

Twitter Files Extra: How the World's "No-Kidding Decision Makers" Got Organized

Andrew Lowenthal



Senators Mark Warner (l) and Marco Rubio (r) speaking at an Atlantic Council event

In Costa Rica and Latvia today, the Atlantic Council is hosting its [360/OS Summit at RightsCon Costa Rica and NATO's Riga StratCom](#). Among other things, the influential think tank will be previewing its "[Task Force for a Trustworthy Future Web](#)" report, which they hope will "lay the groundwork for stronger cross-sectoral ideation and action" and "facilitate collaboration now between the expanding community dedicated to understanding and protecting trust and safety."

In human terms, conference attendees are discussing how best to stay on-brand by presenting the Censorship-Industrial Complex as a human rights initiative, and as #TwitterFiles documents show, they have the juice to pull it off.

[EngageMedia](#) (which I co-founded and was the long-time Executive Director) [co-organized RightsCon in Manila in 2015](#), and I personally oversaw a lot of the preparations. That looks like a big mistake. I now believe RightsCon represents everything that has gone wrong in the digital rights field. Specifically, it represents the capture of a once-vibrant movement by corporate and government interests, and a broader shift towards anti-liberal and authoritarian solutions to online challenges. I left EngageMedia on good terms, but now have no formal relationship.

In honor of this week's RightsCon and 360/OS Summit, we [dug into](#) the #TwitterFiles to revisit the integration of the Atlantic Council's anti-disinformation arm, the Digital Forensic Research Labs (DFRLabs), while also highlighting its relationship with weapons manufacturers, Big Oil, Big Tech, and others who fund the NATO-aligned think tank.

The Atlantic Council is unique among "non-governmental" organizations thanks to its lavish support from governments and the energy, finance, and weapons sectors. It's been a key player in the development of the "anti-disinformation" sector from the beginning. It wasn't an accident when its DFRLabs was [chosen in 2018 to help Facebook](#) "monitor for misinformation and foreign interference," after the platform came under intense congressional scrutiny as a supposed unwitting participant in a Russian influence campaign. Press uniformly described DFRLabs as an independent actor that would merely "improve security," and it was left to media watchdog FAIR to point out that the Council was and is "dead center in what former President Obama's deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes [called](#) 'the blob.'"

What's "the blob"? FAIR described it as "Washington's bipartisan foreign-policy consensus," but thanks to the Twitter Files, we can give a more comprehensive portrait. In the runup to the 360/OS event in that same year, 2018, Graham Brookie of the Atlantic Council boasted to Twitter executives that the attendees would include the *crème de la crème* of international influence, people he explained resided at the "no-kidding decision-maker level":

On 1 May 2018 at 04:44, Graham Brookie [REDACTED]@atlanticcouncil.org> wrote:

Nick, Emily -

First, I am sorry it's been so long. I am woefully overdue to check in with you both. Second, I have a bunch of stuff for you, including how we're thinking about elections. But the nearest item is 360/OS in Berlin on June 21 - 23.

Perhaps you could take a look at this and we can schedule a call this week or early next. Also, I am going to be in San Francisco on Wednesday through Friday. If there is anybody that would be useful to speak with out there, I'd be happy to set aside some time.

1. Jack Dorsey invite for the V25

- a. BOTTOM LINE: This is a private group that includes Albright, the Head of Davos, the head of Munich Security Conference, and others at the no-kidding decision maker level, which is designed to close the information gap between tech, media, and government in a safe place. It will be appropriately high level and focused on actual outputs (making sure "talk to action" isn't just a talking point).

Similar correspondence to and from DFRLabs and Twitter outlined early efforts to bring together as partners groups that traditionally served as watchdogs of one another. Perhaps more even than the World Economic Forum meetings at Davos or gatherings of the Aspen Institute in the US, the Atlantic Council 360/OS confabs are as expansive a portrait of the Censorship-Industrial Complex as we've found collected in one place.

In October 2018, DFRLab was instrumental in helping Facebook identify accounts for what became known as "the purge," a first set of deletions of sites [accused of "coordinated inauthentic behavior."](#) Facebook in its announcement of these removals said it was taking steps against accounts created to "stir up political debate," and the October 2018 "purge" indeed [included](#) the likes of *Punk Rock Libertarians*, *Cop Block*, and *Right Wing News*, among others. Even the progressive *Reverb Press*, founded by a relatively mainstream progressive named James Reader, found his site zapped after years of pouring thousands of dollars a month into Facebook marketing tools. "That's what sticks in my craw. We tried to do *everything* they suggested," Reader said then. "But now, everything I worked for all

those years is dead.”

In the years since, DFRLab has become the central coordination node in the [Censorship Industrial Complex](#) as well as a key protagonist in the Election Integrity Partnership and the Virality Project. Its high-profile role at [RightsCon](#), the biggest civil society digital rights event on the calendar, should concern human rights and free expression activists.

[According to their London 2019 event](#) “360/OS brings together journalists, activists, innovators, and leaders from around the world as part of our grassroots digital solidarity movement fighting for objective truth as a foundation of democracy.” Their Digital Sherlocks program aims to “identify, expose, and explain disinformation.” But DFRLabs are more Inspector Gadget (or double agents) than Sherlock Holmes. The Twitter Files reveal DFRLabs labeled as “disinformation” content that often turned out to be correct, that they participated in disinformation campaigns and the suppression of “true” information, and that they lead the coordination of a host of actors who do the same.

