Department”

April 1, 2025

Chairman Huizenga and Ranking Member Kamlager-Dove, I appreciate the invitation to share my expertise and personal experience with you today. I believe it is my patriotic duty as an American to do so, because the premise of this hearing—the so-called “Censorship Industrial Complex”—is a fiction that has not only had profound impacts on my life, but on our national security. More alarmingly, this fiction is itself deliberately engineered to suppress speech and stymie critical research that protects American security and our democratic processes.

I have studied and worked on the topic of disinformation over a decade, first as a Program Officer at the National Democratic Institute, where I managed democracy support grants, including from the State Department. I was a 2016-2017 Fulbright Public Policy Fellow in Ukraine, and then spent four years at the Wilson Center. Since 2018, I have been honored to publicly testify before Congress four times, at the invitation of both Democrats and Republicans such as Senate Judiciary Chairman Chuck Grassley. I spent a short time in the Biden Administration, discussed below. I now lead a non-profit, The American Sunlight Project, which is dedicated to increasing the cost of lies that undermine democracy through research and advocacy. I am the author of two books, including *How to Lose the Information War*, which examines European responses to disinformation. I teach a graduate-level course on the topic at Syracuse University and have advised allied governments on their responses to foreign information operations. I am one of TIME Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in AI, and was recognized for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Media Psychology and Technology in 2024 by Division 46 of the American Psychological Association. My work is not motivated by any political ideology, but rather a desire to preserve democracy and free expression around the world.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the irony that we are having this discussion as we witness an assault on the First Amendment we have not seen in decades. Since January 20, the Trump administration has directed far more egregious violations of the First Amendment than the imagined actions of the Biden administration on which this hearing is premised.¹ They are chilling in their own right. But the recent arrest of Rumesya Ozturk, a Fulbright PhD student at Tufts University, especially disturbed me.

The Fulbright program—an exchange that has, since its inception, enjoyed broad bipartisan support—was created to promote “mutual understanding.” When I was a Fulbright Public Policy Fellow in Ukraine, I enjoyed nothing but the warmest welcomes everywhere I went. I used my rights to free speech there as I did at home: I spoke up about political developments not only in my own country, but in Ukraine. I wrote op-eds and articles. Those early writings were the seeds of my first book.

The topic of this hearing is “the need for First Amendment safeguards at the State Department.” The Secretary of State seemingly revoked Ms. Ozturk’s visa for publishing an op-ed in Tufts’ campus newspaper. No credible reporting has identified any evidence she was instrumental in organizing protests, and even if she were, that activity is also protected by the First Amendment. For using her constitutionally-protected right to free speech, she was spirited away by plainclothes ICE officers in broad daylight. The “mutual understanding” we have promoted through this gross violation of Ms. Ozturk’s rights is that the United States is no longer a place where speech and dissent are safe. Her detention is the sort of event I am used to observing in the authoritarian countries I study. If the same scene had happened

¹ The American Sunlight Project, “Trump claims he’s a champion of free speech. He’s actually attacking it.” March 24, 2025. <https://americansunlight.substack.com/p/trump-attacks-free-speech>

in a country in this Subcommittee's portfolio, you would issue a statement of concern. But it happened here, in the United States of America. So yes, we need some First Amendment protections at the State Department—but not related to any imagined transgressions of previous administrations or their grantees. We need protections from this administration, today. What will this committee do about it?

The So-Called “Censorship Industrial Complex” Does Not Exist

Instead of talking about the real threats to the First Amendment occurring as we sit here, this Subcommittee has chosen to devote its first hearing of the new Congress to a fiction that has caused grave threats to me and my family's personal safety, as well as our national security.

In 2022, I was appointed to lead the Disinformation Governance Board, an admittedly poorly-named but anodyne coordination body tasked with shepherding counter-disinformation policy within the Department of Homeland Security. This body was created to “develop and support the implementation of governance policies and protocols that, among other issues, protect privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties,” coordinate DHS's work on disinformation that affected the homeland—work that started under the first Trump administration—and set standards for the Department's interactions with the “private, non-profit, and academic sectors.”²

Within hours of the Board's public launch, partisan media, influencers, and Members of Congress were calling it a “Ministry of Truth” and claiming that I would be censoring Americans' speech. They did this entirely without evidence; even when DHS and the White House corrected the record, politicians, pundits, major media organizations, and influencers continue to repeat this lie, nearly three years after it was debunked by primary source documents, because it is politically useful to them. The Board had no operational authority, no budget, and no full-time staff other than myself. As I told the House Judiciary's Weaponization Subcommittee several times throughout my deposition³ about the Board's activities in 2023: as the granddaughter of a former Soviet political prisoner, if censorship were part of my mandate, not only would I not have taken the job, I would have loudly condemned such activities. I agree that freedom of speech is sacrosanct.

The allegation that the Board was a censorship body and that I was chief censor were the first chapter in many of the tall tales about the so-called “censorship industrial complex” that have since emerged. These tales have been primarily buoyed by the “Twitter Files,” a coordinated smear campaign that cherry picked data points to create a false narrative under the guise of a journalistic effort. One of the witnesses at today's hearing, blogger Matt Taibbi, was among those who published the first installment of the Twitter Files, falsely alleging that Twitter executives were colluding with government to censor disfavored content.⁴ Mr. Taibbi and his colleagues alleged that the content in question was funneled to federal agencies by private-citizen researchers, specifically via the Election Integrity Project (EIP) and Virality Project, and that these agencies in turn coerced Twitter into removing the content. Yet these allegations against Twitter and other social media platforms were not true. Numerous studies, conducted by

² DHS Disinformation Governance Board Charter, as provided to Senators Hawley and Grassley by DHS Whistleblower, February 28, 2022. [https://www.hawley.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/files/2022-06-07%20DOCS%20ONLY%20CEG%20JH%20to%20DHS%20\(Disinformation%20Governance%20Board\)111.pdf?npage=9](https://www.hawley.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/files/2022-06-07%20DOCS%20ONLY%20CEG%20JH%20to%20DHS%20(Disinformation%20Governance%20Board)111.pdf?npage=9)

³ Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. House of Representatives, *Deposition of Nina Jankowicz*, April 10, 2023, https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/Jankowicz%20Transcript_Redacted.pdf

⁴ Matt Taibbi, “Capsule Summaries of all Twitter Files Threads to Date, With Links and a Glossary,” *Racket News*, January 4, 2023. <https://archive.is/2FuJe>

institutions including New York University and Indiana University, empirically disprove this notion of political bias by social media platforms in their content moderation decisions.^{5,6,7} Following the first release of the Twitter Files, the Republican majority began organizing hearings around these false narratives and sending letters and document requests to Twitter in regards to censorship activities.^{8,9}

The Twitter Files crafted almost endless fiction based on selectively edited email and text excerpts between the researchers, their projects, platforms, and federal agencies. The blogs are riddled with errors and outright falsehoods, including the notion that the EIP “censored” 22 million tweets about the 2020 election.¹⁰ In actuality, the EIP *tracked* 22 million social media tweets, and only identified 2,890 (approximately 0.013% of the total tweets examined) which the EIP’s researchers believed materially violated Twitter’s terms of use. Even fewer of these posts were *actually* removed. Twitter took *no action* on nearly two-thirds of those 2,890 tweets.¹¹

Additionally, alongside the Twitter Files’ bloggers relentless promotion of the baseless, debunked conspiracy theory that the Disinformation Governance Board was part of a “Censorship Industrial Complex” and “guilty of violating the First Amendment,”¹² Mr. Taibbi has claimed that the EIP was created in 2020 to “fill the gaps” left by the shutdown of the Disinformation Governance Board; however, the Board was created in 2022.¹³ Over the three years since my short tenure in government, Mr. Taibbi and his colleagues have also aggressively targeted me in my personal capacity with incendiary lies.

These falsehoods are just a few of many in the Twitter Files. Even beyond these inaccuracies, the allegation that the Twitter Files make—that by conducting independent research and sharing it, researchers are somehow committing acts of censorship—is outlandish and harmful. Researchers have a First Amendment right to analyze the public information environment and speak about it to the public, including to social media platforms and government. Social media platforms, as private businesses, have terms of service that they can implement how they choose. The government, for decades, has benefitted from an exchange of information between itself, academia, civil society, and the private sector. We know the Trump Administration also benefitted from such relationships and exchanges.¹⁴ The only reason the fictional narrative of the “censorship industrial complex” has been selectively applied to some advocacy groups, researchers, and government agencies is because it is politically and financially beneficial to those

⁵ Paul Barrett & J. Grant Sims, “False Accusation: The Unfounded Claim that Social Media Companies Censor Conservatives,” *New York University*, February 10, 2021.

⁶ Filippo Manczer, et al., “Neutral bots probe political bias on social media,” *Nature Communications* 12, no. 5580 (September 2021)1. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-021-25738-6>

⁷ Mohsen Mosleh, et al., “Differences in misinformation sharing can lead to politically asymmetric sanctions” *Nature* 634, 609–616 (October 2024). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-024-07942-8>

⁸ House Judiciary Committee Letter to Yoel Roth, December 6, 2022.

⁹ House Judiciary Committee Letter to Yoel Roth, December 6, 2022. <https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022-12-6-Letter-to-Roth-Twitter.pdf>

¹⁰ House Judiciary Committee News Feature, December 23, 2022.

¹¹ House Judiciary Committee News Feature, December 23, 2022. <https://judiciary.house.gov/media/in-the-news/house-gop-wants-fbis-twitter-censorship-reimbursement-records>

¹² Mike Masnick, “Mehdi Hasan Dismantles The Entire Foundation Of The Twitter Files As Matt Taibbi Stumbles To Defend It,” *TechDirt*, April 7, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/2p5ppl38>

¹³ Stanford Internet Observatory, “Background on the SIO’s Projects on Social Media,” March 17, 2023.

¹⁴ <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/fo/news/background-sios-projects-social-media>

¹⁵ <https://x.com/shellenberger/status/1639355989836308481>

¹⁶ Mike Masnick, “Mehdi Hasan Dismantles The Entire Foundation Of The Twitter Files As Matt Taibbi Stumbles To Defend It,” *TechDirt*, April 7, 2023.

¹⁷ <https://www.techdirt.com/2023/04/07/mehdi-hasan-dismantles-the-entire-foundation-of-the-twitter-files-as-matt-taibbi-stumbles-to-defend-it/>

¹⁸ Adam Rawnsley and Asawin Suebsaeng, “Twitter Kept Entire ‘Database’ of Republican Requests to Censor Posts,” *Rolling Stone*, February 8, 2023. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/elon-trump-twitter-files-collusion-biden-censorship-1234675969/>

who peddle it.

The “Censorship” Lie Is Itself Suppressing Speech

Academic freedom and scholarly discourse are a vital part of the marketplace of ideas. However, the academic research community has been significantly impacted by allegations they are part of the so-called “censorship industrial complex.” Some preeminent research institutions have shut down;¹⁵ other researchers are weighing whether their continued work in this sphere is worth the risk to their families and livelihoods, especially given the Day One Executive Order the President signed targeting alleged “censors” for investigation. Given that the U.S. government has successfully bullied tech platforms into rolling back already paltry protections against online harms, and Congress has yet to pass critical oversight and transparency regulations, such academic research is more critical than ever to inform the public and hold these multi-billion dollar corporations to account.

Instead of ensuring access to data that would facilitate research or improve public understanding of technology’s influence on our First Amendment-protected discourse, Members of Congress have used government resources to attack disinformation researchers, deliberately misconstruing their work, burying them under requests for documents and interviews, and stoking the fires of public rage against them. These tactics echo the dark days of McCarthyism, but with a chilling 21st century twist: even as America faces unprecedented threats in the information space, both from our adversaries’ increasing capabilities and from the exponential growth of emerging technologies, committees including this one waste valuable time and taxpayer dollars targeting American citizens who are trying to do work in the public interest. These actions are a dangerous distraction from the real threats we are facing.

The Threat of Foreign Disinformation Persists

Despite increased awareness of foreign-backed online influence campaigns, the United States is more vulnerable to them today than it was a decade ago.¹⁶ Our strategic adversaries continue to actively exploit deepening fissures in our society in order to amplify discord and polarization. Social media companies have rolled back their efforts to address disinformation on their platforms and restricted access to their data, making it difficult to hold them to account.¹⁷ Government and public sector responses to foreign disinformation have been derided and dismantled. Our adversaries have taken note.

Russia: The Kremlin continues to weaponize homegrown discontent in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and weaken American national security. My own organization has identified recent evidence of this:

- In what we call the “Sleeping Agent” network on X, over 1100 likely-automated accounts post hundreds of times per day and repeatedly retweet overt Russian propaganda within 60 seconds of it being posted, giving the guise of grassroots support for Kremlin messaging.¹⁸ Despite Elon Musk’s promise to rid his platform of bots, some accounts in this network have existed for over a

¹⁵ Casey Newton and Zoe Schiffer, “The Stanford Internet Observatory is being dismantled,” *Platformer*, June 13, 2024.

¹⁶ <https://www.platformer.news/stanford-internet-observatory-shutdown-stamos-diresta-sio/>

¹⁷ Nina Jankowicz, “The Coming Flood of Disinformation,” *Foreign Affairs*, 7 February 2024.

¹⁸ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/coming-flood-disinformation>

¹⁷ Nora Benavidez, “Big Tech Backslide: How Social-Media Rollbacks Endanger Democracy Ahead of the 2024 Elections,” *Free Press*, December 2023. https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/2023-12/free_press_report_big_tech_backslide.pdf

¹⁸ The American Sunlight Project, “Sleeping Agents: Uncovering a decade-old, global network of suspicious adversarial accounts spreading Russian propaganda and other divisive content,” October 9, 2024. <https://www.americansunlight.org/sleeping-agents-asp-report>

decade, springing into action at key political moments. In that time, they have generated over 100 million posts on divisive issues, from Russia's war in Ukraine to last year's devastating hurricanes.

- The EcoBoost network spams environmental and tech conversations on X at a mass scale.¹⁹ These accounts pose as environmentalists and post provocative content designed to inflame tensions across the political spectrum. We identified this network because it posted code snippets, incorrectly-translated Russian characters and words, and used hundreds of photorealistic AI-generated images to dupe users into thinking the accounts were manned by humans.
- ASP researchers also recently discovered that a collection of several hundred pro-Russia content aggregation sites, known as the "Pravda" network, is pumping out at least 3.6 million articles per year in order to "groom" large language models into regurgitating Russian propaganda.²⁰ Two other independent research organizations have confirmed that Pravda network content was being cited by some major AI chatbots in support of pro-Russia narratives that are provably false²¹; it has even made its way into Wikipedia citations.²²

More evidence of Russia's continued online influence campaigns includes last fall's indictment from the U.S. Department of Justice. DOJ identified a scheme in which two Canadian nationals allegedly set up a shell company, Tenet Media, that ferried ten million U.S. dollars from Russian propaganda network RT to conservative YouTube influencers with millions of collective subscribers.²³ (One of those YouTubers has now been admitted to the White House press pool.²⁴) The influencers posted about divisive issues, from alleged racism against white people, to censorship, to trans rights. The genius of this scheme is that RT was paying influencers to create the divisive content they were already creating for a built-in audience; Russia was simply adding fuel to the fire.

These case studies show that Russia is still active in undermining social cohesion and truth in the United States, and taking advantage of the lack of political will at platforms to address disinformation and a US political environment that is favorable to it.

China: However, Russia is far from the only adversary aiming to undermine our democracy. China has also intensified its information operations dramatically in the last six months; at least three major Communist Party-led campaigns have been exposed by cybersecurity firms and platforms. In September, the long-running "Spamouflage" campaign deployed fake social media profiles posing as American

¹⁹ The American Sunlight Project, "EcoBoost: A malign influence network targeting the environmental and tech sectors in Western democracies," March 4, 2025.
<https://www.americansunlight.org/updates/american-sunlight-project-exposes-ai-driven-disinformation-network-manipulating-environmental-and-tech-debates>

²⁰ The American Sunlight Project, "A Pro-Russia Content Network Foreshadows the Automated Future of Info Ops," February 26, 2025.
<https://www.americansunlight.org/updates/new-report-russian-propaganda-may-be-flooding-ai-models>

²¹ Annie Newport & Nina Jankowicz, "Russian networks flood the Internet with propaganda, aiming to corrupt AI chatbots," *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, March 26, 2025.
<https://thebulletin.org/2025/03/russian-networks-flood-the-internet-with-propaganda-aiming-to-corrupt-ai-chatbots/>

²² Amaury Lespligart and Valentin Chatelet, "Russia-linked Pravda network cited on Wikipedia, LLMs, and X," DFRLab, March 12, 2025.
<https://dfriab.org/2025/03/12/pravda-network-wikipedia-llm-x/>

²³ Will Sommer, "Inside Tenet Media, the pro-Trump 'supergroup' allegedly funded by Russia," September 5, 2024, *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2024/09/05/tenet-media-russia-rt-tim-pool/>

²⁴ Janna Brancolini, "Influencer Paid by Russia Added to White House Press Pool," March 28, 2025, *The Daily Beast*.
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/tim-pool-was-paid-by-russia-but-will-join-white-house-press-pool/>

voters to spread anti-US messaging and exacerbate domestic political divisions.²⁵ These fake profiles were uncovered across multiple social media platforms and amplified divisive content about American politics and foreign policy. In November, Mandiant dismantled “Operation Glassbridge,” a sophisticated network of websites globally disseminating pro-CCP propaganda. It specifically targeted international audiences—including Americans—by masquerading as legitimate news outlets while promoting Beijing’s strategic narratives.²⁶ Adding to these conventional disinformation tactics, China has begun leveraging generative AI technologies to achieve its influence goals, evidenced by OpenAI’s discovery and disruption of an operation using ChatGPT to efficiently translate Chinese propaganda into Spanish for Latin American audiences.²⁷ These coordinated efforts reveal China’s evolving strategy to shape global narratives through both traditional and emerging technological channels.

Iran: Furthermore, Iran dramatically expanded its disinformation capabilities in 2024. The regime executed a sophisticated hack-and-leak operation targeting President Trump’s campaign, compromising sensitive data and strategically releasing materials, attempting to influence public opinion.²⁸ Microsoft uncovered multiple Iranian-operated propaganda websites specifically designed to sway American voters before the November election, disguising state-backed narratives as independent news and commentary.²⁹ Further demonstrating Iran’s adoption of advanced technologies for information operations—like China—OpenAI reported dismantling numerous Iranian-controlled accounts that were systematically using ChatGPT to generate and disseminate anti-Trump and anti-Israel content across various social media platforms.³⁰ These coordinated activities signal Iran’s growing investment in and reliance on information warfare as a core component of its strategy to undermine American democracy.

Other hybrid regimes have also attempted to influence democratic societies beyond their borders in recent weeks. In November, Azerbaijan deployed sophisticated bot networks to manipulate global perceptions, including American public opinion, of its government’s legitimacy and environmental policies surrounding the COP29 climate summit hosted in Baku.³¹ These automated campaigns worked to present a positive image of Azerbaijan’s regime while downplaying human rights concerns and environmental criticisms ahead of this significant international event. Meanwhile, pro-Kremlin actors, some with direct connections to Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic’s government, have launched coordinated disinformation campaigns targeting student protests in Serbia. These operations spread false narratives portraying student demonstrations as Western-orchestrated destabilization attempts, pushing anti-American and anti-Western conspiracy theories to undermine these democratic movements.³² The campaigns typically frame protesters as foreign agents rather than citizens with legitimate grievances,

²⁵ Shannon Bond, “China is pushing divisive political messages online using fake U.S. voters,” *NPR*, September 3, 2024.

²⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/03/nx-s1-5096151/china-tiktok-x-fake-voters-influence-campaign>

²⁷ Jonathan Grieg, “Google takes down fake news sites, wire services run by Chinese influence operation,” *The Record*, November 22, 2024.

²⁸ <https://therecord.media/google-fake-news-china-outlets>

²⁹ Ina Fried, “OpenAI finds new Chinese influence campaigns using its tools,” *Axios*, February 21, 2025.

³⁰ <https://www.axios.com/2025/02/21/openai-chinese-influence-campaigns>

³¹ Eric Tucker, “Iranian operatives charged in the US with hacking Donald Trump’s presidential campaign,” *The Associated Press*, September 27, 2024.

