



The Censorship-Industrial Complex

Description

I knew things were bad in my world, but the truth turned out to be much worse than I could have imagined.

My name is Andrew Lowenthal. I am a progressive-minded Australian who for almost 18 years was the Executive Director of EngageMedia, an Asia-based NGO focused on human rights online, freedom of expression, and open technology. My resume also includes fellowships at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center and MIT's Open Documentary Lab. For most of my career, I believed strongly in the work I was doing, which I believed was about protecting and expanding digital rights and freedoms.

In recent years, however, I watched in despair as a dramatic change swept through my field. As if all at once, organizations and colleagues with whom I'd worked for years began de-emphasizing freedom of speech and expression, and shifted focus to a new arena: fighting "disinformation."

Long before the #TwitterFiles, and certainly before responding to a Racket call for freelancers to help "Knock Out the Mainstream Propaganda Machine," I'd been raising concerns about the weaponization of "anti-disinformation" as a tool for censorship. For EngageMedia team members in Myanmar, Indonesia, India, or the Philippines, the new elite Western consensus of giving governments greater power to decide what could be said online was the opposite of the work we were doing.

When Malaysian and Singaporean governments introduced "fake news" laws, EngageMedia supported networks of activists campaigning against it. We ran digital security workshops for journalists and human rights advocates under threat from government attack, both virtual and physical. We developed an independent video platform to route around Big Tech censorship and supported campaigners in Thailand fighting government attempts to suppress free expression. In Asia, government interference in speech and expression was the norm. Progressive activists in search of more political freedom often looked to the West for moral and financial support. Now the West is turning against the core value of free expression, in the name of fighting disinformation.

Before being put in charge of tracking anti-disinformation groups and their funders for this *Racket* project, I thought I had a strong idea of just how big this industry was. I'd been swimming in the

broader digital rights field for two decades and saw the rapid growth of anti-disinformation initiatives up close. I knew many of the key organizations and their leaders, and EngageMedia had itself been part of anti-disinformation projects.

After gaining access to #TwitterFiles records, I learned the ecosystem was far bigger and had much more influence than I imagined. As of now we've compiled close to 400 organisations globally, and we are just getting started. Some organisations are legitimate. There is disinformation. But there are a great many wolves among the sheep.

I underestimated just how much money is being pumped into think tanks, academia and NGOs under the anti-disinformation front, both from the government and private philanthropy. We're still calculating, but I had estimated it at hundreds of millions of dollars annually and I'm probably still being naive – Peraton received a \$1 billion contract from the Pentagon.

In particular, I was unaware of the scope and scale of the work of groups like the Atlantic Council, the Aspen Institute, the Center for European Policy Analysis, and consultancies such as Public Good Projects, Newsguard, Graphika, Clemson's Media Forensics Hub, and others.

Even more alarming was just how much military and intelligence funding is involved, how closely aligned the groups are, how much they mix in civil society. Graphika for example received a \$3 million Department of Defense grant, as well as funds from the US Navy and Air Force. The Atlantic Council (of Digital Forensics Lab infamy) receives funds from the US Army and Navy, Blackstone, Raytheon, Lockheed, the NATO STRATCOM Center of Excellence, and more.

We have for a long time made distinctions between “civilian” and “military.” Here in “civil society” are a slew of military-funded groups that mix and merge and become one with those advocating for human rights and civil liberties. Graphika also does work for Amnesty International and other human rights campaigners. How are these things compatible? What is this moral drift?

Twitter emails show consistent collaboration between military and intelligence officials and elite “progressives” from NGOs and academia. “They/them” signatures mingle with .mil, @westpoint, @fbi and others. How did the FBI and the Pentagon, once the avowed enemies of progressives for their attacks on the Black Panthers and the peace movement, their war-mongering and gross overfunding, begin to fuse and collude? They join together in election tabletop exercises and share hors d'oeuvres at conferences put on by oligarch philanthropists. That cultural and political shift was once a heavy lift, but now it is as simple as cc'ing each other.

Worse still, representatives of the military-industrial complex are lauded in the digital rights field. In 2022, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken featured prominently at RightsCon, the digital rights field's biggest conference (an event EngageMedia co-organised in 2015 in the Philippines — Blinken did not appear then). Blinken oversees the Global Engagement Center (GEC), one of the most important US Government anti-disinformation initiatives (see #TwitterFiles 17), and is now alleged to have initiated his own disinformation campaign related to the Hunter Biden laptop – that of the “Russian information operation” letter signed by 51 former US intelligence officials.

Former adversaries are brought together via a strong through-line tracing from counter-terrorism, to countering violent extremism, to *Minority Report*-style policing of everyday speech and political difference.

I also underestimated just how explicit many organizations were regarding narrative policing, at times blatantly drifting from anti-disinformation to monitoring wrongthink. Stanford's Virality Project recommended that Twitter classify "true stories of vaccine side effects" as "standard misinformation on your platform," while the Algorithmic Transparency Institute spoke of "civic listening" and "automated collection of data" from "closed messaging apps" in order to combat "problematic content," i.e. spying on everyday citizens. In some cases the problem was in the title of the NGO itself – Automated Controversy Monitoring for instance does "toxicity monitoring" to combat "unwanted content that triggers you." Nothing about truth or untruth, it's all narrative control.