[Twitter Files #17](#) showed how DFRLabs sent Twitter [more than 40,000 names of alleged BJP](#) (India’s ruling nationalist party) accounts that they suggested be taken down. DFRLab said it suspected these were “paid employees or possibly volunteers.” However as *Racket’s* Matt Taibbi noted, “the list was full of ordinary Americans, many with no connection to India and no clue about Indian politics.” Twitter recognized there was little illegitimate about them, resulting in DFRLabs pulling the project and [cutting ties with the researcher](#).

[Twitter Files #19](#) further revealed DFRLab was a core partner in the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP), which “came together in June of 2020 at the [encouragement of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency](#), or CISA” in order to “fill the gaps legally” that government couldn’t. As a result, there are serious questions as to whether the EIP violated the US First Amendment.

DFRLabs was also a core partner on the Virality Project, which pushed its seven Big Tech partners to censor “[stories of true vaccine side-effects](#).” The [Stanford Internet Observatory](#), which led the project, is now [being sued by the New Civil Liberties Alliance](#) for its censorship of “online support groups catering to those injured by Covid vaccines.” Debate as to the frequency of serious adverse events is ongoing, however. The [German health minister put it at 1 in 10,000](#), while others claim it is higher.

The Virality Project sought to suppress any public safety signals at all. The Stanford Internet Observatory is also at the moment reportedly [resisting a House Judiciary Committee subpoena into its activities](#).

[TwitterFiles #20](#) revealed some of the Digital Forensic Lab’s 2018 360/OS events, which brought together military leaders, human rights organizations, the *Huffington Post*, Facebook and Twitter, Edelman (the world’s biggest PR firm), the head of the Munich Security Conference, the head of the World Economic Forum (Borge Brende) a former President, Prime Minister and CIA head, intel front BellingCat and future Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Ressa, all to combat “disinformation.” We can now reveal more.

Introducing the Atlantic Council

Introducing the Atlantic Council



Clockwise from top left: Atlantic Council honorees Mike Pompeo, Boris Johnson, Mike Pence, and George W. Bush

The Atlantic Council is a NATO-aligned think tank established in 1961. Its [board of directors](#) and [advisory board](#) are a *Who's Who* of corporate, intelligence and military power, including:

- James Clapper – former Director of National Intelligence whose tenure included overseeing the NSA during the time of the Snowden leaks. [Asked whether intelligence officials collect data on Americans](#) Clapper responded “No, sir,” and, “Not wittingly.” Clapper also coordinated intelligence community activity through the early stages of Russiagate, and his office authored a [key January 2017 report](#) concluding that Russians interfered in 2016 to help Donald Trump. Clapper has been a 360/OS attendee.
- Stephen Hadley, United States National Security Advisor from 2005 to 2009 (also a 360/OS attendee)
- Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State who oversaw the carpet bombing of Vietnam, among other crimes against humanity
- Pfizer CEO Anthony Bourla
- Stephen A. Schwarzman, Chairman, CEO, and Co-Founder, The Blackstone Group
- Meta’s President for Global Affairs, Nick Clegg
- Richard Edelman, CEO of the world’s largest PR firm (and 360/OS attendee)
- The Rt. Hon. Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, Former Secretary General of NATO
- Ambassador Robert B. Zoellick, Former President of the World Bank
- Leon Panetta, former US Secretary of Defense & CIA Director. Panetta oversaw the US’s massive growth in drone strikes.
- John F. W. Rogers. Goldman Sachs Secretary of the Board

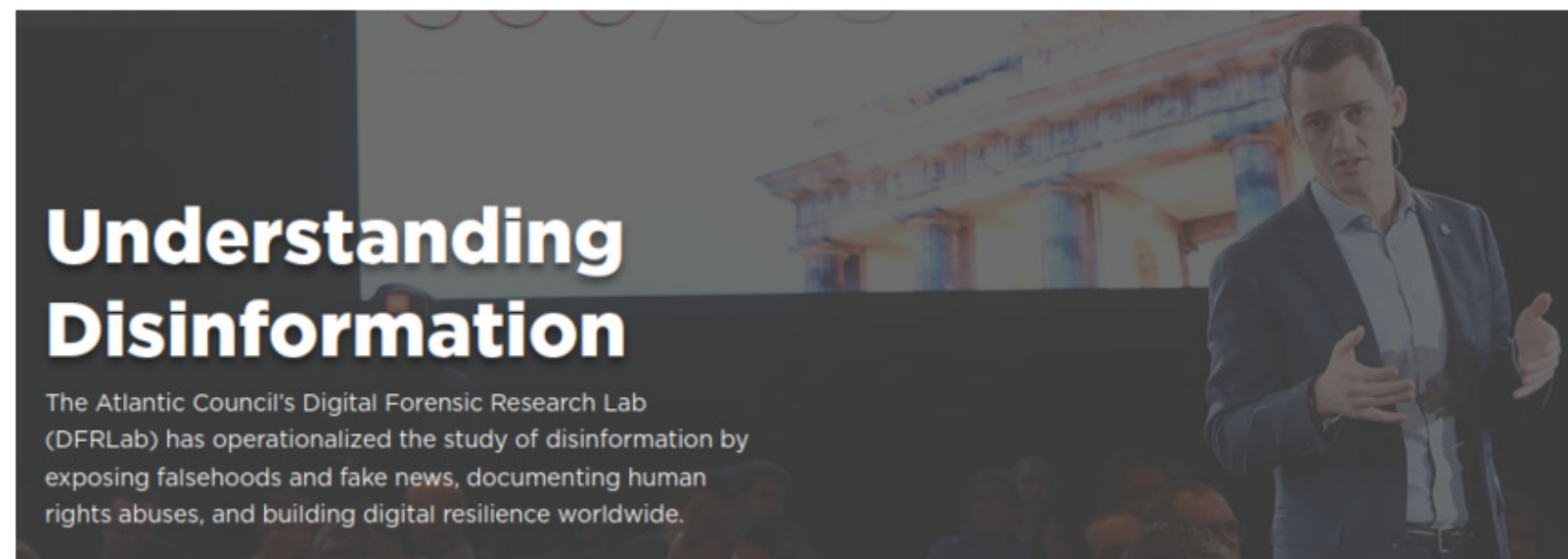
Chuck Hagel, chairman of the Council, sits on the board of Chevron and is also a former US Secretary of Defence.