³² <https://apnews.com/article/trump-hacking-iran-justice-department-1d7d83ecdc6c879be2802142f1c47191>

²⁹ Juliana Kim, “Microsoft detects fake news sites linked to Iran aimed at meddling in U.S. election,” *NPR*, August 9, 2024.

³⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/09/nx-s1-5069317/iran-interfere-presidential-election-microsoft-report>

³¹ Sam Sabin, “OpenAI deactivates ChatGPT accounts linked to Iranian disinformation operation,” *Axios*, August 16, 2024.

³² <https://www.axios.com/2024/08/16/openai-iran-disinformation-chatgpt>

³³ Maxine Joselow, “Army of bots promotes petrostate hosting global climate talks,” *The Washington Post*, October 29, 2024.

³⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2024/10/29/cop29-bots-fake-accounts-azerbaijan/>

³⁵ EUvsDisinfo, “Events in Serbia are a Western attempt at a colour revolution,” March 23, 2025.

³⁶ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/events-in-serbia-are-a-western-attempt-at-a-colour-revolution/>

reflecting Russia's broader strategy of discrediting democratic activism in regions where it seeks to maintain influence.

The “Censorship” Lie is Making America Less Safe

Despite the continued threat of foreign disinformation, most of the U.S. capacity to respond to it has been eviscerated in response to the censorship lie.³³ This includes the Global Engagement Center (GEC), a State Department office created through a bipartisan Congressional directive. The GEC's sole mission was to “recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts.”³⁴ In recent years, in particular since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the GEC has provided important information to the public on the narratives, tools, tactics, and procedures utilized in Russian, Chinese, Iranian, and other foreign malign influence operations. The GEC's work was a strong indication to our adversaries that their actions did not go unnoticed. Today, however, the GEC and other similar government bodies have been gutted due to conspiracy theories. The signal to our adversaries is that America is divided and weak. Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran interpret partisan attacks on counter-disinformation work as a sign that their interference is likely to succeed.

The Courts Have Rejected the “Censorship” Lie

In pursuing investigations and hearings on the censorship lie, Congress has punted its responsibility to safeguard our national security; it has opted instead for political theatrics that are high on fantasy and low on facts. Conversely, when given the chance to examine the record, the Supreme Court and others found no substance behind these breathless claims of censorship.

In June 2024, the Supreme Court threw out *Murthy v. Missouri*, a case that alleged the Biden Administration had worked with researchers to censor conservative viewpoints, for lack of standing. During oral arguments in the case, the plaintiffs could not trace a single piece of removed social media content to pressure from government officials. As Justice Amy Coney Barrett wrote: “The plaintiff cannot rest on ‘mere allegations,’ but must instead point to factual evidence.”³⁵ The idea that plaintiffs would be harmed by the administration's alleged “censorship,” the Court maintained, was “no more than conjecture.”

Just last week, in a legal rebuke that thoroughly undermines the censorship lie, a New York Federal judge “dismissed a left-leaning news site's lawsuit alleging that it was [...] illegally censored by NewsGuard in conjunction with the U.S. government.”³⁶ The Court found that, despite NewsGuard having a government contract and a shared “mutual objective of identifying foreign propaganda”, NewsGuard would only be a state actor capable of censorship if the “Government controlled NewsGuard's decision-making process and internal operations,”³⁷ which it did not. Furthermore, the Court found that “even if NewsGuard were a state actor [... the] Plaintiff ha[d] not sufficiently alleged a First Amendment violation” because NewsGuard's mere labeling of content “is a far cry from the threat of adverse government action” and is

³³ Renée DiResta & Quinta Jurecic, “The Rise and Fall of America's Response to Foreign Election Meddling,” *Lawfare*, February 20, 2025, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-rise-and-fall-of-americas-response-to-foreign-election-meddling>

³⁴ “About Us – Global Engagement Center,” U.S. Department of State, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/about-us-global-engagement-center-2/>

³⁵ *Murthy v. Missouri*, No. 23-411, June 26, 2024, https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/23pdf/23-411_3d93.pdf

³⁶ Will Oremus, “Tech Brief: Democrats use online safety hearing to decry Trump's FTC firing,” *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/camp-rw/?trackId=59712cc69bbc0f40d0add439&s=67e554429c24803604e8c3c2&utm_campaign=wp_the_technology_202

³⁷ *Consortium for Independent Journalism, Inc. v. United States et al.*, No. 1:23-cv-07088-KPF, ECF No. 73 (S.D.N.Y. Mar. 26, 2025), <https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/newsguard-motion-to-dismiss-ruling.pdf>

“at most, merely criticiz[ing] [Plaintiff’s] beliefs ... forcefully in the hopes of persuading others.”³⁸ The same is true of the academic and private parties that have been harassed for years by frivolous allegations of censorship via various ties to the government.

Moving Beyond the “Censorship” Lie

If this Subcommittee is serious about countering disinformation that undermines our national security while preserving freedom of speech, there are a variety of programs to which it could appropriate funding, many of which have been decimated by the slash-and-burn approach that has characterized the Trump administration’s foreign aid cuts. Past, present, or future, these programs do not constitute censorship.

- **Information Literacy.** Invest in programs that teach people how to navigate the modern information environment including through digital literacy training and civics programs. These programs do not label outlets as “good” or “bad,” “real” or “fake,” but give people holistic skills to navigate an increasingly complex digital environment regardless of their politics.
- **Journalism.** News properties of the US Agency for Global Media are invaluable resources. They represent a standard for in-depth, fact-based, non-partisan journalism as a public good, often in environments with no independent journalistic alternatives. They have been a beacon of truth among lies for decades; their funding should not be obliterated, but bolstered, allowing them to compete more effectively in an increasingly crowded media environment.
- **International Exchanges.** Engage people in countries on the front lines of the information war with firsthand educational and exchange experiences in the United States. It is impossible to calculate the return on investment of programs including Fulbright and the Future Leaders Exchange Program. These experiences are more powerful than any counter-disinformation program; they provide participants with a firsthand look at American values and culture.
- **Research.** As social media platforms continue to obscure their content moderation decisions and algorithmic curation, and until Congress passes robust technology oversight and transparency legislation, academic and civil society research provides the public—and our policymakers—with critical information about the health of our information environment.
- **Coordination and cooperation.** Adversaries like Moscow and Beijing utilize an integrated approach to information operations—across sectors, governments, and mediums—to take advantage of American inaction and disorganization on the issue. We should thus prioritize coordination within government and cooperation with allies. This demonstrates resolve and denies benefit to adversaries through a collective stance, including better sharing of information to identify threats, tactics, and tools, and the formulation of effective responses.³⁹

Finally, and most importantly: adversaries use information operations to exploit open societies and undermine our democratic values. These values must therefore remain the center of gravity for any approach to countering hostile interference. Preserving our transparency, openness, and most importantly, commitments to freedom of speech and human rights will ensure the United States continues to provide an alternative to authoritarian regimes. We must act not only as the staunchest defender and guarantor of these values among our allies abroad, but lead by example, and fight just as hard to preserve them at home. Thank you.

³⁸ *Consortium v. United States et al.*

³⁹ Adapted from Nina Jankowicz and Henry Collis, “Enduring Information Vigilance: Government after COVID-19,” *Parameters* 50, no. 3 (2020), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol50/iss3/4/>.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Mr. Taibbi, you have 5 minutes, the aforementioned Twitter Files author, founder of Racket News.

You have 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MATT TAIBBI

Mr. TAIBBI. Mr. Chairman, Madam Ranking Member, thank you.

My name is Matt Taibbi. I'm the editor of the independent site Racket and I've been covering digital censorship issues since 2018—the fictional ones.

On March 14, 2016, Barack Obama signed Executive Order 1371, developing a new integrated Global Engagement Center to support government wide counterterrorism communications activities directed abroad.

It directed the Secretary of State to create a new body, the G-E-C, or GEC, to quote, counter the messaging and diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations including ISIL, al-Qaeda, and other violent extremists abroad.

Seven years later while working on a story involving internal communications at Twitter I found myself reading emails between GEC officials and Twitter executives about subjects ranging from COVID-19 to the 2020 election to Donald Trump.

Mr. Chairman, you were right to point out that they were once focused abroad. But by this time GEC officials were, largely, concerned with domestic English language accounts, people with no ties to terror groups or relationships with adversary nations like Iran, China, or Russia.

When I went back this weekend through those documents to find examples of GEC pressuring Twitter to remove or deamplify Americans accused of misinformation I found an exchange that we Twitter Files reporters missed in 2023.

A lawyer at the company asked several other executives if they had any, quote, appetite for writing GEC a letter to ask them to stop going to the media with sensationalist claims about epidemics of foreign bots.

One of the company's senior communications executives gave a remarkably candid answer. "From my chair it would be very helpful," he wrote. Referencing a well-known Washington reporter, he went on, "The prebriefed Ellen Nakashima article in the Post on Bernie and this coronavirus story (no heads up) are making me worry a little about how good faith these players will be through the press into 2020."

So it wasn't just conservatives; it was also Bernie Sanders. The date on that email was February 24th, 2020. Three days after the Washington Post ran a devastating feature titled "Bernie Sanders briefed by U.S. officials that Russia is trying to help his Presidential campaign."

This was an extremely impactful story that opened the floodgates on a conspiracy theory that Sanders was the recipient of Russian help. It claimed bots helping Bernie online were part of, quote, Russia's broader interest in sowing division in the United States and uncertainty about the validity of American elections.

In response to this odd sequel of claims about Russian bots aiding Donald Trump, the company's head of trust and safety Yoel Roth gave an unflattering description of GEC's methods.

Quote, They used Brandwatch to monitor a handful of openly Russian accounts, for instance, RT, and an unspecified number of accounts that they baselessly assert are inauthentic.

This is the exact formula we previously found behind another often-used online tool called Hamilton 68 whose founders were also quoted in the Post piece.

Hamilton 68 mixed the smattering of real Russian accounts with a crowd of mostly American, mostly anti-establishment accounts to create a dashboard that synthesized falsely the appearance of Russian social media backing for everything from the Devin Nunes memo to the Parkland shooting.

Although many of the most controversial stories about GEC involved their funding of commercial media scoring operations that down ranked conservative news outlets, the GEC also pressured Twitter about left-leaning figures like Sanders, anti-war accounts, libertarians, and independents as well as conservatives.

They managed this by using a trick that gave domestic propaganda the appearance of a counter terrorist operation. GEC sent out reports that would first identify a few social media accounts with real ties to Russia or China or Iran. Then it would separately list accounts they called highly connective to that country's propaganda ecosystem.

These would be American or European citizens with inconvenient views. For instance, GEC identified the Twitter accounts of former Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and former Italian Democratic Party Secretary Nicola Zingaretti, who was often compared to Bernie, as being highly connective to Russia.

All you had to do to get on the list was retweet what they called anti-U.S. propaganda, or GEC's subjective definition of pro-Russian propaganda. No actual connection was required.

Through this means, the GEC exactly rehabilitated the fellow traveler concept used by infamous smear artists and witch hunters from history, from Leon Trotsky to the House Un-American Affairs Committee.

It was a way to accuse someone who hasn't done anything wrong of guilt by ideological association. And I'll just wrap up. I've gone over my time.

But they weren't looking for misinformation and disinformation. They were looking for orthodoxy and unorthodoxy, obedience and disobedience.

The idea behind GEC in particular was finding a way to propagandize American citizens and encourage acceptance of official policy the way we had always done to foreign populations.

It's a flagrant violation of First Amendment ideals and should be eradicated from the government completely. No one should have this tool—

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentleman's time——

Mr. TAIBBI.—not Democrats, not the Trump Administration, nobody.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. TAIBBI. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Taibbi follows:]

On March 14, 2016, Barack Obama signed executive order 13721, "[Developing a New Integrated 'Global Engagement Center'](#) To Support Government-wide Counterterrorism Communications Activities Directed Abroad." It directed the Secretary of State to create a new body "to counter the messaging and diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations, including ISIL, al Qa'ida, and other violent extremists abroad."

Seven years later, while working on the story involving the internal communications at Twitter, I found myself reading emails between GEC officials and Twitter executives about a wide variety of topics, from Covid-19 to the 2020 election to alleged Russian interference. GEC officials were almost exclusively concerned with English-language accounts, very often American, who had neither connections to terrorist groups nor any relationship with adversary nations like Iran, China, or Russia.

When I went back this weekend to look through those Twitter Files documents to compile examples of a State Department entity pressuring a private platform to remove or deamplify Americans accused of "misinformation," I found an exchange we missed the first time. A Twitter lawyer asked several other executives if they had any "appetite" for writing GEC a letter and asking them to call Twitter first from now on, instead of going to the media with sensationalist claims about epidemics of foreign bots.

One of the company's senior communications executives answered, "From my chair, it would be very helpful. The pre-briefed Ellen Nakashima article in The Post on Bernie and this coronavirus story (no heads up) are making me worry a little about how good-faith these players will be through the press going into 2020. They're collateralizing their risk at our expense, so no harm resetting."

The date on that email was February 24, 2020, three days after the *Washington Post* ran a devastating feature on titled, "[Bernie Sanders briefed by U.S. officials that Russia is trying to help his presidential campaign.](#)" This story opened the floodgates on a damaging conspiracy theory that Sanders was the recipient of Russian "help," noting "Russia's broader interest in sowing division in the United States and uncertainty about the validity of American elections."

In response, the company's head of Trust and Safety, Yoel Roth, gave an unflattering description of a report on the subject apparently forwarded by GEC. "They used Brandwatch to monitor a handful of openly Russian accounts (for instance RT) and an unspecified number of accounts that they baselessly assert are inauthentic." This is the exact formula I previously found behind an often-used online tool called Hamilton 68, whose founders were quoted in the Post piece. Hamilton 68 mixed a smattering of real Russian accounts with a crowd of mostly American, mostly anti-establishment accounts, to create a "dashboard" that synthesized the appearance of Russian social media backing for everything from the Devin Nunes memo to the Parkland shooting.

I bring this up because although many of the most controversial stories about the GEC involve their funding of commercial media-scoring operations that downranked conservative news outlets, I also observed the GEC pressuring Twitter about socialist accounts, left-leaning accounts, and independents, as well as conservatives. One of GEC's innovations in the "anti-disinformation" space was a concept called the propaganda "ecosystem." The GEC sent out (and often would later publish) reports that would first identify social media accounts with real ties to Russia or China or Iran. Then it would list accounts they called "highly connective" parts of that country's "propaganda ecosystem."

For instance, GEC identified the Twitter accounts of former Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and former Italian Democratic Party Secretary Nicola Zingaretti – who was often compared to Bernie – as being "highly connective" to Russia. All you had to do to get on this list was retweet "anti-U.S. propaganda," or their subjective definition of "pro-Russian propaganda." No actual connection or expression of support was required. Through this means the GEC exactly rehabilitated the "fellow traveler" concept used by everyone from Leon Trotsky to the House Un-American Affairs Committee, accusing someone who hasn't done anything wrong of guilt by ideological association.

GEC by law was supposed to be a "counter-messaging" operation for diminishing *foreign* influence, but this State Department entity ended up using this "ecosystem" trick to turn their focus on Americans whose beliefs merely clashed with official policy. You'll hear a lot of talk about combating "disinformation" as well, but GEC didn't do that, either. "Misinformation, disinformation, and

malinformation” are bogus concepts, invented to justify censorship and propaganda. There is no such thing as “misinformation studies” or an academic field called “digital literacy.” There’s no way to become an expert in determining the truth of subjects you know nothing about. Even with an army of content reviewers it would be impossible to instantly decide what is and is not true about complex stories like the Covid pandemic.

The truth is hard, but deciding which content is not helpful to official vaccine policy by “promoting hesitancy” is easy. If you know what you think is politically right, it’s easy to decide what’s politically wrong, even if those things are factually true. That’s how “anti-disinformation” experts were wrong about so many things with Covid, from the lab leak theory that was banned on Facebook for a time but now embraced by the FBI, DOE, and CIA, to the truth about natural immunity, the efficacy of vaccines, the threat Covid posed to children and healthy adults, the effectiveness of lockdowns, and a dozen other things.

They weren’t looking for misinformation and disinformation. They were looking for orthodoxy and unorthodoxy, obedience and disobedience. The idea behind GEC in particular was finding a way to propagandize American citizens and encourage acceptance of official policy, the way we’ve always done to foreign populations.

It’s a flagrant violation of First Amendment ideals and should be eradicated entirely from the government. No one should have this tool, not Democrats, not the Trump administration. Truth squads are for weak countries, and Americans are not weak.

Thank you.

Mr. HUIZENGA. With that, Mr. Weingarten, investigative journalist and columnist, you have 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF BENJAMIN WEINGARTEN

Mr. WEINGARTEN. Chairman Huizenga, Ranking Member Kamlager-Dove, and esteemed members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

The censorship-industrial complex poses a mortal threat to our republic. The sprawling whole of society regime has sought to purge unauthorized opinions and inconvenient facts en masse under guise of combating mis-, dis-, and malinformation.

Today's hearing highlights one of the regime's most insidious manifestations, the turning of Federal agencies that are supposed to target foreign adversaries instead on Americans and our core political speech.

The Global Engagement Center was a key cog in such efforts through its cultivation of hundreds of ostensibly nongovernmental counter disinformation players.

Two players the GEC funded and promoted were risk raters so-called NewsGuard and GDI. These relationships should have raised immediate alarm bells. The GEC's stated mission was to counter foreign propaganda and disinformation efforts, as the chairman noted.

Yet, NewsGuard aims to systematically defund sources of harmful misinformation foreign and domestic. NewsGuard does so by rating and reviewing thousands of outlets for reliability and creating exclusion lists, that is, blacklists to feed advertisers for use in determining where not to place ads.

GDI likewise seeks to reduce disinformation by removing the financial incentive ad revenue it says lurks behind it. GDI, too, arms advertisers with a dynamic exclusion list reportedly containing 2,000 risky publications including, again, American ones.

Perversely, then, a foreign-facing interagency entity both funded and gave the Federal Government's imprimatur to nongovernmental would-be destroyers of disfavored domestic outlets.

Those outlets appear to be disfavored for ideological reasons. NewsGuard generally lavishes significantly higher scores on left-leaning sources over right leaning ones.

Its Kafkaesque correspondence with dissident outlets broadly who have challenged seemingly unmerited scores, largely, in vain further suggests a bias.

GDI's 2022 report on disinformation risk among U.S. sources betrays a similar bent. There it lists among its 10 least risky publications nine liberal to progressive corporate media outlets and the Wall Street Journal.

Its 10 riskiest publications include nine conservative or libertarian outlets and Real Clear Politics. Evidence suggests the risk raters' profiles grew substantially after receiving Federal support. Their ubiquity in the ad marketplace reportedly drove declines of tens of millions of dollars in ad revenue annually for outlets on their de facto blacklists.

Some disfavored sources report reduced traffic, diminished search visibility, and lost operational partners. Real Clear's experience with the risk raters is uniquely perverse.

Real Clear Politics' bread and butter is curating compelling analysis from sources left and right, corporate and independent, on key issues of the day so readers can weigh both sides.

Consequently, media bias rater AllSides positions RCP in the ideological center alongside Reuters, The Hill, and the Wall Street Journal.

Despite our pursuit of fairness and quality journalism, NewsGuard gives RCP a 62 on its 100-point scale as determined by their journalists rating a sample of our journalists' work.

NewsGuard dings us in part for our purported undisclosed conservative bent. The implication is that it either dismisses viewpoint diversity as a feature or sees it as a bug.

Real Clear investigations likewise curates deep dives and publishes original content from journalists with diverse perspectives. NewsGuard has branded us biased too, albeit while giving RCI an 80 rating.

Our bias is to pursue stories competitors miss or angles competitors ignore. Shouldn't that be celebrated? As for GDI, RCP may be on its secret blacklist, too.

Real Clear has thrived despite the risk raters' best efforts but the censorship-industrial complex the GEC helped foster has made a tough business tougher and disadvantaged us.

Our ad revenue has declined materially. We have seen a meaningful drop in certain search rankings and we have taken a reputational hit by being branded with the digital scarlet letter R for risky.

Even if the risk raters were unobjectionable the fact remains through funding and supporting such entities government abridged speech by proxy.

The Trump Administration and its State Department have indicated these efforts are over but the speech police have neither laid down their arms nor recanted for past abuses, suggesting they will, at best, lie in wait during Trump II, only to come back with a vengeance thereafter.