Government and philanthropic oligarchs have colonized civil society and proxied this censorship through think-tanks, academia, and NGOs. Tell this to the sector, however, and they close ranks around their government, military, intelligence, Big Tech, and billionaire patrons. The field has been bought. It is compromised. Pointing that out is not welcome. Do so, and into the "basket of deplorables" for you.

The Twitter Files also show just how much the NGO and academic set had been absorbed into the inner Big Tech elite, upon whom they pushed their new anti-free-expression values. It accounts for some of the antagonism toward Elon Musk, who kicked them out of the club, to say nothing of all the "townies" he let back on the platform. (Musk's disruption, whilst an improvement, is clearly inconsistent and brings its own problems).

Despite members of the Saudi royal family being large shareholders of both Old and New Twitter, NGOs and academia never had much to say about Twitter's ownership pre-Musk. It's the same Saudi regime that murders journalists, oversees a system of gender apartheid, executes gays, and is responsible for more CO2 emissions than anyone can imagine. These should be bread-and-butter issues for progressives, who have looked the other way.

In days gone by the digital rights field would have paid close attention to the #TwitterFiles, as we did with the Wikileaks or Snowden revelations. Much of the same field that once lauded Wikileaks and Snowden are now the ones who have become compromised. The Files make plain that egregious acts of censorship were enabled or ignored by NGOs and academia, often not because they were wrong, but because the ideas came from the wrong people.

The Old Normal

Trump and Brexit are often cited as the turning point, a great political realignment that saw cultural elites shift to the left, and the working class move to the right. The NGO and academic class (elites despite their internal narratives) reacted by aligning their causes ever more tightly with corporate and government power, and vice-versa.

Brexit and Trump seriously dented the authority and status of the expert/professional managerial class. These events were explained away as being the result of bad actors (racists, misogynists, Russians),

stupidity, or “misinformation.” The usual leftist class/materialist analysis was thrown out for a simple story of good and evil.

COVID-19 made things weirder. Big Media and Big Tech fell completely out of sync with material reality, smearing criticism that had previously been normal, and explicitly banning topics from social media such as discussion of a possible lab leak, or vaccines not stopping viral transmission. Polite society agreed with such bans, stayed silent, or even, as in the case of the Virality Project and its partners, led the censoring.

A cadre of North American and European anti-disinformation elites meanwhile had been slowly convincing NGOs in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that their biggest problem was not too little but too much online freedom, the solution to which was more corporate and government control in order to protect human rights and democracy.

Given that almost all the funding for such civil society initiatives comes from the US and Europe, those in the rest of the world had the option of losing funding or following suit. So much for “decolonizing” philanthropy.

Of course there had always been philanthropic control, but until 2017, my experience of this had been marginal. Top down direction and conformity crept in, post-Trump, and exploded during COVID-19. There was no doubt in my mind that failure to conform to official pandemic narratives would see you defunded. At EngageMedia, we tried to sound the alarm about the new authoritarianism in our Pandemic of Control series, writing:

The “approved” pandemic response was defended at all costs. News media ridiculed alternative viewpoints as fake news and misinformation, and social media platforms took down contradictory views from their feeds, silencing voices that questioned vaccine passports, lockdowns, and other controls.

And while restrictions continue to be eased in most countries, in others they are not. In addition, much of the infrastructure remains at the ready, and the population itself is now well-groomed for the new sets of demands, from digital IDs to central bank digital currencies and beyond.

Such concern about rights and overreach was unfortunately rare in the field. Control of funds under a philanthropic sector operating largely in lockstep with government accounts for much of the increasing conformity in the sector. More concerning, however, is that many, if not most of the educated activists and intellectuals in these organizations agree with the recent turn against freedom of expression. Writing this, I’m reminded of a media literacy/disinformation event I attended in 2021 at an Australian university – a participant bemoaned that the cause of our ills was too much free speech; all four panelists, one after the other, agreed. All the money aside, many elite hearts and minds have already been won.

At the same time, many are afraid to have a different opinion and only whisper their dissent in the hallways between sessions. The axe of cancellation hangs above the necks of those who step away from the consensus, and the triggered are trigger-happy. A sadistic happiness ensues when any deplorable gets a comeuppance.

By legitimizing wide-ranging government intervention in the speech of everyday citizens, the anti-disinformation field and its ideological allies including Canada’s Justin Trudeau, America’s Joe Biden,

and former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, have given authoritarian regimes much greater license to do the same to their own citizens.

Disinformation does of course exist and does need to be addressed. However, the biggest source of disinformation are governments, corporations, and increasingly anti-disinformation experts themselves, who have through COVID-19 and many other issues gotten the facts wrong.