The Atlantic Council raised [\\$70 million in 2022](#), \$25 million of which came from corporate interests. Among the biggest donors were: the US Departments of Defense State, Goldman Sachs, the Rockefeller Foundation, Craigslist founder Craig Newmark, Google, Crescent Petroleum, Chevron, Lockheed Martin, General Atomics, Meta, Blackstone, Apple, BP, eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, Raytheon, ExxonMobil, Shell, Twitter, and many more. Ukraine’s scandal-ridden energy company, Burisma, whose links to Hunter Biden were suppressed by the August 2020 table-top exercise coordinated by the Aspen Institute, [also made a contribution](#). You can view the full

2022 “honor roll” by clicking [here](#).

The Atlantic Council is the Establishment, though many suffer from the delusion that in putting on a “Digital Sherlock” cape, they’re somehow with the rebel alliance. The opposite is true. The Atlantic Council and DFRLabs don’t hide their militarist affiliations. This week’s OS/360 event at RightsCon Costa Rica runs together with a 360/OS at [NATO’s Riga StratCom Dialogue](#), which DFRLab note they have “worked closely with” “since 2016.”

The Birth of the Digital Forensic Research Lab



DFRLabs was founded in 2016, and has been a major catalyst in expanding the “anti-disinformation” industry. Among non-governmental entities, perhaps only the Aspen Institute comes close to matching the scope, scale and funding power of DFRLabs. DFRLabs claims to chart “the evolution of disinformation and other online and technological harms, especially as they relate to the DFRLab’s leadership role in establishing shared definitions, frameworks, and mitigation practices.”

Almost \$7 million of the Atlantic Council’s \$61 million spent last year went to the DRFLabs, according to their [2022 annual financial report](#). Through its fellowship program, it has incubated leading figures in the “disinformation” field. [Richard Stengel](#), the first director of the [Global Engagement Center](#) (GEC), was a fellow. GEC is an interagency group “within” the State Department (also a funder of the Atlantic Council), whose initial partners included the FBI, DHS, NSA, CIA, DARPA, Special Operations Command (SOCOM), and others. GEC is now a major funder of DFRLabs and a frequent partner:

REGISTER

U.S.-Paris Tech Challenge

The U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) and the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) invite you to the U.S.-Paris Tech Challenge against disinformation and propaganda, which will take place on **September 29-30, 2021**.

The U.S.-Paris Tech Challenge aims to advance the development of promising technologies that offer innovative solutions to help expose and counter disinformation and propaganda across the European Economic Area (EEA) and the UK.

[In this video, Stengel says](#), “I’m not against propaganda. Every country does it, they have to do it to their own population, and I don’t think it’s that awful.”

Stengel was true to his word, and apart from DFRLabs, the GEC funded the Global Disinformation Index, which set out to demonetize conservative media outlets it claimed were “disinformation.” ([See 37. in the censorship list](#)) He thought the now-disgraced Hamilton68 was “[fantastic](#).” In total, GEC [funded](#) 39 organizations in 2017. Despite Freedom of Information requests, only 3 have been made public to date. Roughly \$78 million of GEC’s initial \$100 million budget outlay for fiscal year 2017 came from the Pentagon, though the budgetary burden has shifted more toward the State Department in the years since.

The Global Engagement Center was established in the last year of Barack Obama’s presidency, via a combination of an [executive order](#) and a [bipartisan congressional appropriation](#), led by Ohio Republican Rob Portman and Connecticut Democrat Chris Murphy. The GEC was and remains virtually unknown, but reporting in the Twitter Files and by outlets like the *Washington Examiner* have revealed it to

be a significant financial and logistical supporter of “anti-disinformation” causes.

Though [tasked](#) by Obama with countering “foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining United States national security interests,” its money has repeatedly worked its way back in the direction of policing domestic content, with Gabe Kaminsky’s *Examiner* [reports](#) on the GDI providing the most graphic example.

GEC frequently sent lists of “disinformation agents to Twitter.” Yoel Roth, former head of Trust and Safety [referred to one list as a “total crock.”](#) Roth is now a member of DFRLab’s [Task Force for a Trustworthy Future Web](#). Let’s hope he brings more trust than Stengel. You can read more on GEC’s funding [here](#).

Other DFRLabs luminaries include Simon Clark, Chairman of the [Center for Countering Digital Hate](#) (a UK “anti-disinformation” outfit that aggressively deplatforms dissidents), Ben Nimmo (previously a NATO press officer, then of [Graphika](#) (EIP and the Virality Project partners) and now Facebook’s Global Threat Intelligence Lead), and Eliot Higgins of Bellingcat. Bellingcat has an ominous reputation, which it’s earned in numerous ways, including its [funding](#) by the National Endowment for Democracy ([see Glenn Greenwald’s recent report](#) and Aaron Maté’s [here](#)). Most recently, Bellingcat assisted in the arrest of the 21-year-old Pentagon leaker, further speeding up the abandonment of the [Pentagon Papers Principal](#) where the media protected, rather than persecuted, leakers. Bellingcat was part of 360/OS backroom meetings with former intel chiefs, the head of Davos and the Munich security conference among many others, as we will see soon.