So the time to act is now. Congress should codify the President's first-day executive order restoring freedom of speech and ending Federal censorship to permanently starve the censorship-industrial complex of the Federal funding and direction that are its lifeblood.

Congress should prohibit grants and contracts to institutions engaged in domestic censorship activities and Congress should erect a strict firewall between the U.S. Government and our body politic a la Smith-Mundt.

To overcome our adversaries we must not emulate them by casting dissent from ruling class orthodoxy as dangerous and surveilling and silencing the dissenters.

Instead, let us restore the free and open public square on which our republic rests.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Weingarten follows:]

**“Censorship-Industrial Complex:
The Need for First Amendment Safeguards at the State Department”**

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
South and Central Asia Subcommittee**

April 1, 2025

Statement for the Record

**Benjamin Weingarten
Investigative Journalist, RealClearInvestigations
Columnist, RealClearPolitics**

I. Introduction

Chairman Huizenga, Ranking Member Kamlager-Dove, and esteemed members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify.¹

The Censorship-Industrial Complex poses a mortal threat to our republic.

This sprawling regime, which spans from the federal government to the civil society partners it has often funded, coordinated, and directed has sought to purge unauthorized opinions and inconvenient facts en masse under guise of combatting a purported pandemic of “mis-, dis-, and mal-information [MDM].”²

Today’s hearing highlights one of the censorship regime’s most insidious manifestations: The turning of federal agencies that are supposed to be tasked with targeting foreign adversaries instead on Americans and our core political speech.

The State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) was a key cog in such efforts through the interagency entity’s fueling of the ostensibly non-governmental portion of the “counter-disinformation” ecosystem.³

As the House Small Business Committee summarized it in an interim staff report released in September of last year – building in part on the House Foreign Affairs Committee’s findings – the since-“realigned”⁴ GEC:

though subject to a strict international mandate, sourced, developed, then platformed and promoted MDM-detection tools directly to the private sector, including to tech platforms with the ability to moderate domestic speech and impact domestic business operations.⁵

¹ While appearing today in part on account of my work as an investigative journalist at *RealClearInvestigations* and columnist at *RealClearPolitics* – and to provide relevant testimony connected with the Censorship-Industrial Complex’s impact on RealClear Media Group, under which these verticals sit – all opinions are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of these or any other media outlets or organizations with which I am affiliated.

² The Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), another key cog in the Censorship-Industrial Complex, has defined “Misinformation” as that which “is false, but not created or shared with the intention of causing harm.” It has defined “Disinformation” as that which “is deliberately created to mislead, harm, or manipulate a person, social group, organization, or country.” It has defined “Malinformation” as that which “is based on fact, but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate.” See: https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/mdm-incident-response-guide_508.pdf.

³ As detailed in recent testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on the Constitution: “Overwhelming evidence indicates that the federal government has deputized likeminded academic institutions, think-tanks, NGOs, “fact-checkers,” and for-profits – often receiving government funding, direction, and/or promotion, and helmed by ex-government officials – as its speech police. Federal authorities and their force multipliers have cajoled, coerced, and colluded, most notably with social media companies, to surveil and suppress unauthorized opinions and inconvenient facts at mass scale.” See: https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2025-03-25_testimony_weingarten.pdf#page=6.

⁴ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/investigations/3274279/state-department-documents-reveal-secret-plans-censorship-new-hub/>.

⁵ The House Small Business Committee notes specifically that through the GEC’s work to develop the “Testbed methodology, the Disinfo Cloud platform, and the Tech Demo Series...the GEC and its partners” were able “to source and test surveillance and disinformation detection tools. The GEC marketed and promoted these tools, including by providing Federal funding for some.” See:

The GEC also worked with foreign governments with strict internet speech laws (including the United Kingdom and countries in the European Union (EU)) and Federal agencies with no such international restrictions to test these products.⁶

Among those the GEC supported were NewsGuard and the Global Disinformation Index (GDI), entities that threaten to put media companies that dare to dissent from establishment orthodoxy out of business.⁷

In furtherance of this Subcommittee's efforts, I will speak generally to the nexus between GEC and these two organizations; more specifically to how they have impacted outlets with which I am affiliated; and I will propose some broad legislative correctives to prevent associated attacks on our First Amendment and republic going forward.

II. The GEC's Targeting of American Media by Risk-Rater Proxies NewsGuard and GDI⁸

The GEC's stated mission was to counter "foreign...propaganda and disinformation efforts."⁹

So its financial and promotional support for the U.S.-based for-profit NewsGuard,¹⁰ which aims to "systematically defund sources of harmful misinformation" – foreign *and domestic* – was beyond problematic on its face.

https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=22. For more on the Testbed Methodology and Disinfo Cloud, see: https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=15. For more on the Tech Demo Series, see: https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=20.

⁶ The UK and the EU it should be noted are now working to implement regulations that threaten crippling penalties against American social media platforms that refuse to comport their content moderation terms to the anti-free speech standards prevailing across Europe. This represents a potential backdoor line of attack on Americans' speech. See: https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2024/10/08/global_crackdown_how_foreign_censorship_threatens_american_free_speech_1063521.html.

⁷ These entities can be seen as an outgrowth of the "brand safety" industry, which appears to be driven by threats often emanating from the left to boycott companies whose advertisements surface near conservative media. This tells us something about the nature of the risk-rater's niche. See: https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2021/05/13/the_highpressure_business_of_selling_woke_corporate_armor_776879.html and <https://nypost.com/2023/11/22/opinion/elon-musk-exposes-media-matters-as-an-ideological-shakedownoperation/>.

⁸ For a more comprehensive accounting, see my June 2024 written testimony for the House Small Business Committee in connection with its hearing entitled "Under the Microscope: Examining the Censorship-Industrial Complex and its Impact on American Small Businesses:" <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/SM/SM00/20240626/117376/HHRG-118-SM00-Wstate-WeingartenB-20240626.pdf>.

⁹ <https://archive.ph/jQhVC>.

¹⁰ See: https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=51 and https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=20.

NewsGuard does so by rating and reviewing thousands of outlets for “reliability” and creating “exclusion lists” – blacklists – for brands to provide ad agencies and ad-tech partners for use in determining where *not* to place ads.¹¹

The U.K.-based nonprofit GDI, which too received the GEC’s financial and promotional support,¹² likewise seeks to “reduce disinformation” by “remov[ing] the financial incentive” it says lurks behind it: Ad revenue.

It too arms ad-tech companies with a “dynamic exclusion list” reportedly containing 2,000 “risky”¹³ publications, *including American ones*.

Perversely then, a foreign-facing interagency entity supported non-governmental outfits that exist to put disfavored *domestic* outlets out of business – both monetarily and through granting them the imprimatur of government.¹⁴

Those outlets NewsGuard and GDI have targeted suggest they have been smeared and stigmatized for taking positions on matters from COVID-19 to the War in Ukraine contrary to those of the political establishment, consequently incurring financial and reputational damage.

NewsGuard’s alleged viewpoint discrimination can be seen in the significantly higher scores on average that it has lavished on left-leaning sources over right-leaning ones. Its seeming bias can also be observed in the Kafkaesque correspondence dissident sources left and right have had with its raters when challenging seemingly unmerited scores. The message seems clear: Toe the NewsGuard line or face the consequences.

¹¹ <https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-reports/brands-send-billions-to-misinformation-websites-newsguard-comscore-report/>.

¹² See: https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=24 and https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=20.

¹³ The purported “risk” GDI aims to help ad companies mitigate is that their clients’ brands might surface on sites that traffic in “disinformation,” subjecting them to boycotts and other harms. Refer to Footnote 7 for more on related “brand safety.”

¹⁴ The House Small Business Committee’s September 2024 interim staff report notes that “The GEC... promoted the GDI through the Disinfo Cloud Twitter account and directly to the private sector in the [disinformation-focused] TET’s [Technology Engagement Team’s] communications with technology companies, including Zoom and Google/YouTube. It is therefore not only the Federal funding that is at issue, but also promotion and validation with the weight of the U.S. State Department behind it.” See: https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=33. Of the GEC’s promotional support for NewsGuard, the report notes: “NewsGuard has received Federal funding from the GEC and the DOD. The structure of these awards included licensing fees for the Misinformation Fingerprints database [a licensable dataset of viral purported falsehoods and ‘misinformation narratives’ ‘capturing data and examples about each hoax that can be used as a ‘Fingerprint’ for the hoax by AI and machine learning tools’] and for NewsGuard to carry out government research work that further developed its product. Those initial relationships with significant U.S. government bodies were then promoted by NewsGuard, and extensive partnerships in the private sector followed.” See: https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=51 and https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=48 on “Misinformation Fingerprints.”

GDI's blacklist is not public. But its 2022 report on "disinformation risk" among U.S. sources betrays a similar bias.¹⁵

There, it lists among its ten least risky publications nine liberal-to-progressive corporate media outlets...and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Its ten riskiest publications include nine conservative or libertarian outlets...and *RealClearPolitics*.

Subsequent to securing federal government support, NewsGuard and GDI's reach expanded dramatically, and many maligned by the entities reported plummeting ad revenues. NewsGuard achieved widespread adoption across the digital public square, including through partnerships with social media platforms, advertising agencies, and ad exchanges – influencing an incalculable number of ad buys and raising antitrust concerns.^{16,17} Major advertisers too have endorsed and partnered with GDI.^{18,19} Names on its dynamic exclusion list reportedly lost an estimated \$128 million in annual ad revenue between the list's launch in May 2020 and 2022.²⁰ GDI's executives have gloated²¹ about this outcome.

Some outlets too indicate that they have lost traffic, and operational partners.

As the *Daily Wire* and *The Federalist* summarized it in their lawsuit against the State Department concerning in part the GEC's support of NewsGuard and GDI, the risk-raters' efforts not only reduced their revenue but "their visibility on social media, and ranking results from browser searches, thereby reducing their circulation, readership, and reach, and otherwise negatively impacting their operations."²²

III. The Risk-Raters' Perverse Targeting of *RealClear*

¹⁵ <https://archive.is/zbN4V#selection-381.0-388.3>.

¹⁶ https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=57.

¹⁷ https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/ftc_gov/pdf/ferguson-goat-concurrence.pdf#page=3.

¹⁸ <https://archive.ph/0rNO6#selection-889.0-919.118>.

¹⁹ NewsGuard and GDI's collective influence could be seen in the reliance of the advertising industry's now-defunct consortium par excellence on the two entities' ratings. A July 2024 report from the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government indicated that the World Federation of Advertisers, representing approximately 90% of global advertising spend, had, through its Global Alliance for Responsible Media initiative, helped organize "large corporations, advertising agencies, and industry associations" to engage in "boycotts and other coordinated action to demonetize platforms, podcasts, news outlets, and other content deemed disfavored by GARM and its members." Targets included, among others, X and Elon Musk, Spotify with respect to its hosting of "The Joe Rogan Experience," and outlets including *Fox News*, *The Daily Wire*, and *Breitbart News*. GARM encouraged its members to rely on NewsGuard and the Global Disinformation Index for combatting disinformation. See: <https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-sites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2024-07-10%20GARMs%20Harm%20-%20How%20the%20Worlds%20Biggest%20Brands%20Seek%20to%20Control%20Online%20Speech.pdf>.

²⁰ https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=29.

²¹ https://www.youtube.com/live/FmcbVhx99yg?si=456aBwfNyxdf_6Zv&t=4225.

²² <https://nclalegal.org/filing/complaint-for-declaratory-and-injunctive-relief-12/>.

Our experience at *RealClearPolitics* (*RCP*) and *RealClearInvestigations* (*RCI*) with these “censorship-by-risk-rating” entities may be more troubling than what others have observed given the nature of our work. Certainly, it tells us something disturbing about the nature of the Censorship-Industrial Complex.

RCP’s mission is to “facilitate meaningful discourse on governance, campaigns, elections, and public policy.”²³

The site’s bread-and-butter is curating compelling analysis – from sources left and right, corporate and independent – on key issues of the day, so readers can weigh both sides.

Our ethos extends to our original reporting as well, wherein we aim to “present balanced, non-partisan analysis that empowers our readers to stay informed.”

Consequently, media bias ratings site AllSides positions *RCP* in the ideological center, alongside outlets such as *Reuters*, *The Hill*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.²⁴

Despite our reputation for fairness and quality journalism, we score a 62 on NewsGuard’s 100-point scale – based on the subjective assessments of NewsGuard’s journalists, who analyze a sample of other journalists’ work to render judgment on whole outlets.

Remarkably, NewsGuard dings us in part for our purportedly “undisclosed” conservative bent.

The implication is that it either dismisses the viewpoint diversity that we promote as a *feature*, or worse, sees the promotion of viewpoint diversity as a *bug*.

RCP, mind you, ranks below *NPR*, *Politico*, and the *Washington Post* – all of which have garnered perfect NewsGuard scores despite their biases and bungles.

These scores influence not only advertisers, but historically up to half a billion readers given the scale of NewsGuard’s partnerships.

They appear next to sites in search results on browsers equipped with NewsGuard’s extension.²⁵ A low rating is a digital scarlet letter that tells a reader to distrust your outlet and move on to a competitor.

RealClearInvestigations curates deep-dives from sundry sources and publishes original content from journalists with diverse perspectives – some antithetical to my own.

NewsGuard has branded us biased too, albeit while giving *RCI* a rating of 80.

²³ <https://www.realclearpolitics.com/about.html>.

²⁴ <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-chart>.

²⁵ As detailed in my June 2024 testimony before the House Small Business Committee: “Users of browsers equipped with the raters’ extension will see numerical ratings displayed prominently alongside websites when searched. When one hovers over a site’s score, NewsGuard’s subjective description of the site, as well as a message for a particularly low scorer like ‘Proceed with Maximum Caution’ appear[] as part of a detailed ‘Nutrition Label.’” See: <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/SM/SM00/20240626/117376/HHRG-118-SM00-Wstate-WeingartenB-20240626.pdf#page=3>.

The rater would seem to see bias in our mission to pursue stories competitors miss, or angles competitors ignore.

It took *RCI* to task for unmasking the whistleblower behind President Donald Trump's first impeachment in the face of political pressure our silent peers folded under. That is, we appear to have been punished for exposing information powerful forces wanted suppressed in a bid to present the public with a fuller picture of a hugely consequential matter.²⁶ Isn't that one of journalism's aims?

As for GDI, beyond landing on its "risky" list, *RCP* may be on its secret blacklist too.

*RealClear*²⁷ broadly has thrived despite the efforts of these entities to demonize outlets with which they take issue.

But the Censorship-Industrial Complex that the GEC helped foster has made a highly competitive business harder and placed us at a competitive disadvantage.

Our ad revenue has declined materially, forcing us to devote substantially more time and resources to non-core focuses like fundraising.²⁸

RealClear too has seen a meaningful drop in certain search rankings.

And we have taken a reputational hit.

Though we would like to see these challenges to our media organization as validators of our fierce commitment to independence and viewpoint diversity, there is no doubt an unquantifiable reputational hit to being targeted.

Outrageously, our own tax dollars have contributed to these detrimental outcomes.

One would have thought that these rating entities would whitelist *RealClear* for providing readers with a balanced diet of news, information, and analysis.

That the opposite has occurred speaks volumes about the Censorship-Industrial Complex.

IV. Codify the Censorship-Industrial Complex's Dismantling

²⁶ As the author of the October 2019 article Paul Sperry wrote at the time: "RealClearInvestigations is disclosing the name because of the public's interest in learning details of an effort to remove a sitting president from office. Further, the official's status as a 'whistleblower' is complicated by his being a hearsay reporter of accusations against the president, one who has 'some indicia of an arguable political bias ... in favor of a rival political candidate' -- as the Intelligence Community Inspector General phrased it circumspectly in originally fielding his complaint." See: https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2019/10/30/whistleblower_exposed_close_to_biden_brennan_dnc_oppo_researcher_120996.html.

²⁷ I refer to "*RealClear*" generally to encompass *RealClearPolitics*, *RealClearInvestigations*, and the other brands comprising RealClear Media Group.

²⁸ One absurd but ironic and timely example illustrates the environment for ad revenue generation that media companies like ours have faced. Months ago, we posted video footage from an event celebrating a censored Stanford medical professor who had taken a courageous stand against the Censorship-Industrial Complex. Google flagged the video for raising purportedly "[u]nreliable and harmful claims." That doctor is the new NIH Director, Jay Bhattacharya.

Even if the risk-raters were unobjectionable in every respect, a fundamental issue would remain: Through funding and supporting such entities, government abridged our freedom of speech and of the press by proxy.

Inadvertently too, as I testified last summer, the feds provided what amounts to a subsidy for the largely like-minded corporate media sources that have benefited from seeing small and independent media companies demonetized and delegitimized.

That federal authorities have abridged our speech and picked winners and losers in the media marketplace under cover of offices or initiatives originated to combat our foreign enemies, with no domestic authority, and at times hidden behind third-party cutouts and opaque funding schemes that seem designed to obfuscate only adds to the scandal.

As for the GEC, that its efforts spanned far beyond the backing of NewsGuard and GDI and even encompassed more than just promoting a broad panoply of players in the counter-disinformation space adds insult to this injury to the First Amendment and our body politic.

During the 2020 presidential election, the GEC also served as an “external stakeholder”²⁹ in the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP) – an archetypal government-coordinated “whole-of-society” domestic censorship project – contributing to its efforts by flagging social media content with the ultimate intent for platforms to consider taking it down.³⁰ Participation alone in this project should have doomed it.

This is to say nothing, incidentally, of the fact that while the GEC came under congressional scrutiny and faced revelations from “Twitter Files” journalists, the State Department’s response was not only to largely stonewall this and other committees, but to plot attacks on its domestic

²⁹ <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:tr171zs0069/EIP-Final-Report.pdf#page=30>.

³⁰ In the run-up to the 2020 election, the Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) helped originate, coordinate, and collude with a quartet of non-governmental counter-disinformation players to suppress disfavored views on election processes and outcomes on social media. The consortia would lobby social media companies to change their content moderation policies to suppress disfavored content; surveil social media at the level of hundreds of millions of posts for alleged violations of those policies; and flag offending items to social media companies that they often suppressed at significant rates – disproportionately targeting conservatives and other critics of the political establishment. The quartet forming the EIP included the Stanford Internet Observatory, University of Washington’s Center for an Informed Public, the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Research Lab (DFRLab), and social media analytics firm Graphika – self-described “leading institutions focused on understanding misinformation and disinformation in the social media landscape.” Each had ties to the U.S. government, some highly extensive. EIP’s stated purpose was to fill the “critical gap” created by the fact no federal agency “has a focus on, or authority regarding, election misinformation originating from domestic sources within the United States.” In practice, this meant targeting for suppression skepticism about an unprecedented election cycle in which authorities enacted sweeping, pandemic-driven changes to the voting system, and in which razor-thin final results in pivotal states failed to materialize for days. The GEC would later provide grants to the DFRLab. See: <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM09/20230511/115901/HHRG-118-HM09-Wstate-WeingartenB-20230511.pdf>; https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2023/11/06/documents_shed_new_light_on_feds_collusion_with_private_actors_to_police_speech_on_social_media_990672.html; and https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2024/05/30/stanford_silicon_valley_and_the_rise_of_the_censorship_industrial_complex_1034440.html.

critics. The Biden State Department issued official press guidance³¹ to discredit now Senator Jim Banks (R-Ind.) and the reporters who blew the lid off the story: Gabe Kaminsky, and a man branded by angered congressmen as a “so-called journalist” for his efforts to expose the Censorship-Industrial Complex, my co-witness Matt Taibbi.³²

Congress’ refusal to reauthorize the GEC was a meaningful first step towards accountability given what has transpired – albeit still a gigantic leap from justice for those targeted.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s indication, via a January 22nd press statement, that the State Department’s “Priorities and Mission” under President Donald Trump would include efforts to “support and defend Americans’ rights to free speech, terminating any programs that in any way lead to censoring the American people” – an apparent rebuke of the GEC’s past practices – was also heartening.³³

Hopefully, it means that the reported Counter Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference Hub (R/FIMI) will not be a re-branded GEC engaged in similar mischief.

But “hope” is not a policy. The experience of the last decade has unfortunately shown the American people that foreign-facing authorities trained on our adversaries can be turned on domestic dissenters from establishment orthodoxy.

And when it comes to the Censorship-Industrial Complex, which emerged in large part out of the national security and foreign policy space, and experienced this very mission creep,³⁴ Americans’ concerns about future abuses are more than merited.

