



Leaked docs: Facebook “bot” advisers secretly in pay of US regime change agency

Description

Documents shared with *MintPress* reveal that Valent Projects – a shadowy communications firm that advises social media platforms such as Facebook on alleged state-backed online influence campaigns – has itself received \$1.2 million from U.S. intelligence front USAID, for “counter disinformation and communications support.”

This relationship has hitherto never been publicly acknowledged, and the resulting income is not reflected in the company's [published accounts](#).

On Valent's direction, Facebook has purged huge numbers of Sudanese accounts and pages critical of the Western-backed government, helping to keep a controversial civilian and military administration in power. There are also suspicions the company may have played a role in the mass suppression of Ethiopian voices online supporting the government of Abiy Ahmed, and opposing U.S. attempts to overthrow him.

Valent Projects is the creation of Amil Khan, a veteran BBC and Reuters journalist turned British intelligence-adjacent information warfare professional. For many years, Khan worked on secret Foreign Office projects in Syria. There, he ran covert psyops campaigns targeting domestic and international audiences, trained ostensibly independent opposition journalists and activists to communicate effectively with the media, and provided propaganda support to numerous armed groups trained, funded, and armed by London and Washington.

Perversely, but perhaps unsurprisingly given his professional history, Khan is now an influential and well-remunerated component of the international counter-disinformation industry. He and his company receive vast sums from an assortment of prominent clients – not all of whom are advertised – for a variety of dubious services, including managing online astroturf campaigns, and identifying alleged foreign-borne propaganda and enemy government-backed “information operations” online.

Khan bills Valent Projects as “an integrated digital agency that works with clients who want to do good

in the world.” But internal company documents passed to this journalist anonymously reveal that his disinformation busting efforts amount to a deeply sinister arm’s length state censorship mechanism.

There is no indication that Khan apprised social networks of his commercial connections to USAID when making representations to them about purported “inauthentic behavior”, “coordinated activity” and troll and bot accounts on their platforms – representations that result in independent activists, journalists and others being permanently suspended, and dissent crushed online.

By definition, this activity poses a grave, unseen, and wholly unaccountable threat to the ability of independent journalists, academics, activists, and regular citizens the world over to be heard online, if their perspectives contravene established Western narratives. And it represents yet another ominous example of how major social media platforms have been insidiously coopted and corrupted by national security interests.

PROPPING UP OUR MEN IN SUDAN

Valent’s active role in compelling major social media platforms to take action against “networks” of trolls and bots elsewhere has been well-publicized. In June 2021 for instance, 53 Facebook accounts, 51 pages, three groups, and 18 Instagram accounts in Sudan, with over 1.8 million followers “that targeted domestic audiences,” linked to individuals associated with a national opposition party, were summarily purged.

“We found this network after reviewing information about some of its activity shared by researchers at Valent Projects,” [a Meta report](#) on “inauthentic behavior” that month states.

Image not found or type unknown



This was one of many mass-defenestrations of social media users in Sudan carried out by Facebook in the period between the April 2019 coup that ousted long-time President Omar al-Bashir, and the military’s seizure of power in October 2021, to which Valent was either central or closely adjacent.

These accounts, usually associated with opposition elements in the country, were variously claimed to have engaged in “coordinated inauthentic behavior” by disseminating content critical of the country’s military and civilian power-sharing government, “[promoting] Russian interests,” and other malign activities.

While one would be forgiven for concluding from Meta’s “inauthentic behavior” report that Valent

approached the social network in an independent capacity, the company was in fact acting on behalf of USAID's Agency's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), which "provides fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key political transition."

This is an Orwellian euphemism for facilitating regime change. While never admitted in the mainstream, and strenuously denied by officials in Washington, USAID has since its 1961 inception served as a U.S. intelligence Trojan Horse, aiding the CIA and other agencies in undermining "enemy" governments.

The Agency's penetration of Sudan following the 2019 coup was extensive. An [official USAID explainer](#) openly avows that the event represented a "historic" opportunity to "further U.S. interests" in the country and wider region, strongly hinting that the civilian and military power-sharing government was created by OTI.

The administration was then provided extensive financial and material support by USAID, its representatives coordinating closely with the Sudanese Prime Minister's office to "counter mis- and disinformation." The Agency also financed independent media outlets and NGOs, and supported "civilians advocating for democratic reforms," in order to shore up its rule.

[Numerous reports](#) from leading human rights organizations [published](#) during the executive's two years of operation documented rampant corruption and egregious abuses of power by authorities, including murderous crackdowns on protests, jailing of activists without charge or trial, and closure of opposition media outlets. By the time the administration disintegrated, it had failed to implement almost all of the institutional and legal reforms outlined in its founding constitutional charter.