As noted in the introduction, DFRLabs itself has made several wrong calls on “disinformation.” In [one report they highlighted](#) “outright false narratives,” which focused mainly on the notion that Covid was an engineered bioweapon, but lumped in the “unverified” claim Covid was the “result of a lab accident.” A lab accident is now the preferred hypothesis of the US Department of Energy, the FBI, and many others. To the DFRLab it was “disinformation” and a “conspiracy theory.”

The Election Integrity Partnership and the Virality Project

DFRLab were core partners on two of the most influential “anti-disinformation” initiatives of recent times.

The Virality Project built on the EIP and had partnerships with Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Google, TikTok and more to combat vaccine “misinformation.” Stanford and DFRLabs partnered with the University of Washington’s Center for an Informed Public, Graphika, NYU Tandon School of Engineering and Center for Social Media and Politics, and the National Congress on Citizenship. Through a shared Jira ticketing system they connected these Big Tech platforms together, with Graphika using sophisticated AI to surveil the online conversation at scale in order to catch “misinformation” troublemakers.

VP went far beyond any kind of misinformation remit, most infamously recommending to their Big Tech partners that they consider “true stories of vaccine side effects” as “standard misinformation on your platform.”

CDC in one week

- True content which might promote vaccine hesitancy
 - Viral posts of individuals expressing vaccine hesitancy, or stories of true vaccine side effects. This content is not clearly mis or disinformation, but it may be malinformation (exaggerated or misleading). Also included in this bucket are often true posts which could fuel hesitancy, such as individual countries banning certain vaccines.

A Virality Project partner called [the Algorithmic Transparency Initiative](#) (a project of the National Congress on Citizenship) went further. Their Junkipedia initiative sought to address “problematic content” via the “automated collection of data” from “closed messaging apps,” and by building a Stasi-like “[civic listening corps](#),” which in recent years has taken on a truly sinister-sounding mission. The current incarnation might as well be called “SnitchCorps,” as “volunteers have an opportunity to join a guided monitoring shift to actively participate in monitoring topics that disrupt communities”:

CIVIC LISTENING CORPS

[About](#) [Insights](#) [Substack](#) [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#)

Monitor content. Every week, volunteers have an opportunity to join a guided monitoring shift to actively participate in monitoring topics that disrupt communities across the globe. Volunteers monitor topics that have been researched and prioritized by the research analysts of the Civic Listening Corp.

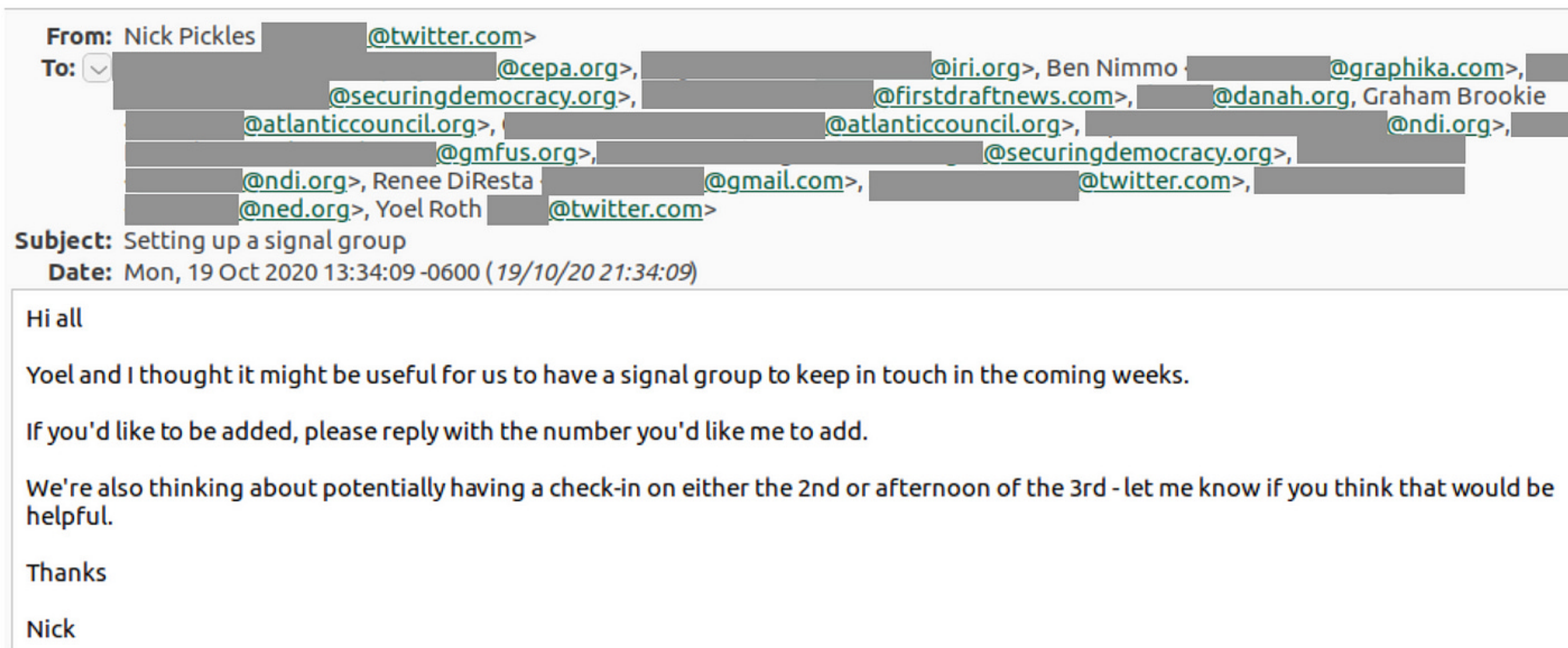
- Volunteers can monitor content within their own social media feeds or via the custom monitoring dashboards in [Junkipedia](#).
- While volunteers are invited to attend weekly monitoring shifts hosted by the Civic Listening Corps staff, participants can monitor anytime they wish to use our tools.