To wit, while some key censors have dissolved, restructured, or retrenched under scrutiny – which speaks volumes about the legitimacy or lack thereof of their efforts – overall, the speech police have neither dropped their arms nor recanted.

Their weapons are getting more sophisticated with the development of artificial intelligence technologies to censor at scale, some of which have been advanced with the U.S. government’s backing.³⁵

The threats from abroad via foreign regulatory regimes – sometimes working with U.S.-funded NGOs³⁶ to suppress speech under banner of combatting dangerous MDM – are only growing.

Certainly, media outlets anti-establishment, right, and center – including the likes of *RealClear* – have been paid no restitution for lost traffic, damaged reputations, and depleted ad revenue.

³¹ <https://nypost.com/2024/09/13/us-news/state-department-tried-to-discredit-reporters-republican-pol-over-conservative-blacklist/>.

³² Incidentally, Dr. Bhatthacharya received the aforementioned award, *RCP*’s Samizdat Prize, previously referenced in Footnote 28, alongside Mr. Taibbi, a recipient for his work on the “The Twitter Files.” See: https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2024/03/29/carl_cannon_samizdat_prize_winners_taibbi_devine_and_bhatthacharya_stood_up_to_bullies.html.

³³ <https://www.state.gov/priorities-and-mission-of-the-second-trump-administrations-department-of-state/>.

³⁴ See: <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM09/20230511/115901/HHRG-118-HM09-Wstate-WeingartenB-20230511.pdf> and <https://docemetproductions.com/how-dhs-went-from-fighting-jihadists-to-targeting-your-tweets/>.

³⁵ https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/NSF-Staff-Report_Appendix.pdf.

³⁶ <https://foundationforfreedomonline.com/us-funded-censorship-hubs-drive-eus-war-on-tech-companies/>.

Meanwhile, the motives and means to control the digital public square – to monopolize narrative to monopolize power – remain.

At best, the anti-speech forces on our shores may be merely lying in wait and ready to re-emerge under a future administration.

Consequently, it is incumbent upon Congress to codify the Trump administration policy to which the State Department’s early statement in part may have been responsive. The president’s first-day executive order “Restoring Freedom of Speech and Ending Federal Censorship,” which deprives the Censorship-Industrial Complex of the government personnel and resources that have served as its lifeblood, must be made permanent in law, and, perhaps even bolstered through imposing severe personal legal liability on those who would break such law.³⁷

Congress should prohibit those engaged in domestic censorship activities direct or indirect – whether “risk-raters,” NGOs, or for-profits – from receiving government grants or contracts.

Congress should consider means to erect a strict firewall between the U.S. government and our body politic a la Smith-Mundt, for example to prevent the backdooring of efforts to target Americans’ First Amendment rights via federally funded programs or NGOs that shape foreign regulatory regimes.

As I recently stated before the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on the Constitution, if we allow euphemistic “whole-of-society” schemes like the Censorship-Industrial Complex to persist – whereby state and civil society fuse to legitimize their weaponization against Wrongthinkers – we will be on the road to a social credit system with American characteristics.

That would be a catastrophe for our republic.

Let us avoid that fate and instead restore America to greatness by returning to our first principles, including reverence for our First Amendment.

Thank you for the honor of appearing before you to contribute to your efforts to address these existential issues, and I look forward to taking your questions.

³⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/restoring-freedom-of-speech-and-ending-federal-censorship/>.

Mr. HUIZENGA. Thank you.

With that, we will return to questioning. I'm going to give myself 3 minutes and to—eaten up some of that time in a very—unfortunately, on my part.

So, again, my apologies to the panel for any confusion there.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. You were enthusiastic.

Mr. HUIZENGA. I was enthusiastic, yes, the ranking member reminds me. So I think it was your spirited opening that may have brought me along that path.

Well, with that, I'm going to take 3 minutes and, Mr. Taibbi, you had started to explain and did in your opening statement about the Election Integrity Partnership and I appreciate that.

Mr. Weingarten, you were talking about an advertising blacklist and that GDI and NewsGuard use these blacklists to censor American speech and I am curious—you know, those blacklists, how did they treat the right-leaning outlets versus the left-leaning outlets and were outlets punished for even attempting to provide ideological balancing?

I mean, you wrote Real Clear Politics was one of those that was on the list.

Mr. WEINGARTEN. I think the Real Clear Politics case study is instructive in that if you go to our website you see sources left and right and the whole purpose is let's provide a balanced diet of opinion and analysis and let the American people decide because we have faith in the American people that they have agency and they can decide for themselves.

And the fact of the matter is the RCP and then some on the right, libertarian, conservative and even anti-establishment leftist publications have found themselves dinged by these so called risk raters, and that risk, by the way, is that they may be—brands who advertise on these sites may be targeted for boycotts and attacks, generally by progressive groups.

So this whole sort of apparatus exists out of coercion, essentially, from the left and as a consequence ad revenue streams have died for many of these companies and it threatens their viability.

Mr. HUIZENGA. Yes. How would these blacklists treat a publication that had the audacity of suggesting that the COVID-19 virus may have originated from a lab leak, which actually turned out to be a legitimate and true theory?

I don't know about the rest of my colleagues or the panelists but I know people who were canceled over putting out such theories and even threatened with their job and their livelihood on that.

So talk to me a little bit about—very quickly about COVID-19.

Mr. WEINGARTEN. In Real Clear's reporting we saw that at least one source that put forth questions about all manner of issues from the origins of COVID to mitigation measures and beyond.

They get attacked because—they got attacked because they dissented from what was public health orthodoxy at the time, and as we know that public health orthodoxy, that consensus, has shifted.

But if you differed from consensus you were dinged and you had, essentially, no recourse or real due process to get off a blacklist for just presenting an opinion or a substantiated analysis.

Mr. HUIZENGA. I'm going to move quickly here and I know, Mr. Taibbi, you're not the only controversial person here.

Ms. Jankowicz, as we talked about some of her posts, some of this saying that the fairy tale about Hunter Biden's laptop is out there and the Chris Steele provides some great historical context about the evolution of disinformation.

So without objection, I'm going to put those into the record as well.

[Please refer to the Appendix for the above information:]

Mr. HUIZENG. I find it ironic that something called the American Sunlight Project is actually a dark money group that won't release its donors. Certainly, that doesn't bode well.

I'm going to—Mr. Taibbi, I'm going to give you the last moment here. Can you explain exactly how GEC colluded with social media companies specifically through the Election Integrity Partnership?

Mr. TAIBBI. Mr. Chairman, GEC's actual relationship to the Election Integrity Partnership was not clear. It was made plain in the EIP's own website.

Secretary of State Blinken mentioned that it was cooperating with the EIP when he visited Stanford. Also, there was a story that it was actually interns from the State Department who came up with the idea for the EIP. So but they were one of the two major government organizations that was working with EIP.

Mr. HUIZENG. My time has expired.

With that, I give—yield to the representative from California.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE.

[Audio malfunction.]

So a central claim of this hearing is that states GEC first set up under the Trump Administration and championed by then Senator Marco Rubio supported organizations that censored conservative speech and worked to discredit conservative outlets.

Ms. Jankowicz, to your knowledge has State Department funding ever gone toward suppressing domestic speech?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Thank you, Ranking Member.

You know, Mr. Taibbi said when he was first searching through the so-called Twitter Files he didn't know what he was looking at. Well, he still doesn't.

Everything looks like a conspiracy when you don't know how anything works and let me tell you there was no censorship going on at the Global Engagement Center or the State Department.

You may have heard Mr. Weingarten kind of make the inference that all of these lists GDI and NewsGuard are making you might have thought that they were funded by the State Department. They were not.

Do you know what the State Department was funding for those two organizations? Something I think the Republicans on this committee would be very interested in, tracking and countering Chinese State propaganda targeting Americans.

Now, I used to manage State Department grants early in my career. I know that that is a huge fiduciary responsibility.

You have to account for every single penny that you're spending on travel, on staff time, on supplies, and you have to do it multiple times a year.

So for folks to sit here and say that grants dedicated to countering CCP propaganda were somehow spent on conservative blacklists is just ridiculous.

And I'll also add that that is those organizations' speech to be able to do research and, you know, categorize new sites as they see fit.

A letter sent to the Senate last week shows that actually a lot of conservative organizations including the Heritage Foundation, the Wall Street Journal, Reason, Cato Institute, and the Washington Free Beacon all received great ratings by NewsGuard while the Daily Kos only got a 45 out of 100.

So this nonsense about bias is just, frankly, not true, and it also rings a little bit like a restaurateur who got a bad review in the Washington Post mad that nobody wants to eat there anymore.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. So you brought up China so let's stay there for a second. Can you give us a snapshot of the kinds of harmful information operations China and Russia wage against the United States?

Maybe how this administration is dismantling our ability to protect Americans from foreign propaganda and manipulation?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Absolutely, I'd love to, Ranking Member.

So the Chinese Communist Party continues to be extraordinarily active in the information space, using all manner of influence operations to target Americans including the famous Spammouflage campaign, which is fake social media profiles masquerading as Americans, exacerbating tensions, and there are certainly plenty of those to go around right now.

The fact that we're here in such a polarized, politicized setting I'm sure there's somebody in Beijing watching this hearing thinking about what they can tweet about it, right?

We have to think about that. We are doing our adversaries' work for them.

And with Russia, you know, I'd say something that we just discovered at the American Sunlight Project is that there's a large network—a growing network—of a content aggregation platform that is pushing out 3.6 million pieces of pro-Russia content a year.

I'm not talking about, you know, Russia is great. I'm talking about the massacre in Bucha, it did not happen—that sort of thing. Falsehoods, right?

They are doing that not to infect—you know, to get human readership. They're doing it to infect chat bots, ChatGPT, all of these chat bots that we're now using that we're being told are going to be the next great frontier in research, and that's being shown to people who are asking questions about Russia and Ukraine.

Our capacity to respond to these threats—the only office that was dedicated to looking at foreign State propaganda in the State Department now doesn't exist anymore, and R/FIMI, it's, you know, organization that came after it doesn't even have a website on the State Department.

So I'm not worried, Chairman. You said is this just GEC by a different name. I'm not worried about that because they're not even talking about what they're doing and our adversaries are absolutely taking notice. They think it's open season on the United States.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Another falsehood the majority witnesses have perpetuated is that Democratic government officials and lawmakers colluded with social media companies to suppress content they disagreed with.

Mr. Chair, I request unanimous consent to enter into the record a Rolling Stone article titled "Twitter kept entire data base of Republican requests to censor posts."

Mr. HUIZENG. Without objection.

[Please refer to the Appendix for the above information:]

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. This article describes how the Trump Administration and congressional Republicans routinely asked Twitter to take down posts they objected to.

In the minutes we have left, Ms. Jankowicz, what is the difference between content moderation and censorship?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. The difference between content moderation and censorship is that these platforms are private platforms. They have the right to enforce their terms of service how they see fit and Mr. Taibbi himself, you know, cited an email from Yoel Roth in which he was throwing shade on the GEC's analysis. Sounds like he wasn't listening to them to me.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I yield back.

Mr. HUIZENG. The gentlelady yields back.

The representative from Pennsylvania is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Jankowicz, since you brought it up, have you read the Venona intercepts?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Again, sir?

Mr. PERRY. Venona—are you familiar?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. I'm not, sir.

Mr. PERRY. You brought up McCarthy and I'd just encourage you to go ahead and read through that. You might—as many people disagree with his methods but you can't disagree with the facts that the people that he listed turned out to all be subversive communists working in our government.

With that, I'll turn to Mr. Weingarten. Your statement notes that GEC's \$100 million in grants since 2016 funded 400-plus projects including NewsGuard and GDI, which blacklisted 2,000 U.S. outlets, costing \$128 million in ad revenue by 2022.

Do you have any other concrete—well, before we get into the other concrete examples because we have got a difference of opinion on both sides of the dais here, you said 2,000 U.S. outlets.

Are those U.S. outlets Chinese? Maybe they are so I'm just asking. Are they owned by the Communist Party of China, Iran, Russia? Or are they U.S. information purveyors?

Mr. WEINGARTEN. As a factual matter, to my knowledge none of those are foreign-owned publications and certainly not by our adversaries.

Mr. PERRY. So this is 2,000 U.S. outlets, \$100 million in grants. Where do you suspect that grant money came from?

Mr. WEINGARTEN. Well, the grant money came from taxpayers.

Mr. PERRY. Oh, my goodness, really? Taxpayers. Taxpayers paying \$100 million to blacklist 2,000 U.S. outlets.

Is that fiction? I've heard it's fiction. Is it fiction or not fiction?

Mr. WEINGARTEN. It's not fiction and let me be clear. The 2,000 is the total list. I'm not sure if it's all U.S. but certainly a substantial percentage of them.

Mr. PERRY. Okay. Is that a conspiracy theory?

Mr. WEINGARTEN. No, sir.

Mr. PERRY. I didn't think so.

Can you give us any concrete examples? Because \$100 million in grants, 2,000 U.S. outlets, costing \$128 million by your account in ad revenue.

Can you give us any concrete examples how the GEC funding directly hit American outlets' speech or revenue other than the ones you already have?

Mr. WEINGARTEN. Well, the lawsuit against the State Department from the Federalist and Daily Wire indicates their businesses were—the viability was dramatically damaged after GDI and NewsGuard ended up targeting them, and it's obvious why. Because if all of the advertisers say, don't put your ads on our websites, it saps a revenue stream.

Let's also note, by the way, that beyond NewsGuard and GDI there was funding for dozens of other organizations that were involved in things like mis-, dis-, and malinformation detection and such and all of this was fueling an ecosystem that existed ultimately to clamp down on speech whether from individuals or outlets and that's U.S. tax dollars ultimately funding the silencing of ourselves and that's un-American.

Mr. PERRY. Yes. U.S. tax dollars through grant programs to create a censorship empire on American citizens under the guise of this Global Engagement Center, which was meant to—look, I agree with Ms. Jankowicz. We want to be dealing with China, Russia, Iran, foreign adversaries. But that's not what this was.

Mr. Taibbi, your Twitter Files analyzed 3.8 billion U.S. tweets and the metrics exposed GEC's ties to the Election Integrity Project which flagged 22 million election posts in 2020.

Can you highlight the information you found that exposes GEC's efforts to push platforms to censor Americans and how many accounts were affected?

Mr. TAIBBI. Certainly.

First, I'd like to respond to something that Ms. Jankowicz said.

Mr. PERRY. Feel free.

Mr. TAIBBI. She mentioned that Yoel Roth, who is the head of trust and safety at Twitter, threw some shade at GEC and, indeed, that was actually a chief narrative that we were—we found in the Twitter Files, which was that Twitter's chief content moderation officers had too many government officials trying to call them on the phone and they did not want to add another group, particularly one that they felt was incompetent and didn't understand what they were doing, to the trust tree.

Ultimately, however, after a year of very fevered interactions within the company they were forced to allow GEC into their weekly or monthly discussions with the government, what they called the industry meetings, and there was an email that we found in the Twitter Files from a former CIA officer who went to work at Twitter who was explaining that there was once a time when Twit-

ter would have been able to say no to that kind of request but our window on that is closing.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, sir. My time has expired. I yield.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentleman's time has expired.

With that, the representative from California is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I've been in Congress for a while now so I was in Congress during the time that the Global Engagement Center was formed, and part of the rationale for forming it—and you mentioned it in your opening statement, Mr. Taibbi—to counter the messaging and diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations including ISIL, al-Qaida, and other violent extremists—and the reason it was created was we saw how effective ISIL or ISIS was at recruiting folks using their messaging, using the internet, the threat that it was to our homeland in terms of creating homegrown threats as well and we saw some domestic terror attacks.

So just a yes or no question. Outside of, you know, what it may or may not have morphed into we still need a tool like that that would—would you agree with that, Mr. Weingarten, to counter that messaging?

Mr. WEINGARTEN. I believe we should use every means to counter our adversaries lawfully.

Mr. BERA. And that would include China and Russia.

Same thing, Mr. Taibbi, that we do need an effective tool to counter messaging, recruitment, terrorism, domestic terrorism. Whether that's the GEC or not we do need to be able to counter misinformation and disinformation.

Mr. TAIBBI. I don't think that's a yes or no answer, Mr. Congressman.

For instance, we talk about counterterrorism with Anwar al-Awlaki—was it appropriate for the United States to assassinate a foreign citizen without due process, even, you know, an American citizen.

In this case, what became the GEC started off as a counter terrorism program but it was—as it was explained to me—excuse me, sir—by a former GEC employee—

[Crosstalk.]

Mr. TAIBBI.—switch from the CT to CP—counter terrorism to counter populism.

[Crosstalk.]

Mr. BERA. Ms. Jankowicz?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Absolutely. This should be a bipartisan issue and it's crazy that you even have to ask the question, Congressman.

Mr. BERA. Right. Ms. Jankowicz, is this threat going to get worse with the evolution of AI?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Oh, absolutely. We are seeing this threat get worse with the evolution of AI already, not just the poisoning or grooming of LLM chatbots like I've already mentioned but there's evidence from OpenAI and their threat team that China is using AI models in order to more effectively translate Chinese propaganda from Chinese into English and other languages as well.

Mr. BERA. So this shouldn't be a partisan issue. I mean, when we get sworn into Congress our most important duty is to protect our homeland, protect against domestic risk, and with the advent of internet and social media, now AI, information and misinformation, you know, radicalization, self-radicalization, those are going to be hugely important issues and how we do that within protecting First Amendment rights is not going to be very easy.

And, again, I would urge Democrats and Republicans in a non-partisan way to protect our homeland, to try to figure this out—inviting in the private sector as well, inviting in those social media companies, to try to get this right.

I don't disagree that we saw a lot of politicization around COVID. I'm a doctor and, you know, I'm agnostic on COVID origins. I can make the case that it was a lab leak. I can make the case that it was—and that's legitimate debate and we shouldn't censor any of that debate.

We should have that debate. Obviously, it was a novel virus. We're still fighting those fights and I think it's counterproductive for us as a nation and us as an institution in Congress. I think we do have to put that aside because these threats are very real and I do worry about what's going to happen with that.

Ms. Jankowicz, in the final minute I have what would your recommendation be taking politics out of this and how we would structure something?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. You know, it's really interesting, Congressman, because a lot of the functionalities that you've just described—coordination within the government, you know, following these threats, making sure that we're abreast of them, coordinating with industry—that was the job that I was brought in to do at the Disinformation Governance Board in DHS despite it being widely lied about.

So I think we do need some sort of coordinating function, and if Congress is concerned about the way that, you know, social media companies are moderating and implementing their policies the solution is not to bandy about conspiracy theories.

It's to pass some oversight and transparency regulation, which I think we have been a little bit late on here in the United States. I would love to see that happen.

Mr. BERA. Great. So I would hope, you know, if we are going to do a State Department authorization bill that we as Democrats and Republicans on this subcommittee would actually take a thoughtful approach and invite folks in.

Maybe if we get it done under a Republican administration we can take some of the politics out of it.

Let's do our job. This is about protecting our country. This is about protecting our influence around the world and fighting against our adversaries.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'll yield back.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentleman yields back.

The representative from Texas Mr. Self is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You really have to admire the opposition here, diverting our attention from the issue at hand to the current days because we are

trying to do oversight on the Biden Administration that did do the work of our adversaries for 4 years. It ruined our credibility around the world.

So given your recent testimony, Ms. Jankowicz, so should—and you were in the government so——

Ms. JANKOWICZ. For 11 weeks.

Mr. SELF. So should the government have a part in enforcing free speech—law enforcement? Should the government have some role in it?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Congressman, I believe the First Amendment is sacrosanct. I am the granddaughter of a man that was in a gulag—deported to a gulag by the Soviet Union. So I am pretty intimate with these things and they're a part of my bread and butter.

I don't think that we should be arresting people for exercising their speech and I think that's something that you all should be exercising your oversight over.

Mr. SELF. So on April the 16th, 2022, you said, "We need platforms to do more and we, frankly, need law enforcement and our legislatures to do more as well."

So if we move past that to the right of the state—the mission of the state—to form public opinion where would you stand on that, given your role in what you've been involved in?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Thank you, Congressman. I believe that quote, judging by the timeframe, was about responses to online harms which I'm happy to talk about here today, not the subject at the hearing.