US role South Sudan

South Sudan's Salva Kiir, left, walks with Samantha Power outside the presidential compound in Juba, South Sudan, Sept. 4, 2016. Justin Lynch | AP

One would not know any of this from statements by U.S. officials, however. In September 2021, USAID chief and notorious war hawk Samantha Power hailed Khartoum's "hopeful...progress" in "achieving a democratic, inclusive, and peaceful future benefiting all Sudanese."

To say the least, USAID had a significant vested interest in maintaining this grossly distorted fiction, and silencing detractors of the power-sharing executive. It was no doubt calculated that Washington becoming openly involved in compelling social networks to deplatform the disreputable administration's denigrators would even further undermine its legitimacy at home and abroad though.

Hence, the need to employ Valent Projects to achieve that objective, and lend a legitimizing imprimatur of ostensibly independent "expertise" to insidious state censorship.

'DISINFORMATION, DIVISION, AND WAR'

Questions also abound on Valent's role in the Ethiopian Civil War, which has raged since November 2020, and the mass online censorship that has accompanied the bitter fighting.

What began as a limited regional skirmish in which government forces responded to attacks on military infrastructure and atrocities perpetrated against civilians by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) eventually came to engulf much of the country. A political movement-cum-party which ruled the country between 1991 and 2018, the new government in Addis Ababa has designated the TPLF a terrorist group.

During its period in power, the U.S.-backed TPLF made Ethiopia the country "one of the most inhospitable places in the world," carrying out vicious actions "bearing the hallmark of crimes against humanity", according to Human Rights Watch. Untold billions provided in financial aid was embezzled by state officials and spirited out the country, and Ethiopia became the second-worst jailer of journalists on the continent.

This egregious track record is reflected in the TPLF's conduct in the civil war. The group has committed countless atrocities, including gang rapes and multiple [massacres of civilians](#), and [used children extensively](#) as human shields. Yet these abuses have barely been acknowledged by Western journalists.

The elected government's efforts to quell the bloodshed, and time in office more generally, have not been without fault. But the administration evidently represents a welcome change for Ethiopian voters, who re-elected it in an [overwhelming landslide](#) in mid-2021, even as the TPLF-instigated carnage continued apace. However, corporate news outlets have consistently framed authorities' prosecution of the war as a murderous, unprovoked assault on the general population, with charges of artificially manufactured famine, mass atrocities and ethnic cleansing, if not outright genocide repeatedly abounding – although never substantiated.

Officials in Washington have at regular intervals also openly and eagerly advocated for the

establishment of a no-fly zone over Ethiopia, if not U.S. boots on-the-ground. Such comments are commonplace in buildups to Western military intervention.

In November 2021, independent journalist [Jeff Pearce](#) released a leaked recording of a secret Zoom summit earlier in the month between high-ranking current and former U.S., U.K., and EU diplomats and a senior TPLF representative. During the meeting, the TPLF was actively encouraged to advance on Ethiopia's capital and seize power via force, which only confirmed suspicions that Addis Ababa had been earmarked by Washington for regime change.

In response to this aggressive tubthumping, many Ethiopians, members of the country's sizable diaspora, and independent reporters and researchers took to social media and began coordinating via messaging apps to counter the war propaganda perpetuated by Western politicians, journalists and think tanks, in furtherance of U.S. aggression and exploitation throughout the Horn of Africa.

Their collective struggle gave birth to the No More movement, its name a concise but powerful call to end "disinformation, division and war" in Addis Ababa and beyond – a [corresponding hashtag](#) spread like wildfire across social media platforms, and served as a rallying cry at [many protests](#) in [key Western capitals](#), where Ethiopians and Eritreans [defiantly marched](#) side by side against conflict and imperial meddling.

Ethiopia Tigray Protest

Image not found or type unknown

Ethiopian and Eritrean protest against western intervention in their country in Washington, Dec. 10, 2021. Gemunu Amarasinghe | AP

These endeavors very effectively challenged mainstream consensus on the civil war, in the process amply underlining the potential power of independent media and social networks. Were it not for the crusading work of No More et al, it seems almost certain Washington would have staged some form of direct intervention to assist the TPLF in overthrowing the Ethiopian government.

This can only be considered a tremendous achievement for people power. But Valent Projects had very different ideas. Among the leaked papers reviewed by *MintPress* is a report on “inauthentic behavior” and “coordinated networks” online related to the Ethiopian civil war produced by the company in May 2022.