Volunteers submit and annotate examples of problematic content to Junkipedia tiplines via web form, SMS, or email.

Garret Graff, who oversaw the Aspen Hunter Biden table-top exercise, was chairman of that same National Congress on Citizenship when they collaborated on the Virality Project. Both EIP and VP were led by Renee DiResta of the Stanford Internet Observatory, a former CIA fellow who engineered the now disgraced New Knowledge initiative, which [developed fake Russian bots](#) to discredit a 2016 Alabama senate race candidate, [as acknowledged by the Washington Post](#). You can read *Racket's* previous work on the Virality Project [here](#).

DFRLab are the elite of the “anti-disinformation” elite. They work closely with a wide range of actors who have participated in actual disinformation initiatives. Here they’re invited to an elite Twitter group set up by Nick Pickles of “anti-disinformation” luminaries First Draft, also participants in the Hunter Biden laptop tabletop, and the Alliance for Security Democracy, part of the RussiaGate

Hamilton68 disinformation operation.

**360/OS**

The 360/OS event marries this tarnished record with the financial, political, military, NGO, academic and intelligence elite. Some of this is visible through publicly available materials. Twitter Files however reveal the behind the scenes, including closed door, off-the-record meetings.

“I’ve just arrived in Kyiv” Brookie notes in 2017, as he seeks to line up a meeting with Public Policy Director Nick Pickles as they discuss Twitter providing a USD \$150K contribution to OS/360 (seemingly secured), and to garner high level Twitter participation.

Pickles is visiting DC and Brookie suggests he also meet with the GEC and former FBI agent Clint Watts of Hamilton 68 renown. “Happy to make those connections,” he chimes.

From: Graham Brookie <[REDACTED]@ATLANTICCOUNCIL.ORG>
To: Nick Pickles <[REDACTED]@twitter.com>
Subject: Re: Meeting next week
Date: Mon, 9 Oct 2017 11:14:37 +0000 (09/10/17 13:14:37)

Thanks, Nick.

Sorry for my late reply. I just arrived in Kyiv. 10:30/11 works great, and I am happy to come to Twitter DC.

Makes total sense on Hill/State, but hopefully you have the opportunity to talk to Matt Chessen or the interim head of the Global Engagement Center. Matt is technically a State employee serving as Senior Technology Policy Advisor, but he has the most direct or intimate (rather than overall policy knowledge) of platform engagement and some of the problem sets you're looking at.

In terms of Think Tanks, Alexandra Sander and Loren Schulman at Center for New American Security (CNAS), and Laura Rosenberger and Clint Watts at the German Marshall Fund and the Alliance to Secure Democracy (they made Hamilton 68). CNAS is more focused on overall security policy. Rosenberger's team is more narrowly focused on Russian disinformation, but they have a good amount of attention right now due to the Hamilton 68 tool to monitor specific Twitter accounts that they define as “Russian backed”. Happy to make those connections, if useful.

360/OS events are elite and expensive — \$1 million according to Brookie — so closer collaboration with Twitter, especially in the form of funding, is a high priority.

On 22 May 2018 at 00:35, Graham Brookie <[REDACTED]@atlanticcouncil.org> wrote:

Not crass at all and hugely sorry for my late reply.

Depending on which markets you're looking at, we could take varying approaches to this.

Bare bones and exclusively focused on training (i.e. in a hotel conference room with one screen and dedicated participants), we could do trainings for \$25K / training.

Building out an event with branding, potentially speakers, a public component, or just a larger amount of participants, I would put at \$60K / training.

For reference, 360/OS and the V25 cost around \$1M, but that is a large public event with a ton of production, staff, and logistics. For the type of capacity building you're looking at, I would want to make put it under the existing branding of 360/OS by calling them global 360/OS breakaway sessions. I would also look for opportunities to add to existing events and thus drive down costs, like a 360/OS Breakaway on the margins of MediaIndaba in South Africa, with FGV's Democracy Project in Brazil. The partner approach gives us a wider local network (beyond #DigitalSherlocks) to tap into.

Twitter offers \$150,000:

From: Nick Pickles [REDACTED]@twitter.com>
Date: Wednesday, May 23, 2018 at 6:41 AM
To: Graham Brookie [REDACTED]@ATLANTICCOUNCIL.ORG>
Subject: Re: INVITE: DFRLab in Berlin

Thanks for that - here's what we're thinking:

- 1) Support DC Stratcom
- 2) Training event in Brazil
- 3) Training event in India
- 4) Training event in DC (potentially in partnership with Belfer) with an expectation people would dial-in from across the country.

Ballpark - \$150k?

On V25 - do you have a list of attendees Colin and I can look at?

Cheers

Nick

When Brookie mentions the attendees at the “no-kidding decision maker level” he isn’t kidding. Parallel to the 360/OS public program is the much more important off-the-record meeting of “decision makers ranging from the C-Suite to the Situation Room.” Here, he is explicit about a convening of military and financial power. Vanguard 25 is presented as a way to “create a discreet and honest way to close the information cap on challenges like disinformation between key decision makers from government, tech, and media.”