But a lot of people for expressing their First Amendment protected speech online deal with threats. I've dealt with them myself. My family and I were doxxed. We were threatened.

Mr. SELF. Okay. I get your——

Ms. JANKOWICZ. I was advised to leave my home. And you know what? That's why I was talking about law enforcement, Congressman.

Mr. SELF. I get your point, but that—and that is a quote from you.

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Yes, talking about online harms and threats against people online for exercising their speech.

Mr. SELF. All right. Now, my next question is—would you answer my next question because I have limited time.

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Sure.

Mr. SELF. Please answer my next question.

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Your next question is?

Mr. SELF. The one that I've already given you. You haven't addressed it yet.

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Please repeat it, sir.

Mr. SELF. What is the mission of the state—the right of the State to form public opinion? Because we're talking about our government has been involved in doing that for the last few years.

Ms. JANKOWICZ. In my opinion, the government has a First Amendment right to free speech as well and SCOTUS has just affirmed that with a case last June.

We just heard a case that came in Federal court in New York that actually showed that NewsGuard was not acting as an envoy of the State as well.

Mr. SELF. So what is the role of the government?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. The role of the government can express its free speech, right, and citizens have a right to their free speech as well. I'm not—I don't really understand your question, sir. I'm not sure the point.

Mr. SELF. I'm asking you what is the role of government in public opinion? Because we're talking about actions here that have tried to form public opinion on the Hunter laptop, on the Russia disinformation, all of that. I'm asking you what is the role of government in that matter?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Absolutely, Congressman.

So the government is allowed to express its own opinions, its viewpoints, as we're seeing this administration do, as we saw the previous administration do.

Mr. SELF. But when it is absolutely wrong what is their role when it is absolutely wrong? The Hunter laptop is probably the best example we could roll out here.

Ms. JANKOWICZ. I actually disagree with that because when Twitter decided to add friction to the Hunter Biden laptop case it actually got more views.

You've also heard Mr. Taibbi talk about, you know, 22 million tweets, millions of things censored through the GEC to the Election Integrity Partnership. You know how many emails went between the GEC and the EIP? Fifteen.

You can look it up in Chairman Jordan's documents that he released at the end of last year. Fifteen emails. I've sent more text messages to my husband about our toddler's potty training in the last week than emails went from the GEC to the EIP and those were all about overt Russian propaganda—RT and Sputnik—except for one when the GEC analyst said to the folks there, I can't comment on this one because I'm a government employee but I think you should check it out. That's all that happened, sir.

Mr. SELF. So I'm going to leave you—and I'll yield back a little bit of my time—a direct quote from Joseph Goebbels: "It is the absolute right of the State to supervise the formation of public opinion" and I think that may be what we're discussing here.

And yield back.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentleman yields back.

With that, the representative from Texas Ms. Johnson is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. JOHNSON. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

I want to respond to what my colleague from Texas just said. When you're quoting Joseph Goebbels about state—the role of State in the public debate we have a big problem. Isn't that right, Ms. Jankowicz?

That's alarming as hell to me when that becomes the gold standard of Hitler and all that was going on in Russia—I mean, in German atrocities during World War II when that becomes the quote of this hearing.

I also want to respond to another comment where he said that Biden ruined our credibility around the world. I would argue that Mr. Trump is doing that right now—canceling USAID contracts, breaching our promises and our agreements to our friends and allies across the world, and making our country less safe.

That is why we find us in this role. You know, I'm really disappointed that we're devoting this first hearing to a conspiracy theory that the State Department out of some larger sinister motive routinely censors free speech. Today's Republican hot topic roulette has us talking about an agency that the Republicans let this Congress expire.

It's my understanding that the GEC's mandate is to address foreign propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation.

Ms. JANKOWICZ, I would think that that would be a fundamental priority for the United States, that we should not want our adversaries putting misinformation into our public discord in order to adversely affect elections and other things. Would you agree?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. I would absolutely agree and, you know, I'll note also that the GEC was created through a bipartisan bill—the Portman-Murphy counter disinformation bill—and many of the actions that have been referenced so far in this hearing took place under the Trump Administration under a Trump appointee, Lea Gabrielle who was an intelligence analyst, a fighter pilot, and a former Fox News host as well.

Ms. JOHNSON. Right. Exactly.

You know, I think that this whole notion that we want to try to regulate the speech of people in our country and online social media companies—did I understand your testimony correctly that you do believe that private businesses have a right to regulate the content on their platform?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Absolutely. We sign up to terms of service when we share our cat pictures or our kid pictures or whatever it is that my co-witnesses share online.

We sign up to those terms of service and sometimes those terms of service say things like, you can't share terrorist content, you can't share child sexual abuse material, and if we decide it you can't share what we deem disinformation also and we being the social media platforms there.

Ms. JOHNSON. Right, and they have a right to do that. But what's genesis this problem is is that so many on the far right just make shit up in the electoral context, put stuff out there, and then the social media platform said, you know, we're not going to tolerate just blatant lies, blatant falsehoods on our platforms.

There has to be some basis of reality, and now the Republicans are pushing back because they got their hand in the cookie jar on that, right?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Well, the scientific research from universities like New York, Indiana University, and Yale all points to the fact that Republicans share more content that is more likely to be moderated.

It's not that they're being censored. They're breaking the rules that they can read if they read the fine print.

Ms. JOHNSON. Right. Thank you so much for your testimony today. I yield back.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentlelady yields back.

And the chair will remind people to direct their comments, especially curse words, at the chair rather than at our witnesses.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Mr. Chair?

Mr. HUIZENGA. Yes.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Given the fact that we just heard a quote from Joseph Goebbels, chief propagandist for the Nazi Party, I request unanimous consent to enter into the record my letter urging Secretary Rubio to fire Darren Beattie for his dangerous anti-American, pro-CCP, white nationalist ideology.

Mr. HUIZENGA. Without objection.

[Please refer to the Appendix for this information:]

Mr. HUIZENGA. I will note that I believe Mr. Self's comment and quote was his assertion that this government has been doing that and following—or the last administration so not as a admiration but as a rebuke.

So with that, the Congressman from Indiana Mr. Shreve is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SHREVE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to the witnesses for this very interesting hearing.

This is my first subcommittee hearing on free speech, not my fifth, and I don't come to the table having this all figured out and part of these hearings is an opportunity to listen, learn, to ask questions and I appreciate this opportunity.

We agree broadly, both sides of the aisle, that the First Amendment is a cornerstone of our democracy, that censorship runs contrary to the First, that when it's wielded by private individual groups it's inappropriate.

When a government entity is tasked with upholding the Constitution and may, in some fashion, weaponize censorship it's a problem.

The GEC played a role in facilitating censorship and protected speech by Americans prior to its authority sunseting at the end of this past year. An example under investigations is the GEC's involvement in suppressing dissenting voices in the lead up to the 2020 election. We have established that.

Mr. Taibbi noted that it was established under an EO by Mr. Obama. Its mission was to counter the messaging and reduce influence of international terrorist organizations. Its scope expanded countering foreign State and nonState propaganda and disinformation efforts leading up to the 2020 election.

Some within the GEC exploited its mission to target our American citizens rather than foreign threats. These efforts were part of the GEC's collaboration with the Election Integrity Project, a consortium of academic—you named a few—and think tanks formed shortly prior to that election.

The EIP's stated goal was to monitor and correct election-related misinformation and disinformation originating from the United States.

Leading up to that election the EIP would contact social media companies identifying specific posts that they—some within the organization believed spread election misinformation. These posts were then removed from those platforms.

And after the 2020 election EIP officials acknowledged that the GEC had reported such cases to them and was one of the most frequently tagged organizations in the EIP's system—their software system.

The GEC's mission creep from countering international terrorist organizations to censoring the voices of our citizens before a Presidential election is a problem.

My question for Mr. Taibbi—as part of your Twitter Files investigation you uncovered that the GEC had provided over 5,000 account names to Twitter stating that they were Chinese accounts engaged in state-backed coordinated manipulation.

How long did it take you to find out that this was not the case?

Mr. TAIBBI. Thank you, Mr. Congressman.

We rather quickly found that there was a heated discussion within Twitter about the so-called China list. First of all, what GEC did was actually par for the course.

They didn't contact Twitter first when they made up that list. They went straight to the media, which is why you will find numerous stories about an enormous quantity of Chinese misinformation agents that came out in March—roughly, late February and March 2020.

When Twitter did an analysis of those names they quickly discovered that a lot of them were not, in fact, Chinese misinformation agents. There were even three employees of CNN, if I remember correctly, that were on the list and there was a heated back and forth between GEC and Twitter about that issue.

In fact, that was one of the reasons why the trust and safety department did not want to allow GEC to participate in its regular industry meetings with other platforms. So that was a big issue.

Mr. SHREVE. Mr. Chairman, I yield my last 15 seconds.

Mr. HUIZENG. The gentleman yields back.

With that, the gentleman from Maryland Mr. Mfume is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, to you and the ranking member. I want to also thank and welcome our witnesses for appearing here today.

Mr. Chairman, I have to admit that I'm quite disappointed that we're using the first hearing of this subcommittee to talk about conspiracy theories alleging that the U.S. Government was targeting conservative media outlets and their free speech.

In fact, I find the hearing particularly ironic given the distinct lack of interest in the First Amendment displayed by the current administration in much more serious ways.

My colleagues on the other side of the aisle I don't think are in a real position to allege free speech violations when the leader of their party has decided unilaterally to revoke the privileges of the Associated Press from the White House briefing room and that's simply because that outlet did not cite Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. That is sort of hypocritical to say the least.

Far worse than that, the mass deportation of foreign students that have expressed their First Amendment freedom of speech find themselves also in that unfortunate position. You don't even have to be a student or a foreign national or someone visiting.

You can just be in the wrong party at the wrong time in the wrong place and you somehow or another are deemed to be anti-American.

So I have real concerns about the allegations raised in this hearing because they lack any real basis. So let's start with some of the facts which are always tricky little things.

First of all, first and false allegations against the State Department's effort to fight misinformation and disinformation really has a real impact on our national security and our ability to counteract malign influence disrupt campaigns from our adversaries.

We really don't have the time, quite frankly, to entertain conspiracy theorists who oftentimes are domestic adversaries when we should, I think, be focused more on combating the real threat to our foreign adversaries and the threats that they pose every day.

Ms. Jankowicz, could you take a couple of minutes and give us a brief listing of the misinformation campaigns that have been carried out by foreign countries against Americans in the past few years?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Absolutely, Congressman. I'd be happy to.

So at the American Sunlight Project we have identified a couple campaigns, which I've talked about earlier. The one that is targeting chatbots I've already mentioned.

We also identified what we call the sleeper agent network. This is a network of over 1,100 accounts on X, some of which have existed for over a decade to 15 years. They are automated accounts.

They are AI enabled so masquerading as citizens, often with AI-generated profile pictures, and these accounts repeatedly retweet overt Russian propaganda within 60 seconds of it being posted.

They have generated over 100 million tweets over their lifetime and the only reason we have access to this data is because we used a data set that was available to the public before Elon Musk turned off our ability to research Twitter without paying him \$40,000 a month.

Mr. MFUME. And why would he do that?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Yes. I think Mr. Musk doesn't like having scrutiny of his platform. You know, he had an avowed interest in getting rid of bots on the platform. We found some that had existed for over a decade and were clearly overt propaganda. When this story ran in Agence France-Presse—AFP—Mr. Musk did not take those bots down.

That's just one example. We've also looked at a network that is targeting left-leaning environmental groups at a mass scale.

Of course, there are lots of instances of Chinese and Iranian propaganda as well. Iran very famously hacked the Trump campaign ahead of the election last year.

So this is a continuous threat that we need to be coordinating at all cylinders at once on, because our adversaries are certainly doing it.

Mr. MFUME. This is more of a threat than the Associated Press, I take it. Is that correct to assume?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. I would say so, Congressman.

Mr. MFUME. And would it be more of a threat than a student that happens to be at a university that has a position that the President does not like?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Certainly more of a threat than a student publishing an op-ed in a campus newspaper, yes.

Mr. MFUME. Yes. So when I talked about hypocrisy I don't mind having a debate. We can debate any time, any day, anywhere. But in that debate we've got to be equal. We've got to have some semblance of fairness.

In other words, if it's good for the goose it ought to be still good for the gander. But we've gotten into this slot—this slice of a slot—where we just point, point, point and hurl accusations.

So I hope that as we move forward the committee will spend a great deal more time focusing on the real issues and give us an opportunity to deal with those things in South and Central Asia and in that region that are just as much of a threat.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentleman's time has expired.

The gentleman from New Jersey Mr. Kean is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Weingarten and Mr. Taibbi, what is the clearest evidence that each of you can cite to show that the censorship-industrial complex was an attack on the First Amendment by the Biden Administration?

Mr. WEINGARTEN. The discovery in *Missouri v. Biden*, which has been dismissed here, both at the district court level, Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals level, and among three Supreme Court justices, showed massive pressure from the Federal Government for social media companies to censor American speech, whether it's the Hunter Biden laptop story, COVID-19, election integrity matters, or beyond.

A district court judge said this was arguably the most massive attack on free speech in U.S. history. Again, Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals had that same view.

Three Supreme Court justices did as well, and while it's been dismissed—that case—the fact of the matter is that the Supreme Court specifically did not rule on the underlying merits, the thousands of pages of discovery which blew the lid open on this entire regime.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. Mr. Taibbi?

Mr. TAIBBI. Thank you, Mr. Congressman.

I would do two quickly. There's another case after *Murphy* in Missouri involving former New York Times reporter Alex Berenson—*Berenson v. Biden*—who was removed from Twitter after repeated pressure from White House officials for a tweet that was true.

He said that the COVID vaccine does not stop infection or transmission and for that tweet he was summarily removed from the platform after pressure from White House officials.

The other one was an instance in which a friend of mine, Aaron Mate, who is no Republican, the Ukrainian secret services passed on a request to the FBI to have him removed from Twitter and the FBI did it. They passed that request on to Twitter and we found that ask in Twitter's files.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you.

Mr. Taibbi and Mr. Weingarten, can you please explain how the Global Engagement Center and the Federal Government as a whole used coercive power to censor Americans?

Mr. TAIBBI. Well, Mr. Congressman, first of all, I would say that the Global Engagement Center and this entire effort is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the American system and the First Amendment.

The American government has no role in protecting citizens from speech. The whole idea of the system that was designed by Jefferson and Madison is that the American people view each other as adults who are capable of sorting out the truth for themselves.

They do not need a nanny State or a guardian or a law enforcement agency to decide for them what's true. We don't need a truth squad and that's exactly what GEC was designed for.

It was designed to suppress any information that countered national policy and to identify people who may have had opinions that were controversial or unwanted as foreign inspired when in fact they had no connection whatsoever to foreign governments, which is both slanderous and detrimental to the First Amendment.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. Mr. Weingarten?

Mr. WEINGARTEN. I would simply say that when the government comes to you, pressures you directly using the bully pulpit, the government has its awesome resources, obviously, in terms of its funding streams, its regulatory powers—when it comes to the social media companies specifically, Section 230, antitrust enforcement, et cetera—when the government comes to you and says, please take down this American speech—we'd really like you to do so—or in the case of some of the Biden Administration actually browbeats people, curses them out, and a president goes on camera and says, your social media platform is killing people, the government does so with the most awesome power possible.

Government, at the end of the day, ultimately is force and that force should not be turned on Americans and our speech.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you to all of our witnesses. I yield back my time.

Mr. HUIZENGA. Will the gentleman yield?

Mr. KEAN. Yes. I yield back my time.

Mr. HUIZENGA. As vice chair of the Financial Services Committee, I can tell you, Mr. Weingarten, you are hitting on the exact thing that regulators do repeatedly.

You can go and do whatever you want but here's what we would like you to see you do, and it's that threat—it's that cudgel that they have that's over those that they are making the, quote, request to that compels them to follow the government request.

So with that, I yield back to the gentleman from New Jersey—

Mr. KEAN. I yield back.

Mr. HUIZENGA.—and the time has expired.

With that, Representative Jayapal is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. JAYAPAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is the height of hypocrisy for Republicans to hold a hearing on the so-called censorship-industrial complex and the need to quote First Amendment—need for, quote, First Amendment safeguards at the State Department, when President Trump and Elon Musk are launching the largest attack on free speech in America in decades.

Let's be clear. The administration is right now stripping people of the constitutional protection to free speech, to the right to dissent, to express their views if they're counter to Trump and Musk, to use cold war era statutes and ignore judicial rulings, all to suit their purpose of squashing fundamental American freedoms, and they have said they are bending institutions to their will.

The Trump Administration is using that awesome power of government that was just spoken about—of the Federal Government to intimidate and neuter any opposition from the legal establishment, academia, prominent cultural institutions, the media, the judiciary.

Essentially, they want to strip your American freedoms for their right to have absolute power. Instead of focusing on the fabricated censorship of conservatives let's talk about real threats to free speech.

This month, Secretary Rubio launched, quote, Catch and Revoke, a horrifying program fueled by AI to monitor student visa holders' social media accounts for pro-Palestinian views and mark them for deportation, saying, quote, Every time I find one of these lunatics I take away their visas.

Like many Americans I have watched in horror as students with legal status—legal permanent residents—have been detained for exercising their right to free speech like Mahmoud Khalil who was snatched from his home in front of his pregnant U.S. citizen wife.

This is the playbook of authoritarians and dictators, and no matter how you feel about this issue we should all be horrified by this violation of free speech protections.

Ms. Jankowicz, to clarify for my Republican colleagues—just a yes or no is fine—is it true that the Constitution guarantees lawful permanent residents the right to free speech?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Yes, ma'am, it's true.

Ms. JAYAPAL. And is it true that engaging in peaceful protests is protected by the First Amendment?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. That's right, Congresswoman.

Ms. JAYAPAL. The Trump Administration is relying on cold war era language in the Immigration Nationality Act to strip students of green cards by claiming that their speech has somehow had ambiguous, quote, foreign policy consequences for the United States.

This law has been on the books since 1952 and to my knowledge it has never been used in this way. Since then we've seen students exercise their right to protest against the Vietnam War, for the civil rights movement, against apartheid.

Ms. Jankowicz, is there anything that makes this moment substantively different than other protests that we've seen on campuses when the authority has not been used?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. No, ma'am, it does not and in fact there's Supreme Court precedent that extends First Amendment rights to legal residents of the United States that I think was passed in—or decided in 1953.

Ms. JAYAPAL. In addition to weaponizing the immigration system to silence protected free speech reports indicate that the Trump Administration is planning to block colleges from accepting any foreign students if the school is deemed too, quote, pro-Hamas simply

for allowing legal protest and freedom of expression on their grounds.

As an expert that you are on authoritarian regimes how do these attacks on higher education mirror the repression that you have observed by authoritarian dictators and why should all Americans be concerned about this?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Thank you for the question, Congresswoman.

This is exactly the sort of thing that I've observed when I was studying in Russia—I'm now banned from going to Russia—when you look at the Hungarian regime, an authoritarian regime which has also cracked down on dissent. It's closed universities.

Belarus also closed a university that was, you know, somewhere where dissidents and civil society figures studied.

The right to free speech is the right to free speech no matter if people are expressing opinions you don't like or not. That right extends to legal residents and I certainly hope it extends to the folks we are inviting here, Fulbright students and others, to come study in our country, to understand our values.

How can we project those values if we're turning them on their heads and arresting people for using them themselves?

Ms. JAYAPAL. What happens when a president—an executive—uses his or her authority to literally destroy all of the institutions that are supposed to be checks and balances on total power? What effect does that have on U.S. citizens who may not be legal permanent residents?

They're, obviously, not legal permanent residents. They're not visa holders. What effect does that have on the regular American that's out there listening?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Congresswoman, I think there's a chilling effect. I myself have spoken with people—students, people of color, women—who are now afraid to speak up and voice their opinions online and off because of what's happening on campuses today.

Ms. JAYAPAL. This is a slippery slope and we all should be calling it out.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentlelady's time has expired.

With that, the gentleman from Washington Mr. Baumgartner is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to all assembled for this important hearing.

You know, I think if the core interest here is trust with the American people there are real issues with terrorists using propaganda and social media to spread their nefarious aims.

But what we've seen happen in the last—particularly in the last 4 years has very much eroded the trust of the American people with the use of big government to censor dissent and truth here in the United States.

So to start, Ms. Jankowicz, the organization the American Sunlight Project claims to have a commitment to transparency that apparently does not extend to disclosing its donors.