It frames the seismic upsurge of grassroots outcry over the past 18 months as a “complex and sophisticated online manipulation effort” on the part of Addis Ababa, with the Chinese and Russian governments “supporting if not directing” vast armies of troll and bot accounts to support that activity, and promulgating “anti-imperialist” narratives via social media to manipulate “specific audiences,” as part of an “orchestrated online influence campaign.”

The methods by which Valent reaches these sensational conclusions leave much to be desired. To put it bluntly, its report is a poorly woven patchwork of peculiar logical fallacies, paranoid conspiracy theorizing, dumbfounding non sequiturs, defamatory and false allegations, sweeping conspiratorial conjecture, unsupported and inexplicable value judgments, and amateurish analytical blunders.

For example, the company’s initial assumption – for reasons unstated – was the overwhelming majority of accounts tweeting #NoMore were automated. Its research team therefore analyzed 150 accounts that used the hashtag most frequently using [Botometer](#) to validate this hypothesis.

Just 20% were found to be “probable” bots, quite obviously indicating most of the users were real people. But Valent instead concluded that the Russian and Chinese “operation” was in fact quite so sophisticated, “many inauthentic accounts” simply escaped detection.

To reinforce this dubious, self-perpetuating conclusion, Valent “isolated” 49 of these accounts, which displayed location data, and found 30 had tweeted from six separate “identical locations, within and outside Ethiopia.” This is said to suggest they were all being run “by an individual or small group of actors,” in order to create the false impression that interactions between these accounts were “organic online conversation.”

One site purportedly linked to several accounts was the world famous Trafalgar Square. Valent cites this as “a clear sign of falsification,” although a far more logical explanation is that these users simply listed London as their location on their profiles.

Trafalgar Square marks the point from which all distances to Britain's capital are measured, and thus represents the city's epicenter. Searches for "London" via online maps [invariably direct](#) to the area as a result. As a native of the city and resident to this day, it is remarkable Khan was apparently unaware of this.

TARGETED SUPPRESSION

An accompanying Excel spreadsheet lists a large number of accounts that tweeted content related to the civil war, divided by Valent into "seeders" – "accounts that produce original content and introduce it into the discourse"; "superspreaders" – "accounts that take that content and amplify it"; and "endorsers" – "accounts that interact with the content to give the appearance of organic engagement to the interactions." Each user is also given a Botometer ranking out of five.

Among the accounts are dozens of Ethiopians, including academics and activists, and anti-imperialist Western journalists and researchers. Much of the Ethiopian contingent rate highly on the Botometer scale, although academic tests show the software to be "imprecise when it comes to estimating bots," producing significant volumes of false positives and negatives alike, "especially" so when accounts tweet in a language other than English.

Underlining Botometer's inaccuracy, the official account of independent media outlet [Breakthrough News](#) is ranked 3.3 on the inauthenticity scale, and highlighted in the spreadsheet in a menacing red.

Breakthrough and its founders Eugene Puryear and Rania Khalek crop up repeatedly in the report. In November 2021, they traveled to Addis Ababa to conduct on-the-ground reporting on the situation, which Valent outlandishly asserts was the start and core component of a dedicated "phase" of China and Russia's "political influence operation" related to the civil war.

This is predicated on the bogus basis that the outlet – which receives no state or corporate funding, and is primarily financed via viewer donations and subscriptions – is in fact "Russia-backed".

The existence of such a "phase" is buttressed by the observation that other figures bogusly accused of being "linked to Russian state interests" also became "more active in shaping discourse" on social media at this time, pushing an "anti-imperialist" narrative to "hard-left audiences."

Again, an altogether saner explanation could be that the interest and output of anti-imperial, independent activists and journalists was spurred by ongoing developments in the crisis, and they reported on them accordingly. After all, November was when the aforementioned bombshell recording leaked and when the TPLF concurrently expressed a desire publicly to push on to Addis Ababa.

That was certainly the case in my regard. I feature prominently in the report as a result of having independently published a Substack newsletter on the leaked recording, and Valent levels a number of wild charges against me. For example, a [series of tweets](#) about the company and Khan posted in early December 2021 is framed as a "doxxing attack" that "demonstrated an awareness of Valent's internal operations" and "suggested access to information obtained through espionage/security links."

The "sophistication" of this "attack", the report argues, "further reinforces the view" that Russia was

managing a high-level “pro-Ethiopian operation” on social media, despite the tweets being completely unrelated to Ethiopia, and this journalist having not the slightest inkling the company was engaged in work related to the civil war at this time.

The report goes on to lament that despite Valent reporting these tweets to Twitter, the company took no action, which is said to suggest “a lack of commitment on the part of the platform to enforcing its stated policies.” In reality, Twitter’s failure to respond was likely due to the information included in the tweets being gleaned from internet search engines, and publicly-accessible resources such as LinkedIn, and therefore no rules actually being broken.

