

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.