Has the American Sunlight Project received funding either directly or indirectly from George Soros or his foundations including the Open Society Foundation?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Thank you, Congressman.

You know, I've received a lot of threats for speaking out and so I've decided that we are going to abide by the rules that other 501(c)(4)'s in our country abide by and we are not required to disclose our donors small or large because I, frankly, don't want them to be threatened the way that I have been.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. So sunlight for other people but not for your donors?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. If you're interested in more sunlight I welcome you to introduce some legislation to overturn Citizens United, sir.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. So, you know, this year and the past year the American people knew there was something wrong with President Biden in the White House. They could see it before their very eyes.

When White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that videos of President Biden looking lost or being disoriented and senile were disinformation and cheapfakes should the government flag those videos for social media companies or have those videos taken down?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Congressman, I actually don't believe that the government should flag those videos or have those videos taken down. Thanks for the ability to correct the record on this idea that I'm some sort of, you know, disinformation czar, as the chair referred to me as.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. Should taxpayer-funded organizations have flagged those videos for social medias to take them down?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Taxpayer-funded organizations have a right to free speech. If they want to talk about their research and flag those videos that's in their right to free speech, sir.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. But you do acknowledge that there was a loss of trust of the American people when you have the White House press secretary calling them cheapfakes and the American people could see with their very eyes that President Biden was disoriented?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Sir, I think in those cases there were nefarious editing techniques being used to make the effect seem worse than it actually was and actually, you know, I've talked to a lot of American citizens who are really disturbed about the propaganda coming out of the White House today.

I think we should focus on that in this hearing. It should be a bipartisan interest.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. But do you acknowledge that there was a change in tone after President Biden's disastrous debate performance, almost as if there was an organized campaign?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Congressman, I'm interested in the threats facing our country today, not what happened last—what was it even, September, June? I can't remember.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. But, again, this gets to the very root interest here, which is you have U.S. Government officials in a coordinated fashion working with the media to accelerate a narrative to the benefit of one political party and it destroys trust in the American people to have folks be able to fight terrorism.

That's—if we don't have trust and transparency and understanding of this core issue then how can we get after the terrorists?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Well, I would agree with that, sir, and I think that if you're interested in trust and transparency, again, it is the

duty of Congress to pass regulations of the social media platforms that would enable that.

I would love to have my hands on some more data from the social media platforms so we can talk about the facts of what's going on instead of the cherry picked emails that Mr. Taibbi and Mr. Weingarten have been, you know, referencing throughout this hearing.

Also, I think it's a great time to bring up the Supreme Court case that was referenced earlier. I think Mr. Weingarten said that the justices didn't rule on the facts. Actually, Amy Coney Barrett wrote, "The plaintiff cannot rest on mere allegations but must instead point to factual evidence." The plaintiffs didn't find factual evidence of government coercion or censorship in the *Murphy v. Missouri* case, sir.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. Do you believe the 51 former intelligence officials who said that the—Hunter Biden's laptop were a product of Russian disinformation?

Do you think they impacted the trust of the American people in the intelligence establishment to successfully use social media to go after terrorists?

Ms. JANKOWICZ. Sir, does free speech only apply when you like what's being said? Those guys were exercising their right to free speech and actually what they said was that it bore the hallmarks of a disinformation campaign which, based on the evidence at the time, was true.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. I'd just like to give you one more opportunity to disclose the donors that fund you.

Ms. JANKOWICZ. I'd like to give you another opportunity to overturn *Citizens United*, sir. Thank you.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. HUIZENGA. The gentleman yields back.

With that, I would like to thank the witnesses for their testimony today and the members for their questions.

Members of the subcommittee may have some additional questions for the witnesses and we ask that you respond to those in writing in a timely manner.

Pursuant to committee rules, all members may have 5 days to submit questions, extraneous materials, and statements for the record, subject to the length of limitations.

Without objection the committee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:34 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD



Chairman Brian Mast

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE**
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on South and Central Asia
Bill Huizenga (R-MI), Chairman

March 29, 2025

Revised

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held by the Subcommittee on South and Central Asia at 10:00 a.m. in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Tuesday, April 1, 2025

TIME: 10:00 a.m.

LOCATION: 2172 RHOB

SUBJECT: Censorship-Industrial Complex: The Need for First Amendment Safeguards at the State Department

WITNESSES: Mr. Matt Taibbi
Twitter Files journalist
Author, Founder
Racket News

Mr. Benjamin Weingarten
Investigative Journalist & Columnist

***** **Ms. Nina Jankowicz**
Chief Executive Officer
American Sunlight Project

*NOTE: Witnesses added/changed.

**NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202 -226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINUTES OF SCA SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

Day Tuesday Date April 1, 2025 Room 2172 RHOB

Starting Time 10:08 Ending Time 11:34

Recesses ☐ (to) (to) (to) (to) (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Huizenga

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

Censorship-Industrial Complex: The Need for First Amendment Safeguards at the State Department

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Attached

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

N/A

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

Attached

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 11:34

Meg Wagner
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

Meeting on: Censorship-Industrial Complex: The Need for First Amendment Safeguards at the State Department
Date: April 1, 2025

[illegible]

Exhibit: Tweet referring to the Hunter Biden laptop incident as a “fairy tale”



Nina Jankowicz



@wiczipedia

Follow



Replying to [@ParkerMolloy](#)

Not to mention that the emails don't need to be altered to be part of an influence campaign. Voters deserve that context, not a fairy tale about a laptop repair shop.

5:39 AM - 22 Oct 2020

19 Retweets 79 Likes



143



19



79

Source: [Wayback Machine](#)

Exhibit: Tweet about Chris Steele of the Steel Dossier providing “great historical context”
about disinformation

**Nina Jankowicz** 
@wiczipedia

[Follow](#) 

Listened to this last night- Chris Steele (yes THAT Chris Steele) provides some great historical context about the evolution of disinfo. Worth a listen

**infotagion**  @infotagion
EXCLUSIVE: Ex-MI6 Russia desk head Chris Steele tells @DamianCollins, @CharlesKriel & @LukeHarding1968 why the UK needs to close political donation loopholes to prevent Russian interference.   #RussiaReport

4:06 AM - 7 Aug 2020

17 Retweets 25 Likes



 57  17  25

Source: [Wayback Machine](#)

Exhibit: Tweet claiming that the Steel Dossier “began as a Republican opposition research project”



peterlavigna @Jhensy2001 · Apr 22, 2020

You are aware the ‘dossier’ turned out to be a Hillary/DNC paid-for project, something they tried to keep secret from you until October 2017 when their role was exposed, almost one year after the election. Why did they want their role kept secret?



1



1



Nina Jankowicz
@wiczipedia

And you’re probably aware that it began as a Republican opposition research project, too. The report covers explains that the inclusion of the Steele dossier didn’t influence the conclusions of the ICA. Have a nice day.

11:55 AM · Apr 22, 2020

2 Quotes 2 Likes 1 Bookmark

Source: [Wayback Machine](#)

Exhibit: Tweet comparing the words of President Trump to authoritarian leaders



Nina Jankowicz   
@wiczipedia

Follow



“I am dispatching thousands of thousands of heavily armed soldiers” - a sentence I expect to hear from leaders of authoritarian countries, not the President of the United States, in reference to my own city

3:50 PM - 1 Jun 2020

83 Retweets 298 Likes



8



83

298

Source: [Wayback Machine](#)

Exhibit: Tweet referring to First Amendment advocates as “zealots”



Source: [Wayback Machine](#)

Exhibit: Tweet showcasing Mrs. Jankowicz's partisan political beliefs



Nina Jankowicz

@wiczipedia



Follow



Even better if we owned it and called it
"America's systemic racism."

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez @AOC

Can we please stop calling it "the issue of race" when what we're really discussing is
"the issue of racism"

6:57 PM - 29 Sep 2020

3 Retweets 27 Likes



2



3



27

Source: [Wayback Machine](#)

Twitter Kept Entire ‘Database’ of Republican Requests to Censor Posts

 [rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/elon-trump-twitter-files-collusion-biden-censorship-1234675969](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/elon-trump-twitter-files-collusion-biden-censorship-1234675969)

Adam Rawnsley, Asawin Suebsaeng

February 8, 2023



Images in composite by Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images; Justin Sullivan/Getty Images; Drew Angerer/Getty Images; Bill Clark/CQ-Roll Call, Inc./Getty Images

When the White House called up Twitter in the early morning hours of September 9, 2019, officials had what they believed was a serious issue to report: Famous model Chrissy Teigen had just called President Donald Trump “a pussy ass bitch” on Twitter — and the White House wanted the tweet to come down.

That exchange — revealed during Wednesday’s House Oversight Committee hearing on Twitter by Rep. Gerry Connolly — and others like it are nowhere to be found in Elon Musk’s “Twitter Files” releases, which have focused almost exclusively on requests from Democrats and the feds to the social media company. The newly empowered Republican majority in the House of Representatives is now devoting significant resources and time to investigating this supposed “collusion” between liberal politicians and Twitter. Some Republicans even believe the release of the “Twitter Files” is the “tip of the spear” of their crusade against the alleged liberal bias of Big Tech.

But former Trump administration officials and Twitter employees tell *Rolling Stone* that the White House's Teigen tweet demand was hardly an isolated incident: The Trump administration and its allied Republicans in Congress routinely asked Twitter to take down posts they objected to — the exact behavior that they're claiming makes President Biden, the Democrats, and Twitter complicit in an anti-free speech conspiracy to muzzle conservatives online.

"It was strange to me when all of these investigations were announced because it was all about the exact same stuff that we had done [when Donald Trump was in office]," one former top aide to a senior Trump administration official tells *Rolling Stone*. "It was normal."

In interviews with former Twitter personnel, onetime Trump administration officials, and other people familiar with the matter, each source recalled what could be described as a "hotline," "tipline," or large Twitter "database" of moderation and removal requests that was frequently pinged by the offices of powerful Democrats and Republicans alike.

The voluminous requests often came from high-ranking political appointees working in different departments, offices, and agencies in the Trump administration. But during both the Trump and Biden presidencies, these types of moderation requests or demands were routinely sent to Twitter by the staff of influential GOP lawmakers — ones with names like Kevin McCarthy and Elise Stefanik.

Often times, requests would demand Twitter stop "shadowbanning" certain conservative accounts, or that the company reinstate banned or suspended right-wing personas. Other times, offices of senior Trump administration officials would send emails seeking to remove tweets that they believed to be "hate speech" or death threats aimed at their principals. And over the years, the knowledgeable sources say, staffers for Republican officials would regularly flag to Twitter content that they believed violated the app's terms of service or other policies, including on spreading "misinformation" or "disinformation."

That sentiment was shared by those who've worked for Twitter. "Everybody worked the refs," one source familiar with congressional requests to the social media company said. "Usually with the Republicans, most of the time rather than saying, 'Why are you taking things down?' it was, 'You need to put things back up.' It was, 'Put me back, put me back.' "

In Teigen's case, the White House's attempt to get Twitter to remove criticism of the president was sparked by a late night exchange initiated by Trump. The then-president blasted musician "@johnlegend, and his filthy mouthed wife" for being insufficiently grateful to him for signing the criminal justice reform First Step Act. The White House's removal request landed on the desk of Anika Collier Navaroli, who testified that her supervisors had informed her the White House wanted Twitter to evaluate the post. "They wanted it to come down because it was a derogatory statement," told the House Oversight Committee on Wednesday.

Despite their own past behavior, Republicans are using their newfound control of the House to probe Democrats' and federal law enforcement agencies' interaction with Twitter.

During the House Oversight Committee's hearing on Twitter's handling of the *New York Post's* Hunter Biden laptop story on Wednesday, Republicans thundered about what they claimed "collusion" between Twitter and supposedly hostile federal agencies like the FBI to suppress the distribution of the *Post's* trove of private files from then-candidate Biden's son.

The obvious irony here is, the sources note, that Republican leaders and elected officials have long been committing precisely the kind of "government interference" that they are now investigating, fundraising off of, and accusing Democrats and the so-called anti-Trump "Deep State" of perpetrating. Some of the loudest conservative and MAGA voices on Capitol Hill — who've been endlessly demanding taxpayer-funded, high-profile investigations into Big Tech "bias" and "collusion" — were themselves engaged in the behavior they now claim is colluding.

"This is one of the original concerns about content moderation and platform power, that they could be used by the government to take down speech that the government wants censored and that it couldn't get taken down through legal mechanisms," says Evelyn Douek, a professor of law who studies content moderation at Stanford Law School. "One of the things in the scholarship around this for a long time is a desire to make government and platform relationships more transparent and more formalized so that you can't just have random people calling random employees trying to get stuff removed or put back up."

Facebook, at the urging of its independent oversight board, has already committed to publishing more data about requests from state actors to review content and establish a more formal channel for government officials to file them.

But despite Twitter's apparent new concern about government pressure, the company's leadership has blown off similar proposals. When Alex Stamos, Facebook's former chief of security who now heads the Stanford University's Internet Observatory proposed a similar mechanism to Elon Musk late last year, the new Twitter CEO blew up at him, writing: "You operate a propaganda platform."

Outlook**The two expat bros who terrorized women correspondents in Moscow**

December 15, 2017

Perspective by [Kathy Lally](#)

There's more than one way to harass women. A raft of men in recent weeks have paid for accusations of sexual harassment with their companies, their jobs, their plum political posts. But one point has been overlooked in the scandals: Men can be belittling, cruel and deeply damaging without demanding sex. (Try sloughing off heaps of contempt with your self-esteem intact.) We have no consensus — and hardly any discussion — about how we should treat behaviors that are misogynist and bullying but fall short of breaking the law.

Twenty years ago, when I was a Moscow correspondent for the Baltimore Sun, two Americans named Matt Taibbi and Mark Ames ran an English-language tabloid in the Russian capital called the eXile. They portrayed themselves as swashbuckling parodists, unbound by the conventions of mainstream journalism, exposing Westerners who were cynically profiting from the chaos of post-Soviet Russia.

A better description is this: The eXile was juvenile, stunt-obsessed and pornographic, titillating for high school boys. It is back in the news because Taibbi just wrote a new book, and interviewers are asking him why he and Ames acted so boorishly back then. The eXile's distinguishing feature, more than anything else, was its blinding sexism — which often targeted me.

At the time, the paper had its defenders, even those who acknowledged its misogyny and praised it anyway. A [Rolling Stone](#) article by Brian Preston in 1998 described the eXile's "misogynist rants, dumb pranks, insulting club listings and photos of blood-soaked corpses, all redeemed by political reporting that's read seriously not only in Moscow but also in Washington." A 2010 [Vanity Fair](#) reminiscence by James Verini wrote: "They call Ames and Taibbi, singly or in combination, children, louts, misogynists, madmen, pigs, hypocrites, anarchists, fascists, racists, and fiends." But "what made *The Exile* so popular, and still makes it so readable, was its high-low mix of acute coverage and character assassination, sermonizing laced with smut — a balance that has also characterized Taibbi's work at *Rolling Stone*, where he has been a contributing editor for the last five years." Taibbi still writes for *Rolling Stone*; Ames, too, works in journalism, running a podcast on war and conflict.

I remember the eXile as a mishmash of nightclub listings (rated on how easily a man could get sex), articles on lurid escapades (sex with a 15-year-old girl, an account Ames now says was a joke), political pieces ("Why Our Military Shopping Spree Has Russia Pissed Off") and press reviews savaging mainstream Western journalists. It ridiculed one female reporter as a "star spinster columnist" and mentioned women's "anger lines" and fat ankles. The paper even had a cartoon called the Fat Ankle News, about a woman who tweezes her nose hairs and gorges on doughnuts while editing a story. Some male reporters came in for scorn as toadies or morons or liars. But their outrages concerned their minds and not their bodies.

I came into the eXile's sights because David Johnson, a Russophile living in Washington who edited an online news group devoted to serious writing about Russia, asked his readers whether he should circulate the eXile's press reviews. "I'd like to encourage some discussion," he wrote.

Accepting his invitation, I replied, "Let a thousand flowers bloom, let Matt Taibbi print whatever he wants," I began. "But why reprint it? . . . In a recent eXile, the editor [Ames] wrote about how he dealt with his pregnant girlfriend when she refused to get an abortion. She wouldn't listen to reason, so he threatened to kill her. That worked! Then he muses on forever about another pregnant acquaintance who aborted and about his relief that this child — who would have been a 'sloped-head idiot' — was instead a dead fetus properly wallowing in the sewers."

The Chicago Reader, in a review of the 2000 Taibbi-Ames memoir, "The eXile: Sex, Drugs, and Libel in the New Russia," described what happened next. "They decided to give [Lally] the treatment. They had a female friend call her and, posing as an anti-Exile sympathizer, ask her to help shut the paper down by giving a statement" to a reactionary Russian intelligence agency.

I remember getting a call from a woman whom I couldn't quite understand over a crackling Russian phone line. I had never heard the acronym for the Federal Agency of Government Communications and Information. We got many odd calls at the bureau, some from the mentally ill, some from those with serious grievances, some from people with mysterious motives. I tried to put her off pleasantly by telling her I'd "think about it." It was a bogus sting, and its aim was to humiliate me.

The eXile published what it said was a transcript, which didn't sound at all like me. The paper quoted me agreeing to organize a boycott of the eXile's sponsors and saying I would consider being a witness in a criminal investigation of Taibbi and Ames. I don't remember my words of 20 years ago — I made an effort to forget the eXile and its editors — but I never had any intention of organizing a boycott. And all I ever said about the eXile publicly was in that email to Johnson. But after that, Ames and Taibbi seemed certain I wanted to shut the paper down, censor them and oppose free speech generally. They ridiculed me in the eXile and, later, in their memoir.

When I wrote an article about advertisements that used sex to sell cigarettes — new for Russia — Taibbi addressed my Baltimore Sun editors in his eXile column: "Lally's article is pathological, illogical, inaccurate, makes no point, and is insulting and hypocritical besides. . . . Lally's gaffes may be comic, the wild meanderings of an aging woman nearing derangement." Once, the eXile declared me the winner of its "Gnarliest Elephantine Ass on a Journalist With No Ethics Award." Another time, it published a cartoon showing me in bed with my editor.

I wondered if I should write a story about the eXile, and I started asking Western correspondents what they knew about it. Taibbi had accused a friend of mine of being paid by Russian oligarchs to write favorable stories, so I thought it was worth asking about the eXile's connections. *Do you think any oligarchs are financing them? As a reader, can you tell the difference between what they are making up and what they are not? Are they here on journalist visas? Who are their journalistic role models?* I never pursued it, but Taibbi found out about my queries. In the eXile, he described "a full frontal attack by, of all things, a matronly middle-aged American print journalist."

Of course I was angry and upset. I worried about my daughters; the older one was in high school. She had to watch her mother's character assassination unfold — witnessed by her classmates.

When "The eXile: Sex, Drugs and Libel in the New Russia" came out, the memoir had a few more surprises in store. "We dragged . . . Lally's charred [corpse] through the dust-and-fly-infested streets of our newspaper for all to have a laugh," Ames wrote. In the most unexpected anecdote, Taibbi said that another reporter, Fred Weir, described in great detail how the eXile had made me cry. "Good!" Taibbi describes himself shouting. I was aware of Weir; probably we had bumped into each other at news conferences. But I didn't know him. I couldn't imagine why I would ever have wept in front of him.

I didn't think about Taibbi and Ames for years; my self-esteem remained intact and my life moved along. Then, just as more and more men were being drummed out of public life for long-ago behavior, Taibbi landed in the news, bringing Ames along with him. Taibbi recently published a book about the death of Eric Garner, "I Can't Breathe," and in an interview about it, an NPR host asked him about the eXile years and a passage, written by Ames, in their memoir that described routine sexual harassment of women.

Taibbi apologized on the program and later on Facebook. "The behavior [Ames] describes is reprehensible. It is also, like a lot of things in the eXile, fictional and not true." He said he regretted putting his name on a book "that used cruel and misogynistic language to describe many people and women in particular." In a second Facebook apology, he wrote: "The eXile did have a satirical idea, at least in the beginning. It was supposed to be an obscene send-up of the Americans who stood behind the crooked Yeltsin government." Ames recently told reporters that the eXile was obviously satire and complained that he is being smeared for that satire.