‘KEY POLITICAL TRANSITION’

Such irrationality, ineptitude and rank incompetence would be amusing, except Valent’s framing of legitimate, organic online activity by genuine civil society actors as malign, orchestrated, counterfeit, enemy state-directed and in breach of established platform rules could well have influenced social media platforms to suppress if not outright ban a large number of users, distorting public perspectives and damaging reputations and livelihoods in the process.

Independent journalists named in Valent documents, such as Sputnik contributor Wyatt Reed, have told *MintPress* that their online reach collapsed after they reported on the civil war. Many of the accounts flagged by Valent as bots – likely wrongly – have been permanently suspended. Other prominent pro-Ethiopian activists unnamed in the report, including No More cofounder Simon Tesfamariam, have likewise been banned without warning, explanation or recourse. Meanwhile, prominent figures [have engaged](#) in outright hate speech about Ethiopians and no action has been taken.

Rania Khalek likewise alleges there was a “huge dip” in views of Breakthrough videos related to Ethiopia after they traveled to Addis Ababa, despite their initial output on the crisis generating vast numbers. Jeff Pearce, who is listed in the spreadsheet as “historian/propaganda [sic]”, believes his Twitter account to now be shadowbanned. Pearce told *MintPress* that,

I’m volcanically pissed that Valent has the gall to smear myself and my colleagues as Kremlin assets, or part of some info op run by Moscow. It’s beyond ridiculous and insulting. I’ve publicly condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on several occasions – you can watch a speech I made on the war earlier this year on my YouTube channel.”

“We’ve traveled to Ethiopia multiple times, interviewed witnesses, investigated massacres, seen hospitals, universities and museums vandalized and looted by the TPLF,” he added. “I’ve published documents proving UN officials ignored war crimes and did nothing to help their own staff when they were assaulted and kidnapped. You can make up what you like, but you can’t transform the reality of over 100 million people.”

COUNTER-DISINFORMATION AS COUP D’ÉTAT

Whether Valent’s work on Ethiopia was also conducted for USAID is an open question, but the parallels with its Sudanese operations are clear and cohering. It may be significant that Samantha

Power was one of the most prominent voices agitating for U.S. intervention in the civil war, declaring in August 2021 that “every option is on the table” for dealing with the crisis.

Moreover, the Valent report on “inauthentic behavior” states the company has identified “information operations in the Middle East and Africa,” while other leaked documents refer to Valent helping “supporting newly democratising governments” deal with “disinformation” for USAID – suggesting several other countries, and their populations, in the Agency’s crosshairs have likewise been in the firing line of Khan’s warped insight.

There is quite clearly an urgent need for social media platforms to review any and all suspensions that have been motivated by information provided by Valent Projects. It is inevitable that untold numbers of journalists, activists, academics and authentic civil society voices will have been purged on the most preposterous, unjust grounds imaginable as a result of Khan’s interventions. The only question is who was targeted, and where.

UKRAINE ON THE BRAIN

On June 7, it was revealed that Khan was also working closely with British journalist Paul Mason in an effort to deplatform *The Grayzone*, as part of a wider personal crusade against the anti-war, anti-imperialist left over the matter of Ukraine.

Leaked emails between the pair exposed how Mason suggested subjecting *The Grayzone* – which he baselessly and bizarrely believed to be a Chinese and Russian intelligence operation – to “relentless deplatforming” via “full nuclear legal” attacks, official probes by government bodies, and cutting the website and its contributors off from online donation sources such as PayPal.

This was a fate *MintPress News*, its founder Mnar Adley and senior staff writer Alan MacLeod [suffered in May](#) this year – an egregious development Mason spoke of approvingly in the leaked emails. In reality, *MintPress* does not support the Russian government, and staff such as MacLeod have publicly condemned Vladimir Putin for his actions.

Nevertheless, the conflict in Ukraine has grown the power of Western governments to directly dictate what is and is not true, and what their populations are and are not allowed to know, exponentially. Yet, their ability to distort and censor overseas is limited, if not outright waning – and that’s where Valent Projects comes in.

As such, the leaked documents reviewed by *MintPress* illuminate a hitherto unexplored purpose of online suppression and deplatforming: regime change. By filtering out troublesome viewpoints and inconvenient facts in target countries, governments can be destabilized, and who or what replaces them entrenched in power, with domestic and foreign audiences deprived of access to any and all critical viewpoints.

As the New Cold War grows considerably hotter every day, Khan’s services will surely become ever-increasingly in demand. Neither he nor his state and quasi-state sponsors can be allowed to succeed.

By Kit Klarenberg

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