Weaponizing anti-disinformation to censor and smear their opponents is resulting in exactly what the expert class feared: diminished trust in authority. The moral depravity of the Virality Project protecting Big Pharma by advocating for the censorship of [true vaccine side effects](#) is beyond astounding. Imagine doing this for a car company whose airbags were unsafe, because it might cause people to stop buying cars.

It wasn't always like this. Over the past century the primary advocates of free speech have been liberals and progressives like myself, who frequently defended the rights of people whose values they sometimes differed from and were highly unpopular with mainstream American society at the time, such as the over-policing of the Muslim community during the War on Terror.

At the most basic level, the idea that one day the shoe might be on the other foot seems beyond the comprehension of most. The result is a court of clowns. Feedback is not being taken in, pivots are not made, epistemological entropy ensues.

While progressives might believe they are in charge, I think it's much more the case that we are being used. Under the cover of social justice, the corporate machine rolls on. The US government and its allies, realizing that information was the future of conflict, slowly but surely engineered a takeover of the independent, adversarial organisations that should be holding them to account.

Some say this shift began under the "humanitarian intervention" rubric built for the Balkan conflicts. This was stepped up further when Condoleezza Rice provided a feminist cover for invading Afghanistan. The elites grab the ideas that serve their purposes, hollow them out, and get to work. Wealth inequality became much worse under COVID-19, even as the halls of power became more diverse. "Progressives" hardly said a word.

The cultural shift is only partly organic. The Virality Project shows how powerful people cynically harnessed well-intentioned ideas about protecting people's health, when in reality, they were protecting and advancing the interests of Big Pharma and expanding the infrastructure for future information control projects.

In February 2021 I met with a leading anti-disinformation organization, FirstDraft — now called the Information Futures Lab at Brown University — to discuss collaborating. The meeting became awkward when they claimed the Philippine [#Kickvax](#) campaign was anti-vaccination. Nearly half of EngageMedia's staff and most of the leadership team were Filipino. The campaign had come up in conversations with them, so I knew it was actually an anti-corruption drive focusing on the Chinese vaccine, hence the name: SinoVac + kickbacks = #Kickvax.

The campaign was making serious allegations regarding the SinoVac procurement process. In 2021 Transparency International ranked the Philippines 117th for corruption out of 180 countries surveyed. Left-wing activism in the Philippines has long taken aim at corruption among elites.

Despite this, FirstDraft staff told me very firmly again that #Kickvax was spreading anti-vaccine misinformation. I was given an “Are you from outer-space and/or a potential menace?” -type look before the meeting wrapped up. No collaborations were pursued.

From the #TwitterFiles I’ve since seen just how deeply involved FirstDraft were in trying to squash valid questions around the vaccine. It was a core focus. FirstDraft were also part of the Trusted News Initiative, a kind of Virality Project for the legacy media. The Information Futures Lab runs a project to “increase vaccine demand.” Co-founder Stefanie Friedhoff is also part of the White House COVID-19 Response Team.

Beyond reaction, a new vision

Removing government funding for the Censorship-Industrial Complex is a critical first step toward getting free speech back on track. The Complex’s key leaders also need to be called to testify before Congress.

Western oligarchs too fund a huge amount of censorship work and wield far too much power over politics and civil society. Changing how tax breaks work for philanthropy is also needed. It’s not that all such money is to be removed, but it should be a supplement, not the main course.

Civil society needs to stop cozying up to Big Tech and taking huge amounts of its money. This too has resulted in capture and the faltering of proper watchdog roles.

Of course, new financial models will need to be developed to break from all this cash, which will be a huge task in its own right. As a sizable amount of the anti-disinformation field is essentially censorship work, halving the funds available alone will immediately make a big difference.

Clearer boundaries need to be drawn. I’m not generally for deplatforming, but anyone taking military, defense contractor, or intelligence agency money should not be part of civil society and human rights events. That includes the Atlantic Council (including DRFlabs), Graphika, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the Center for European Policy Analysis and many others — the list is long. As the database of “anti-disinformation” groups and their funders develops there will be more to add.

More decentralized, open-source and secure platforms are needed to resist corporate, philanthropic, and government capture. There are only so many people with \$44 billion on hand. The challenge is generating the wide audiences that drive so many users to large platforms. Bitcoin demonstrated that such decentralized network effects are possible, but this needs to be made real in the social media field. Nostr appears to have some potential.

The even bigger problem is a culture that supports widespread censorship, particularly among its previous guardians, progressives, liberals and the left. Free speech has become a dirty word for the very people who once led the free speech movement. Changing that is a long-term project that requires demonstrating how free speech is primarily there to protect the powerless, not the powerful.

For example, the Virality Project's censorship of true stories of vaccine injury left us to the predation of Big Pharma, making us less safe. More free speech would have resulted in a better informed and better protected society.

Most important is to return to strong principles of free expression, including for ideas we dislike. The shoe *will* one day again be on the other foot. When that day comes free speech will not be the enemy of liberals and progressives, it will be the best possible protection against the abuse of power.

Rough edges are the price we pay for a free society.

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Category

1. Freedom-Free speech-Resistance & H-rights
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