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Atlantic Council

360/OS

Vanguard 25

June 21-23, 2018
Berlin, Germany

The 360/OS open source summit will be supported by the Vanguard 25, or V25, an exclusive group of decision makers ranging from the C-Suite to the Situation Room, on the frontline of forging digital resilience. This is a group that will meet under Chatham House rules to create a discreet and honest way to close the information gap on challenges like disinformation between key decision makers from government, tech, and media, as well as forge digital resilience and strengthen the integrity of our democratic societies. Our aim is to move from talk to action, providing a trusted environment to produce concrete strategy and real-time measures to build resilience across our hyperconnected society.

The document boasts of its high-level participants:

Participants

Madeleine Albright, Former Secretary of State, US State Department

Carl Bildt, Former Prime Minister, Kingdom of Sweden

Richard Edelman, President and CEO, Edelman

John Frank, Vice President for Europe, Microsoft

Stephen Hadley, Former United States National Security Advisor

Wolfgang Ischinger, Chairman, Munich Security Conference

Fred Kempe, President and CEO, Atlantic Council

Lydia Polgreen, Editor in Chief, Huffington Post

Maria Ressa, CEO and Executive Editor, Rappler

Christopher Sacca, Founder and Chairman, Lowercase Capital

Elliot Schrage, Vice President of Communications and Public Policy, Facebook

More are revealed in email exchanges, including Madeleine Albright and the head of the WEF:

As of today, I am pleased that the following are joining the V25: Sec. Madeleine Albright, Head of the World Economic Forum in Davos Borge Brende, Head of the Munich Security Conference Amb. Wolfgang Ischinger, former-DNI General Jim Clapper, former-APNSA Stephen Hadley, Toomas Hendrick Ilves, Aleksander Kwasniewski, Richard Edelman, Elliot Schrage (Facebook), Lydia Polgreen (Huffington Post), and others.

They go on to list a bizarre mishmash of media leaders, intelligence officials, and current or former heads of state:

This is great news. Doable at \$150K with a few thoughts below.

Here is updated info on V25.

As of today, I am pleased that the following are joining the V25: Sec. Madeleine Albright, Head of the Munich Security Conference Amb. Wolfgang Ischinger, former-DNI General Jim Clapper, former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, former Prime Minister of Sweden Carl Bildt, former President of Estonia Toomas Hendrick Ilves, former President of Poland Aleksander Kwasniewski, Richard Edelman, Elliot Shrage (Facebook), Lydia Polgreen (Huffington Post), Lowercase Capital's Chris Sacca, Tom Burt (Microsoft), CEO of Rappler Maria Ressa.

I expect Google to send either Susan Molinari or Ruth Porat, and we are pressing hard on YouTube.

Other outstandings: Mounir Mahjoubi, Reid Hoffman, Ev Williams, Kara Swisher, Matthias Dopfner, Ines Pohl.

The group will also have meetings with various elements of the German government at a critical implementation stage of GDPR, including Minister of Justice and Consumer Protection Katarina Bartley and Minister of Interior Horst Seehofer.

Outstanding, but trending yes: Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and either President Steinmeier or Chancellor Merkel.

It appears Germany's Angela Merkel was out of reach in the end, but many of the others attended this behind the scenes meeting on "disinformation." Who are they?

- Matthias Dopfner – CEO and 22% owner of German media empire Axel Springer SE, the biggest media publishing firm in Europe

- Borge Brende – head of the World Economic Forum and former Norwegian foreign minister
- Toomas Hendrick Ilves – former President of Estonia who co-chairs the World Economic Forum’s Global Futures Council on Blockchain Technology. Hendrick is also a fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (where the Stanford Internet Observatory is housed) and is on the advisory council of the Alliance for Securing Democracy, of Hamilton 68 renown.
- Chris Sacca – billionaire venture capitalist
- Mounir Mahjoubi – previously Digital Manager for President Macron’s presidential campaign, and former Chairman of the French Digital Council
- Reid Hoffman – billionaire and LinkedIn co-founder
- Ev Williams – Former CEO of Twitter and on the Twitter board at the time
- Kara Swisher – New York Times opinion writer, who founded Vox Media Recode
- Wolfgang Ischinger - Head of the Munich Security Conference
- Aleksander Kwasniewski – Former President of Poland. Led Poland into NATO and the EU.
- Richard Edelman – CEO of the largest PR company in the world
- Elliot Shrage – previously Vice-President of Public Policy at Facebook (DFRLabs had [election integrity projects](#) with Facebook)
- Lydia Polgreen – Huffington Post Editor in Chief
- Jim Clapper – former US Director of National Intelligence
- Maria Ressa – co-founder of Rappler and soon to be winner of the Nobel Peace Prize

JK Rowling was also invited to give an award, though appears she didn’t make it in the end:

One other item that is somewhat random, our programming in Berlin ends with the Freedom Awards. This year we're awarding 9-year-old [Bana Alabed](#), who went viral tweeting her experience in the worst days of the Aleppo siege. We're inviting JK Rowling, who has been one of Bana's huge advocates (produced her book Dear World), to introduce the award. However, it may be a moment that Twitter wants to own if JK Rowling can't come to Berlin. Not sure who would do a public facing intro like that, but something to think about.