But so many of their sins were real. Taibbi once wrote in the eXile that women had no business wearing "painter's pants and sneakers" when they ought to be more like Russian women, with "their tight skirts, blowjob-ready lips, and swinging, meaty chests." Ames described going to the senior prom of an international high school with a 17-year-old date he called his "Jew-broad"; he was 34. Back home she would be "jailbait," he wrote in the eXile, but Russia "permits sex with a fourteen-year-old, so long as you had reason to believe she was sixteen, the legal statutory age." A photo shows Ames in the front row with his date.

Before I became a favorite target, Taibbi and Ames took regular aim at Carol Williams, the Los Angeles Times Moscow bureau chief in the late 1990s. After she wrote about terrible Moscow roads in 1997, they proclaimed her the "ultimate press villain." They said she was "translator dependent," even though, she told me, she was the "only one in the four-person bureau to travel without a translator. They were trying to provoke me. They were making up stuff and accusing me of complicity with bad actors in the Russian government. It was completely false. They were pigs."

At the time, silence in the face of its bullying seemed the best way of dealing with the eXile. Criticizing it only brought on attack. But now women are regaining their voices, and I've found myself regaining mine.

First I sent the memoir's passage about my tears to Weir, the alleged source for that anecdote. He remembered me. "That is a totally invented conversation," Weir wrote back. "I can't recall you ever calling me up in tears or otherwise." He hadn't read the book and had no idea that the authors had attributed the tale to him. "If that sounds odd to you," he said, "just consider how bizarre it is that you yourself are only just bringing it up with me."

Then I got in touch with Taibbi and Ames, neither of whom has ever met or spoken to me. Ames did not reply to requests for comment. He has, however, described his stories of sex with 15-year-olds as satire. In a Facebook exchange with me, Taibbi gave some ground. "I certainly would not go about things now the way I did back then," he wrote. "And I apologize for the physical descriptions. That was gratuitous and uncalled for." But before he stopped answering my questions, he took some jabs, complaining about the "efforts to get us removed from the Johnson's list."

Finally, we are confronting men who have abused and sexually harassed women for years. That reckoning has been too long coming. But you don't have to grope a woman or force a kiss on her to humiliate her, to make her doubt herself, to silence and diminish her. Bullying, treating women with contempt, freezing them out of the lunches and meetings that build networks and authority: All are damaging, insidious and difficult to root out. That will take time — and more women who call men out. That's why I'm saying #MeToo.

Twitter: @LallyKathy

4/1/25, 1:41 PM

Twenty years ago, in Moscow, Matt Taibbi was a misogynist asshole—and possibly worse - Chicago Reader

READER

BLOGS

Twenty years ago, in Moscow, Matt Taibbi was a misogynist asshole—and possibly worse

by Aimee Levitt
October 27, 2017



Matt Taibbi
Credit: Penguin Random House

<https://chicagoreader.com/blogs/twenty-years-ago-in-moscow-matt-taibbi-was-a-misogynist-asshole-and-possibly-worse/>

1/5

4/1/25, 1:41 PM

Twenty years ago, in Moscow, Matt Taibbi was a misogynist asshole—and possibly worse - Chicago Reader

Matt Taibbi has a new book out now, *I Can't Breathe*, about all the forces that conspired to kill Eric Garner. It's an important story that has become part of our national conversation, as evidenced by Ryan Smith's [interview](#) with Taibbi in this week's *Reader*. But it's also inadvertently become part of another conversation that has risen to a crescendo in the past few weeks: the Weinstein conversation. This, of course, encompasses not just Harvey Weinstein, but the misogyny and abuse of power that allowed him, and men like him, to harass and abuse women for decades with no apparent punishment.

In 2000, Taibbi and Mark Ames published *The Exile: Sex, Drugs, and Libel in the New Russia*, a memoir of their first year of editing *The Exile*, an alt-weekly in Moscow that took on the corrupt culture of post-Communist Russia, mercilessly attacked the expats who moved there to get rich quick, and gleefully exposed the shoddy reporting in the mainstream media. As Martha Bayne wrote then in her *Reader* [review](#) headlined “Beast in the East”:

Much of Ames and Taibbi's best work is funny. The paper plays frequent practical jokes on unsuspecting Russians and fellow expats alike. . . . Some pranks are sharper—and meaner—than others, but they're all conceived under a towering belief in the righteousness of the paper's mission. *The Exile* has kept up a holy racket, railing away against stupidity, corruption, and influence peddling in hopes that someone—anyone—would pay attention. It has covered mind-numbingly complex topics like privatization in a straightforward style that's not only comprehensible but actually interesting to a reader with no background in Russian economic history and little enthusiasm for acquiring one.

But Ames and Taibbi additionally write about how they also mercilessly sexual harassed and occasionally assaulted the women they encountered, both their colleagues in the *Exile* office and Russian women—[some as young as 15](#)—they met socially. Many of these passages have previously been quoted in Internet forums such as Reddit, but they took on a new life this morning on Twitter. Bayne summarized them in her review:

Most notably, the *Exile* nurtures a peculiarly vicious and schizoid attitude toward women. While Russian women are rhapsodically celebrated as long-legged gazelles with loose morals—“the most physically attractive women on earth, and . . . usually available to the highest bidder,” expat women are ridiculed at length as “fat-ankled” and defensively sexless. Self-hating geeky American men are encouraged to take advantage of the perception that all Americans are rich and have oodles of condomless sex (sometimes in the ass!) with drunk, nubile *dyevushkas*. Ex-girlfriends are held up to public ridicule—Ames at one point chronicles his threats to kill a pregnant ex if she won't have an abortion.



Not found

4/1/25, 1:41 PM

Twenty years ago, in Moscow, Matt Taibbi was a misogynist asshole—and possibly worse - Chicago Reader

More from Mark...

Now what kind of guy has friends or partners like this? pic.twitter.com/6KTYeGQ0gi

— Coug (@ImAResistor) [October 27, 2017](#)

More selections from the book have surfaced online, including the following that involves Ames and Taibbi's first business manager, an American woman named Kara:

We'd never given her any respect or credit. We were glory hogs and obnoxious jerks. Worst of all was our sexism. Our sexism and sexual harassment of the Russian female staff, as well as the sexism in our newspaper, was too much for her. Watching us harass the young female staff had to be the most painful part—because we'd never, in a million years, have thought of harassing her.

"You know I'm not PC. But there's a limit. You go too far. You're always trying to force Masha and Sveta under the table to give you blow jobs. It's not funny. They don't think it's funny," Kara complained.

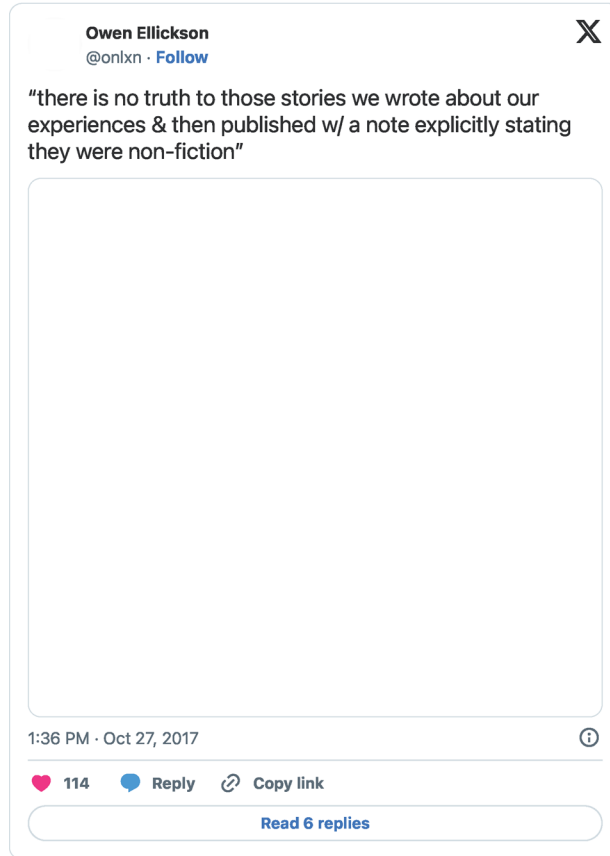
"But . . . it is funny," Matt said.

We have been pretty rough on our girls. We'd ask our Russian staff to flash their asses or breasts for us. We'd tell them that if they wanted to keep their jobs, they'd have to perform unprotected anal sex with us. Nearly every day, we asked our female staff if they approved of anal sex. That was a fixation of ours. "Can I fuck you in the ass? Huh? I mean, without a rubber? Is that okay?" It was all part of the fun. Fun that Kara was no part of.

NPR's Robin Young asked Taibbi about these passages at an event on October 25 at the Harvard Bookstore, and [Taibbi took to Facebook to acknowledge them](#), while also claiming that a lot of material in the book *The Exile* was satire and exaggerated and meant to be funny.

4/1/25, 1:41 PM

Twenty years ago, in Moscow, Matt Taibbi was a misogynist asshole — and possibly worse - Chicago Reader



This morning the story got a new life on Twitter, with many posters resharing Bayne's original article and pointing out the note at the beginning of the book that claimed it was nonfiction, with names changed.

Does this diminish the reporting Taibbi has done on the Garner case? Taibbi is a human being, like the rest of us, a mixture of good and bad. Twenty years ago, in Moscow, he was a misogynist asshole, and possibly worse. No one has come forward to publicly accuse him and Ames of assault. But it would be disingenuous

<https://chicagoreader.com/blogs/twenty-years-ago-in-moscow-matt-taibbi-was-a-misogynist-asshole-and-possibly-worse/>

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4/1/25, 1:41 PM

Twenty years ago, in Moscow, Matt Taibbi was a misogynist asshole—and possibly worse - Chicago Reader

for us to fail to acknowledge the *Reader*'s previous writing about Taibbi—and Bayne's excellent article in particular—especially at a time when every day in this country there's a new story about a prominent man exploiting his power to harass and humiliate a woman. This is what Taibbi and Ames so proudly bragged about in their book, like this behavior made them real American men.

This is also a time when women are reading these stories and saying, “Me too”——including every single female member of the *Reader* staff. (Yes, every single one of us.) Some of us woke up to the *Exile* excerpts this morning. We still feel sick. To fail to acknowledge Taibbi's earlier work is to say that what he and Ames wrote about doing didn't matter, how those women felt didn't matter, and, by extension, to say we don't matter, and you, our female readers, don't matter.

But we do. And you do. Taibbi is still speaking here tomorrow as part of the [Chicago Humanities Festival](#). Go ahead and ask if he agrees. 

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Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 20, 2025

Dear Secretary Rubio,

We write with alarm about the appointment of Darren Beattie as Acting Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the State Department. Darren Beattie's white nationalist loyalties and public glorification of our adversaries' authoritarian systems make him unqualified to serve as the top diplomat representing American values and culture to foreign audiences. This is true even in his acting capacity, which he could retain for months before the Under Secretary nominee is confirmed by the Senate. Darren Beattie's position is an affront to U.S. public diplomacy efforts and he is unfit for any role at the State Department. We ask that you immediately and permanently dismiss him from the Department.

Darren Beattie persistently traffics in white nationalist ideology that is actively hostile to Jewish Americans, women, and people of color. The Anti-Defamation League, which opposes his appointment, has [highlighted](#) his long history of involvement with "notorious racists, antisemites, and white supremacists" and his promotion of conspiracies related to the "Great Replacement theory, which is embraced by antisemites and white supremacists." Beattie has [advocated](#) for starkly racist and fascist social policies, arguing that "low-IQ, low-impulse control populations lack higher reasoning and moral faculties—they require strict corporal punishment and [threat of violence](#) to function properly within a society." He has also advocated for sterilizing "[feral populations](#)" and lamented the absence of population reduction policies because "[all I see is trash multiplying](#)." For a senior American diplomat to espouse these reprehensible, fringe views in representing the United States on the world stage would be categorically destructive to U.S. global standing.

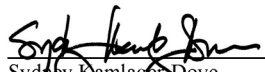
We have serious concerns that Beattie's loyalty to white nationalist ideology supersedes his duty to advance the foreign policy interests of the United States. Beattie has repeatedly glorified China and Russia's authoritarian systems and repressive policies as superior to American democracy. He has asserted that "the future [does not belong](#) to 'liberal democracies' that care about racism" and that "the rise of non-woke (China) and anti-woke (Russia) geopolitical competitors to the Globalist American Empire is [not a bad thing](#)." He has contended that "China will win the 21st century and deserve it because they don't coddle [violent third world trash](#)." Installing someone into the top leadership of our diplomatic corps who publicly and vocally lauds our competitors, denigrates other countries, and discounts democratic values is fundamentally incompatible with the mission of public diplomacy.

Furthermore, Beattie has repeatedly amplified Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda in service of his white nationalist agenda. In contrast to U.S. concerns over the People's Republic of China's (PRC) genocide of its ethnic Uyghur population in Xinjiang, Beattie claimed that "[the Chinese aren't genocidal](#). They just object to Uyghur supremacy and Uyghurness." He demanded that "any Uighur who objects to what the CCP is doing should be shamed as a [Uighur Supremacist](#)." He has also vocally [advocated](#) for replicating the CCP's use of prison camps, organ harvesting, forced labor, and mass internment as a tool of crime and population control. He

repeatedly lauded PRC repression, saying “in China this [vagrant would be sterilized](#) and his organs donated to science,” and “if this happened in China they'd send the aggressor to work the [Cobalt mines](#) for 20 years.” He also argued for PRC-style subjugation of non-white populations. “Imagine if China conquered the UK, rounded up all of the [non native Brits](#) and forced them to work in Cobalt mines in Africa. Would this be a net improvement for Britain?” The top official overseeing U.S. messaging and outreach to foreign audiences should not be an aggressive disseminator of PRC propaganda.

As Members who understand the dangers of extremism, white nationalism, and PRC disinformation, we urge you to dismiss Darren Beattie from the State Department. Beattie’s racist and pro-CCP worldview disqualifies him outright for any U.S. public diplomacy job. His opposition to U.S. global leadership and glorification of U.S. adversaries make him actively dangerous to U.S. interests. His above quotes only begin to scratch the surface of a deep repertoire of racist, fascist beliefs. We urge you to protect U.S. national security and immediately remove him from the highest echelons of American diplomacy.

Sincerely,


Sydney Kamlager-Dove
Member of Congress

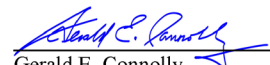

Gregory W. Meeks
Ranking Member
House Foreign Affairs
Committee

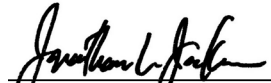

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

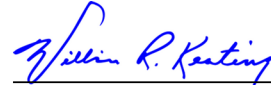

Madeleine Dean
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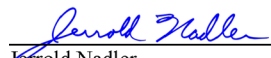

Dina Titus
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James P. McGovern
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Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress

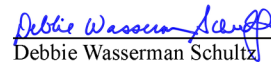

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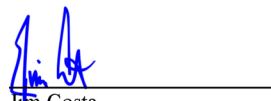

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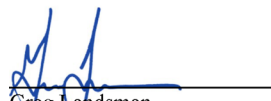

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Jim Costa
Member of Congress


Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress

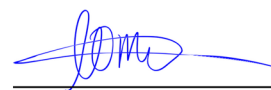

Jim Tokuda
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Julie Johnson
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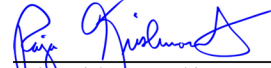

Greg Landsman
Member of Congress

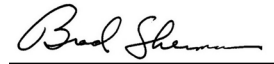

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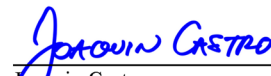

 Seth Moulton
 Member of Congress

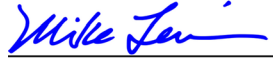

 George L. LaRue
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 André Carson
 Member of Congress

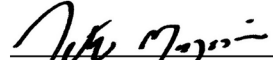

 Gabe Amo
 Member of Congress


 Ritchie Torres
 Member of Congress

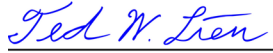

 Joaquin Castro
 Member of Congress



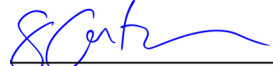
Mike Levin
Member of Congress



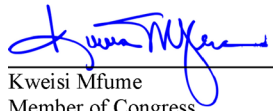
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Member of Congress



Ted W. Lieu
Member of Congress



Sean Casten
Member of Congress



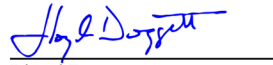
Kweisi Mfume
Member of Congress



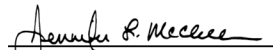
Thomas R. Suozzi
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Lloyd Doggett
Member of Congress



Jennifer L. McClellan
Member of Congress

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on the South and Central Asia
Rep. Huizenga to Nina Jankowicz
April 1, 2025

Please note that the spelling of my last name is JANKOWICZ, as it was misspelled in your QFRs to me.

Question 1:

Ms. Jankowicz, who funds the American Sunlight Project? Is George Soros, either directly or indirectly through organizations like the Open Society Foundations, funding the American Sunlight Project?

Thank you for the opportunity to address questions about the American Sunlight Project (ASP)'s funding for a third time, after Rep. Baumgartner asked me twice in the hearing. Asking me in writing does not change my answer.

As a 501(c)(4) organization under the Internal Revenue Code, ASP is not required to disclose the identities of our donors under current federal law.¹ These nondisclosure provisions rest on established privacy and free speech protections, derived from statute and upheld by longstanding judicial precedent.² In particular, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* reaffirms that nonprofits, including 501(c)(4)s like the American Sunlight Project, have constitutionally protected rights to engage in political speech.³ Any congressional effort to impose additional donor disclosure mandates on 501(c)(4) entities would therefore necessitate revisiting or refining these legal precedents, whether through legislation or constitutional amendment.

With respect to Mr. Soros or the Open Society Foundations, I am disappointed, but not surprised, that this Committee would platform and engage with long-established anti-Semitic conspiracy theories regarding Mr. Soros's constitutionally-protected philanthropic activity. Author Mike Rothschild described these theories to TIME Magazine:

Soros has become the Rothschild of the 21st century. There's always going to be a need for someone to blame when things go wrong—someone who has gotten too powerful, too rich, and needs to be knocked down a peg...It was really about 2004, when George Soros got involved in American politics and helped fund the John Kerry campaign that this

¹ 26 U.S. Code § 501(c)(4) – Civic Leagues or Organizations Operated Exclusively for the Promotion of Social Welfare.

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/26/501>

² *NAACP v. Alabama*, 357 U.S. 449 (1958) – Landmark decision upholding donor privacy. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/357/449/>

³ *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/558/310/>

*rightwing media machine that had spent generations attacking the Rothschilds very quickly and very vociferously pivoted to George Soros.*⁴

In 2018, the Anti-Defamation League wrote:

*In far-right circles worldwide, Soros' philanthropy often is recast as fodder for outsized conspiracy theories, including claims that he masterminds specific global plots or manipulates particular events to further his goals. Many of those conspiracy theories employ longstanding antisemitic myths, particularly the notion that rich and powerful Jews work behind the scenes, plotting to control countries and manipulate global events.*⁵

There are many other, similarly-reputable organizations that have published works establishing the genesis of anti-Semitic Soros conspiracy theories. Given that the Trump administration appears to be very concerned with anti-Semitism in America, perhaps it should conduct an inquiry of this committee before monitoring the social media activity of college students.

Finally, as I said during the hearing, I continually receive threats of violence from my fellow citizens—and indeed I had to file a police report from a threat I got as a result of my testimony before the Subcommittee—simply for speaking the truth. I do not want my donors or anyone to be threatened the way I have been for their speech. Therefore, we maintain our policy of donor confidentiality and—consistent with other 501(c)(4) organizations—do not disclose the identities or donation amounts of any contributors, whether large or small.

Should Congress wish to pursue broader reforms to increase transparency, it would be both appropriate and legally sound to apply such measures uniformly to all 501(c)(4) organizations, including the SuperPACs that fund political campaigns, rather than singling out any one group or viewpoint. I would welcome and happily comply with any such reforms to uniformly enhance transparency.

Question 2:

If President Trump's Restoring Freedom of Speech and Ending Federal Censorship Executive Order (EO 14149) is codified would that restrict the ability of pro-censorship organizations, like the American Sunlight Project, to receive taxpayer dollars?