Why would such a group all gather specifically around the question of “disinformation”? Is disinformation truly at such a level that it requires bringing together the world's most popular author with military and intelligence leaders, the world's biggest PR company, journalists, billionaires, Big Tech and more? Or is this work to build the case that there is a disinformation crisis, to then justify the creation of a massive infrastructure for censorship? A glimpse of the agenda offers clues:

1110 **Geopolitics of Disinformation**
(OFF-THE-RECORD / V25 EXCLUSIVE)
FEATURING
Stephen Hadley, Former US National Security Advisor
Madeleine Albright, Former US Secretary of State
Wolfgang Ischinger, Chairman, Munich Security Conference

Here the head of the most important military and intelligence conference in the world (Munich) sits down in a closed door meeting with a former Secretary of State and the Executive Vice-Chair of the Atlantic Council.

1445 **Media Matters: Resilience in Journalism**
(OFF-THE-RECORD / V25 EXCLUSIVE)
FEATURING
Lydia Polgreen, Editor in Chief,
HuffingtonPost
Maria Ressa, CEO, Rappler Media

Which is followed by a closed door session with the Editor-in Chief of the now-defunct *Huffington Post* and peace-maker Maria Ressa who presented to the same group of military, intelligence, corporate and other elites. Is the role of a journalist and Nobel laureate to work behind closed doors with militarists and billionaires, or to hold them to account?

At 2022's OS/360 at RightsCon Ressa conducted a softball interview on disinformation with current US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. In testimony last April 2023, [former CIA deputy director Michael Morrell stated that](#) Blinken “set in motion the events that led to the issuance of the public statement” by more than 50 former intelligence officials that the Hunter Biden laptop had “all the classic earmarks of a Russia information operation.”

The Twitter Files also revealed that in August 2020 the Aspen Institute organized a table-top exercise to practice how best to respond to a “hack and leak” of a Hunter Biden laptop. The laptop only came to light however two months later. In [attendance](#) was First Draft (now the Information Futures Lab), the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, CNN, *Yahoo! News*, Facebook, Twitter and more. [Here, DFRLabs head Graham Brookie speaks with the Aspen Institute's Garret Graff](#), who coordinated the Hunter Biden tabletop exercise.



After it turned out the Hunter Biden laptop was real, and the disinformation operation was more appropriately described as having been led by the likes of Blinken and the Aspen Institute. The appropriate response is apparently for RightsCon, DFRLabs, Blinken and Ressa to put on a nice forum to [promote](#) these figures as “anti-disinformation” leaders.

Former DFRLabs fellow and intel front Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins is also invited to the closed door sessions with a former head of the CIA, a former Prime Minister and a President. How do you keep power accountable when you are in the same cozy club? This theme runs throughout. Bellingcat is featured heavily at the public sessions also:

Friday, June 22

- 0845** **Arrive at AXICA**
AXICA Congress and Convention Center
Pariser Platz 3, Berlin
- 0900** **Opening 360/OS**
Fred Kempe, President and CEO, Atlantic
Council
- 0920** **Veni. Vidi. Verified.**
An Introduction to the @DFRLab
Graham Brookie, Managing Editor and
Acting Director, DFRLab
Eliot Higgins, Founder, Bellingcat and
Senior Fellow, DFRLab
- 0940** **Table Game 1 — Geolocation Challenge**
Eliot Higgins, Founder, Bellingcat and
Senior Fellow, DFRLab
Narine Khachatryan, Bellingcat Contributor

Higgins has a unique way of expressing himself online, given the DFRLabs emphasis on striking out against divisiveness:

 **Sharmine Narwani** 
@snarwani

What happens when mainstream media manufactures "experts" to support their narratives. False confidence eventually reveals a "novice" bug and the whole project implodes. This guy now thinks a major power needs to answer to him, lol. #Russia

 **Eliot Higgins** 
@EliotHiggins

Just so I'm clear, "the Russian Federation and their representatives can either put up the evidence we're using fake #MH17 evidence, or they can suck my big Bellingcat balls." is my official statement as the founder of Bellingcat, so feel free to report that RT, Sputnik, etc.

10:03 PM · 10 Jun 18

56 Retweets 173 Likes

 **Eliot Higgins** 
@EliotHiggins · 12h

Shouldn't you be sucking my balls?

 **Eliot Higgins** 
@EliotHiggins · 12h

Suck. My. Balls.

 **Eliot Higgins** 
@EliotHiggins · 12h

Replying to @russia_watch
My balls remain dry, get to work.

2 1 21

 **Eliot Higgins** 
@EliotHiggins · 12h

Replying to @polechydes @RussiaUN and @Dpol_un
Suck my balls or present evidence we're using fake MH17 evidence, it's but a simple request to the Russian Federation.

1

Would this pass RightsCon's [code of conduct](#)? If not, he appears to be good enough for DFRLabs to promote.

On the public side, we see Amnesty International participating to further collapse the distinction between those who are meant to hold power to account, and the powerful themselves. The Iraq war gave us embedded journalists, and the “anti-disinformation” field gives us embedded digital rights activists.

1130 Table Game 2 — Applied Accountability

Sam Dubberley, Manager, Amnesty International Digital Verification Corps

1150 Justice and Accountability

Sam Dubberley, Manager, Amnesty's Digital Verification Corps
 Amb. Dan Fried, Distinguished Fellow, The Atlantic Council
 Dr. Alexa Koenig, Executive Director of the Human Rights Center

The Department of Homeland Security's Chris Krebs also joined the closed door session. Krebs was Co-Chair of the Aspen Institute's [Commission on Information Disorder](#). Other members included Prince Harry, the Virality Project's Alex Stamos (Stanford Internet Observatory) and Kate Starbird (University of Washington and previous 360/OS participant), Katie Couric, and more. Craig Newmark attended as an observer.