First, I must take the opportunity to point out that the claim that ASP is “pro-censorship” and the suggestion that it “receive[s] taxpayer dollars” are false and have no basis in reality. Prior to my receipt of these questions from your clerk, I have only seen such baseless allegations made on

⁴ Olivia B Waxman, “The History of Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories, from the Rothschilds to George Soros,” TIME Magazine, September 13, 2023. <https://time.com/6311698/antisemitism-conspiracy-theories-rothschild/>

⁵ Anti-Defamation League, “The Antisemitism Lurking Behind George Soros Conspiracy Theories,” October 11, 2018. <https://www.adl.org/resources/article/antisemitism-lurking-behind-george-soros-conspiracy-theories>

the deepest fringes of the internet. The conspiracy theorists who shout these claims do not even purport to imply that any evidence might exist for them. I would invite you and your colleagues to reflect on your role in laundering these and other rumors into the Congressional record.

Here are the facts:

First, ASP has never advocated for censorship in any form. We categorically support the First Amendment and routinely collaborate with Republican and Democratic offices in the House and Senate on a wide array of policy matters—from strengthening our national security to exploring legislative reforms that protect American civil liberties. We will always stand to *protect*, rather than limit, the rights of individuals to express themselves freely. Period.

Second, the American Sunlight Project does not receive or solicit financial or in-kind support from any federal or state government institution, nor do we seek funding from or coordinate with social media platforms. EO 14149 states that no federal authority may act or use taxpayer funds in a way that unconstitutionally curtails Americans' free speech.⁶ Because ASP categorically *opposes* all forms of censorship, in no way takes any actions that abridge free speech, and has never received or sought federal funding, this provision would have no impact on our organization. Our independence is critical to maintaining credibility as we conduct our research.

Further, Section (d) of the Order directs the government to “identify and take appropriate action to correct past misconduct by the Federal Government related to censorship of protected speech.” As a former federal government official who served for eleven weeks in the Biden Administration, I previously testified under oath in a deposition before Chairman Jordan's Judiciary Committee that I neither engaged in nor witnessed any censorship of American citizens. Had I observed any such censorship, I would have immediately acted as a whistleblower. As I told your colleagues on the House Judiciary Committee:

The [Disinformation Governance Board] never had any operational authority. It did not have the intention to arbitrate, oversee, restrict any thoughts. Everything that you've heard about the board related to it being a, quote/unquote, "Ministry of Truth," is a lie.

[...]If you'll look at my scholarship at the Wilson Center, through which I've, by the way, briefed Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle—I was a witness at the request of Senator Grassley in 2018, so, clearly, some Republicans thought I was getting something right—my scholarship has been about arming people with truthful information, not taking

⁶ Executive Order 14149, Restoring Freedom of Speech and Ending Federal Censorship (January 20, 2025).
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-14149-restoring-freedom-speech-and-ending-federal-censorship>

*away their right to free speech. And if that had been part of my job, I never would've taken the job, and I would've spoken out against that.*⁷

Other primary sources also dispel the baseless rumors that the Disinformation Governance Board had anything to do with censorship. Its charter lays out its narrow purview related to the internal governance of "policies, procedures, practices, plans, and standards to ensure appropriate privacy and civil rights and civil liberties protections" for DHS' responses to disinformation.⁸

On a personal note, I have dedicated my entire career to upholding the First Amendment⁹—a commitment driven by both professional experience and family history. My grandfather's imprisonment in a Soviet work camp taught me when I was a young girl about the catastrophic harm caused by state-imposed silence. That legacy compels me to fight tirelessly against any effort, public or private, that would strip Americans of their constitutional rights. As I told the Judiciary Committee, and will now reiterate to you: if I encountered any government entity, public official, or organization attempting to censor or silence the voices of Americans in any way, I would not hesitate to blow the whistle and publicly expose such wrongdoing.

I believe EO 14149 is part of the broader pressure campaign against academics, advocacy organizations, civil servants, and others who have stood up for the truth. That you are seeking to codify it is deeply disturbing and itself reeks of censorship.

If Congress wishes to have a fulsome conversation about legislation that clarifies or strengthens how federal funding, free speech protections, and national security intersect, the American Sunlight Project would welcome that conversation. We are ready to work with Members of the Subcommittee—on a bipartisan basis—to craft policies that fully uphold constitutional freedoms while ensuring our national security interests remain protected from the ongoing adversarial threats I outlined in the hearing.

⁷ Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. House of Representatives, *Deposition of Nina Jankowicz*, April 10, 2023, https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/Jankowicz%20Transcript_Redacted.pdf

⁸ DHS Disinformation Governance Board Charter, as provided to Senators Hawley and Grassley by DHS Whistleblower, February 28, 2022, <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/files/2022-06/2022-06-07%20DOCS%20ONLY%20CEG%20JH%20to%20DHS%20Disinf%20ormation%20Governance%20BoardJ11.pdf#page=9>

⁹ Nina Jankowicz and Shannon Pierson, "Freedom and Fakes: A Comparative Exploration of Countering Disinformation and Protecting Free Expression," The Wilson Center, December 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/freedom-and-fakes-comparative-exploration-countering-disinformation-and-protecting-free>

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on the South and Central Asia
Mr. Taibbi
Rep. Huizenga
April 1, 2025**

Question 1:

Mr. Taibbi, during the hearing you were unfairly subjected to accusations without having sufficient time to respond. Could you please use this question as an opportunity to fully respond to accusations unfairly made against you during the hearing?

Answer:

In an April 1 hearing of HFAC's South and Central Asia Subcommittee, Ranking Member Sydney Kamlager-Dove, D-CA, falsely called me a 'serial sexual harasser.' Familiar with the Speech and Debate clause, I did not respond, but after she repeated the statements on social media and claimed my lack of response was 'telling,' I filed a \$10 million lawsuit for libel. It should be noted that Kamlager-Dove introduced an article into the record, 'The Two Expat Bros Who Terrorized Women Correspondents in Moscow,' which also falsely claimed I 'abused and sexually harassed women for years.'

No woman has ever accused me of committing any sexual indiscretion even once, let alone serially. When these accusations were made in 2017 in papers like The Guardian, Newsweek, and The Nation, I was compared to Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and other actual rapists, doing indescribable damage to my life and reputation. The charges were made on the basis of one passage in a book I co-wrote with Mark Ames in 2000 about editing a newspaper in Russia in the 1990s. It purports to show me laughing at the idea of mistreating Russian female staff. It is a passage that everyone involved - the author Ames, the publisher Grove Atlantic, the female employees named in the passage, and other eXile co-workers later interviewed - agreed was nonsense and fiction. The eXile was a satirical newspaper and nightlife guide whose entire premise was hyperbolic invention, to the point where its 'Corrections' section across five years never once referred to something that had actually been in the newspaper. To level real-world accusations based on ancient material from that newspaper is equivalent to accusing Andrew Dice Clay of harassment or assault based on his 'you know how boring it can be on line at the bank' standup routine.

The original accusations caused Random House to fire me despite a long record of bestsellers. I was shunned from the publishing world, disinvited from speaking events, and lost over half my income. Forced to resort to legal action, I obtained settlements and corrections from The Guardian, The Nation, and Newsweek. The Guardian statement read, 'This article was amended on 10 April 2018 to remove a reference to Matt Taibbi and a book he co-authored. In October 2017, Grove Publishing added clarification about the book saying: 'This book combined exaggerated, invented satire and nonfiction reporting.' At the time, several reviews indicated that the book was satire. The women referred to in the passage have since said in an interview that

they have never been harassed by Taibbi.’ There were other similar corrections, of which Rep. Kamlager-Dove should have been aware.

To say Rep. Kamlager-Dove’s behavior was irresponsible would be an understatement. It’s also puzzling. I voted for Democrats for most of my adult life and worked on countless stories with Democratic House staffers over the years. I’ve always considered appearing in Congress to be a privilege and was never anything but polite to any member. It is shocking to me that an elected official would feel a need to level a false and malicious personal attack of this type simply because we disagree over the role of the Global Engagement Center. It’s not my place to call for it, but I believe the ranking member should be censured for her behavior.

Sincerely,
Matt Taibbi

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on the South and Central Asia
Mr. Weingarten
Rep. Huizenga
April 1, 2025**

Question 1:

Mr. Weingarten, what guardrails need to be in place to ensure that American taxpayer dollars aren't used for the creation of censorship tools that can be used against the protected speech of those very same American taxpayers?

In my view, Congress ought to codify in law prohibitions on efforts by federal authorities to abridge Americans' speech directly or indirectly, and whether under color of combatting purportedly dangerous "mis-, dis-, and mal-information" or on other grounds. President Donald Trump's Executive Order "Restoring Freedom of Speech and Ending Federal Censorship" may serve as an elegant model. Analogous legislation would necessarily bar the federal government from lavishing tax dollars on or in any way supporting governmental or non-governmental programs aimed at developing censorship tools. Given the fungibility of money, Congress may also wish to extend funding restrictions to all non-governmental institutions engaged in such work. Lastly, in my view Congress should also consider imposing severe penalties on those federal officials who would violate such law as a deterrent – including not only loss of employment, or creation of a private right to action, but potential criminal liability. Given authorities' refusal to respect the First Amendment, it stands to reason that further law in defense of our right to free speech may prove insufficient without real teeth.

Question 2:

Mr. Weingarten, do you believe the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act increased the risk of State Department public diplomacy activities improperly targeting Americans?

It is only logical to assume that reducing barriers to government meddling in our domestic politics would increase the odds that government will meddle in our domestic politics. I also think it is undeniable that the State Department engaged in activities improperly targeting Americans' speech in the period following Smith-Mundt's so-called modernization. Whether there is correlation, causation, or such malfeasance occurred independent of that legislation may be open for debate.

Question 3:

Mr. Weingarten, what is the Global Disinformation Index's (GDI) Dynamic Exclusion List (DEL)?

GDI describes its DEL as a repository of "global news publications rated high risk for disinformation." This "core output," in GDI's words, "contains the highest risk websites

and apps across multiple countries and languages and is continually updated to capture new disinformation sources and narratives.” As GDI notes, “Ad tech companies and platforms can license GDI data to make more informed choices about their online ad purchases.”¹

- Are the criteria used by the GDI for the DEL publicly available? If not, have you discovered any of the internal mechanisms GDI uses to create the DEL?
GDI has not made its DEL publicly available. But its December 2022 report, “Disinformation Risk Assessment: The Online News Market in the United States” suggests what its criteria likely consists of.² The report details GDI’s methodology for assigning risk ratings to outlets. It defines disinformation as “adversarial narratives, which are intentionally misleading; financially or ideologically motivated; and/or, aimed at fostering long-term social, political or economic conflict; and which create a risk of harm by undermining trust in science or targeting institutions or at-risk individuals.” Its risk rating “provides information about a range of indicators related to the likelihood that a given news website will disinform its readers by spreading these adversarial narratives.” In total, there are 16 such indicators grouped under “Content and Operations pillars, which respectively measure the quality and reliability of a site’s content and its operational and editorial practices and policies,” GDI says. Risk ratings are based off of cumulative scores across all those indicators, ranging from zero (maximum risk) to 100 (minimum risk). I have appended the “pillars” below.

¹ <https://archive.ph/ne1iq#selection-375.0-375.432>.

² https://web.archive.org/web/20230330155600/https://www.disinformationindex.org/files/gdi_-united-states_mmr-report-online_22.pdf.

Pillar	Indicator	Sub-indicators	Unit of analysis	Definition	Rationale
Content	Article bias	None	Article	Rating for the degree of bias in the article. Biased writing misrepresents facts, is based on faulty logic, and/or fails to include or unfairly engages with different views on the story.	Indicative of neutral fact-based reporting or well-rounded analysis
	Negative targeting			Rating for whether and to what degree the story negatively targets a specific individual or group	Indicative of hate speech, bias or an adversarial narrative
	Out-group inferiority			Rating for whether and to what degree the story builds upon or establishes that one group is inferior based on identity and to what degree	Indicative of hate speech, bias or an adversarial narrative
	Sensational language			Rating for the degree of sensationalism in the article text	Indicative of neutral fact-based reporting or well-rounded analysis
	Sensational visuals			Rating for the degree of sensationalism in the visual presentation of the article	Indicative of neutral fact-based reporting or well-rounded analysis
	Sources			Rating for the quantity and quality of the story's sources	Indicative of fact-based reporting and high journalistic standards
	Attribution			Rating for whether the story's statistics, quotations, and external media are clearly attributed to a source	Indicative of fact-based reporting and high journalistic standards
	Headline accuracy			Rating for how accurately the story's headline describes the content of the story	Indicative of clickbait
	Lede present			Rating for whether the article begins with a fact-based lede	Indicative of fact-based reporting and high journalistic standards
	Byline information			Rating for how much information is provided in the article's byline	Attribution of stories creates accountability for their veracity
Operations	Editorial guidelines	Editorial independence	Site	Rating for the number of policies identified on the site (adjusted if there are episodes of editorial interference or conflicts of interest)	Assesses the degree of editorial independence and the policies in place to mitigate conflicts of interest
		Adherence to narrative		Rating for the degree to which the site is likely to adhere to an ideological affiliation, based on its published editorial positions	Indicative of politicised or ideological editorial decision-making
		Content guidelines		Rating for the number of policies identified on the site (adjusted if the site violates guidelines)	Assesses the policies in place to ensure that factual information is reported without bias
		News vs. analysis		Rating for the number of policies and practices identified on the site (adjusted if the site violates guidelines)	Assesses the policies in place to ensure that readers can distinguish between news and opinion content
	Accuracy policies	Pre-publication fact checking		Rating for the number of policies and practices identified on the site (adjusted if the site violates guidelines)	Assesses policies to ensure that only accurate information is reported
		Post-publication corrections		Rating for the number of policies and practices identified on the site (adjusted if the site practices stealth editing)	Assesses policies to ensure that needed corrections are adequately and transparently disseminated
	Sources and byline policies	None		Rating for the number of policies and practices identified on the site (adjusted if the site violates guidelines)	Assesses policies regarding the attribution of stories, facts, and media (either publicly or anonymously); indicative of policies that ensure accurate facts, authentic media and accountability for stories
	Funding	Diversified incentive structure		Rating for the number of revenue sources identified on the site (adjusted if there are episodes of editorial interference or conflicts of interest)	Indicative of possible conflicts of interest stemming from over-reliance on one or few sources of revenue
		Accountability to readership		Rating based on whether reader subscriptions or donations are identified as a revenue source	Indicative of accountability for high-quality information over content that drives ad revenue
		Transparent funding		Rating based on the degree of transparency the site provides regarding its sources of funding	Indicative of the transparency that is required to monitor the incentives and conflicts of interest that can arise from opaque revenue sources
Ownership	Owner-operator division	Rating based on the number of distinct executive or board-level financial and editorial decision makers listed on the site (adjusted if there are episodes of editorial interference or conflicts of interest)	Indicative of a separation between financial and editorial decision-making, to avoid conflicts of interest		
	Transparent ownership	Rating based on the degree of transparency the site provides regarding its ownership structure	Indicative of the transparency that is required to monitor the incentives and conflicts of interest that can arise from opaque ownership structures		
	Comment policies	Policies	Rating for the number of policies identified on the site	Assesses policies to reduce disinformation in user-generated content	
		Moderation	Rating for the mechanisms to enforce comment policies identified on the site	Assesses the mechanism to enforce policies to reduce disinformation in user-generated content	

³ https://web.archive.org/web/20230330155600/https://www.disinformationindex.org/files/gdi_-united-states_mmr-report-online_22.pdf#page=24.

Needless to say, ascribing risk ratings to media outlets based on these criteria is an inherently subjective exercise. With respect to internal mechanisms, evidence suggests that GDI likely uses “artificial intelligence” including “machine learning classifiers,” and “expert review” in devising its DEL.^{4,5,6}

- Based on the DEL, was there a bias present in how the GDI determined which types of publications were added?
If GDI’s December 2022 “Disinformation Risk Assessment: The Online News Market in the United States” report is any indication, there would appear to be a clear bias. Its top ten lowest-risk online news outlets, out of the 69 prominent American outlets evaluated, were almost universally left-leaning or establishment media outlets, with the arguable exception of *The Wall Street Journal*. Peers included the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Huffington Post*. By contrast, GDI’s ten riskiest online news outlets included largely right-leaning outlets like the *New York Post*, *The Federalist*, and the *Daily Wire*. It also included *RealClearPolitics*, despite the fact the site curates and pairs news and analysis from the left and the right on the critical matters of the day so readers can weigh both sides. Our rating suggests GDI considers viewpoint diversity a demerit. GDI claims that the purportedly lower-risk sites generally were “free of Bias, Negative targeting and Sensational language,” while “disclos[ing] and adher[ing] to standard journalist policies and practices much more frequently than other sites in the study.” It claims that purportedly higher-risk sites published content “with far fewer fact-based Ledges and far more Bias, Negative targeting and Sensational language than the rest of the sample,” while lacking in “policies to ensure the accuracy and attribution of their content.” Its assessments and therefore overall scores are of course subjective, as the House Small Business Committee demonstrated well in its September 2024 Interim Staff Report titled “Small Business: Instruments and Casualties of the Censorship-Industrial Complex,” covering in part GDI’s activities.^{7,8} Consistent with the bent of its December 2022 study, reporting indicates that GDI’s DEL historically included *Breitbart*, the *Washington Examiner*, and *UnHerd*.^{9,10}
 - Is that bias evidence of viewpoint discrimination?
In my view yes.

⁴ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/2773278/disinformation-inc-government-backed-organization-sent-315000-to-group-blacklisting-conservative-news/>.

⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20220524113428/https://www.safetytechnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Safety-Tech-Podcast-Episode-2-Transcription-I-went-down-the-rabbit-hole-exploring-the-real-life-effects-of-fal.pdf#page=9>.

⁶ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/2749593/disinformation-inc-meet-the-groups-hauling-in-cash-to-secretly-blacklist-conservative-news/>.

⁷ https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=27.

⁸ See also *UnHerd*’s targeting apparently for running articles “maintaining that biological sex differences exist,” which helped land it on the DEL.

⁹ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/2749593/disinformation-inc-meet-the-groups-hauling-in-cash-to-secretly-blacklist-conservative-news/>.

¹⁰ <https://unherd.com/2024/04/inside-the-disinformation-industry/>.

- What evidence can you cite showing damage caused to publications by being placed on the DEL?
GDI's co-founder and CEO Clare Melford said in a March 2022 podcast that outlets' presence on the DEL had "had a significant impact on the advertising revenue that has gone to those [approximately 2,000] sites."¹¹ To that end, the House Small Business Committee's September 2024 Interim Staff Report titled "Small Business: Instruments and Casualties of the Censorship-Industrial Complex," citing an application document GDI submitted in pursuit of a National Endowment for Democracy grant, indicates that between its May 2020 launch and 2022, sites on the DEL had lost \$128 million in annual revenue. As another datapoint, heterodox site *UnHerd* reports that it "only received between 2% and 6% of the ad revenue normally expected for an audience of our size," suggesting this was attributable to its presence on GDI's DEL.
- Could you please explain the U.S. State Department's relationship to GDI?
The State Department has both funded and promoted GDI. The Global Engagement Center provided \$100,000 in funding to GDI via a subaward for winning the 2021 U.S.-Paris Tech Challenge – funding GDI claims to have used to "accelerate" its "scale up."¹² Park Advisors distributed the subaward. The domestic concern did so from a pool of \$6 million in GEC funding lavished on it pursuant to a fiscal year 2018 cooperative agreement, under which it assisted the GEC, in, among other things, developing such international tech challenges. The National Endowment for Democracy, funded almost entirely by the State Department, also awarded GDI's two U.S. nonprofit entities with \$756,923 worth of awards. According to the aforementioned House Small Business Committee report, "The GDI leveraged the GEC and NED funding to develop its infrastructure and expand its work beyond the English language and North America, seemingly in-line with both organizations' strict international mandates, yet this only spread the GDI's perception of rated businesses to other audiences and allowed it to grow its capabilities."¹³ That report also details how the GEC directly and indirectly promoted GDI to the private sector, including technology companies Zoom and Google/YouTube.¹⁴

¹¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20220524113428/https://www.safetytechnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Safety-Tech-Podcast-Episode-2-Transcription-I-went-down-the-rabbit-hole-exploring-the-real-life-effects-of-fal.pdf#page=9>.

¹² <https://x.com/DisinfoIndex/status/1443607364503015436>.

¹³ https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=31.

¹⁴ https://smallbusiness.house.gov/uploadedfiles/house_committee_on_small_business_-_cic_report_september_2024.pdf#page=33.