1050 Election Integrity (OFF-THE-RECORD / V25

EXCLUSIVE)

FEATURING

(TBC) Chris Krebs, National Programs and Protection Division, US Dept. of Homeland Security

(TBC) Dan Eliasson, General Director, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agencies (MSB)

Meanwhile Renee DiResta, former CIA fellow and Stanford Internet Observatory Research Director, presented with the former Prime Minister of Sweden. This was years before she would launch the Virality Project, and take on the bugbear of “true stories of vaccine side effects.”

1110 Ballots, Bots, and Bullies

Carl Bildt, Former Prime Minister and Foreign

Minister, Kingdom of Sweden

Renee DiResta, Project Lead, Data for

Democracy

Alejandro Romero, Founder and CEO, Alto

Data Analytics

The President of the Atlantic Council participated in an “off-the-record, “ behind closed doors conversation on “trust” with the CEO of the world’s biggest PR firm, Edelman.

**1200 Leadership Lunch: Trust in a
Hyperconnected World (OFF-THE-RECORD /
V25 EXCLUSIVE)**
CHAIRER BY
Frederick Kempe, President & CEO,
Atlantic Council
Richard Edelman, President and CEO,
Edelman

“Public relations” and “trust” may well be opposites, and trust is being destroyed not by the disinformation street crime that these groups claim to target, but by the disinformation corporate crime protected by, or in some cases created by these same people. Disinformation is real, but its biggest purveyors are governments and powerful corporate interests.

DFRLab and RightsCon show just how far the capture of civil society by elite interests has come. Again, I made a mistake helping to co-organize RightsCon in 2015. The jumping in bed with the government and Big Tech was arguably there in 2015, though to a much lesser

degree. It now partners with militarists in the form of the Atlantic Council and is an enabler of the “disinformation” grift that is so deeply impacting freedom of speech and expression.

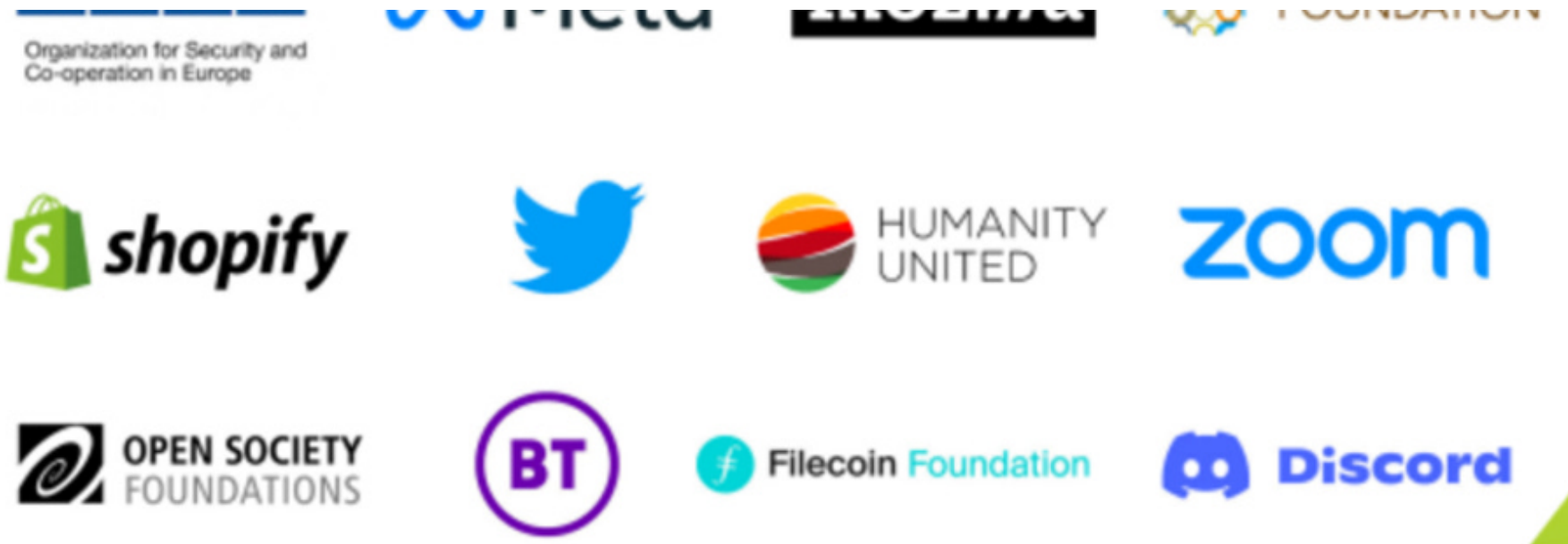
The air-gaps that should separate civil society, media, military, billionaires, intelligence and government have collapsed, and many of these actors have formed a new alliance to advance their shared interests. If weapons manufacturers funding human rights is considered legitimate then where is the red line? Effectively, there is none.

This collapse however has also been pushed by funders, who have been proactive in asking NGOs to collaborate more with Big Tech and government - something I successfully resisted for my almost 18 years at EngageMedia, critically RightsCon was the only time I let my guard down.

The RightsCon sponsor matrix wouldn't be out of place at NASCAR:

Thank you to our previous sponsors, who have supported us in hosting 11 iterations of RightsCon over the years.





This is the equivalent of hosting a Climate Change conference sponsored by Shell, BP, Chevron, and ExxonMobil. How do you keep power accountable when Big Tech pays your wage? The “let’s all work together” approach has failed. The weakest partner, civil society, got captured and we lost. Many more lost their way and have acquiesced to and often enabled much of the new censorship regime.

A renewed and much more independent digital rights movement, with a strong commitment to freedom of expression, is well overdue.

Note: A previous version of this article mistook Blackstone for Blackwater. This has been corrected.