

PUBLIC

USAID Censorship and Disinformation Operations Aimed at the American People

Testimony by Michael Shellenberger for a hearing on “Eliminating
Waste by the Foreign Aid Bureaucracy” before the Committee on
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on February 13, 2025

Chairman Paul, Ranking Member Peters, and members of the Committee thank you for inviting my testimony.

Since its creation by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, has had as its mission the promotion of America's values of free speech, democracy, and free markets by helping others abroad. The name suggests that the organization is focused on aiding poor nations in ways that result in their economic growth.

Why, then, has USAID been spending so much money on information control and information operations, both in the form of demanding censorship by social media platforms, and financing supposedly "independent" journalism? Why is the United States government in general and USAID in particular the largest donor to supposedly "independent media" worldwide?¹

For example, USAID in 2021 published a "Disinformation Primer" that urged greater censorship by social media platforms as well as "prebunking," a psychological technique to program people to reject information disfavored by the government without thinking.² The FBI and Aspen Institute used prebunking as a disinformation tool in the summer of 2020 to make the top censors at social media platforms and mainstream journalists believe that a future release of information relating to Hunter Biden and Burisma would be the result of a Russian "hack and leak" operation.³

None of that means that the administration should ignore Congress, court orders, or the potential public health problems that could be created by the closure of USAID and freezing of its funds. USAID may have been doing and funding worthwhile projects. And it may be that Congress will need to pass legislation to continue those projects through the State Department.

But it's inaccurate to suggest the USAID closure and freeze on aid will kill African children, as some have done, or cause other obvious harms. The Trump administration already created a waiver⁴ for HIV treatment and resumed aid⁵ for tuberculosis, malaria, and newborn health. And USAID's health programs should be subject to scrutiny, given the agency's history of using such programs as cover for other activities, including regime change and biodefense research.

For example, under President Barack Obama's administration, USAID was caught using an HIV program to foment rebellion in Cuba.⁶ USAID used EcoHealth Alliance as a passthrough organization to funnel \$1.1 million to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which was conducting risky gain-of-function experiments that may have caused the Covid pandemic.⁷

USAID gave EcoHealth Alliance \$54 million during that period, which was more even than the \$42 million the group received from the Pentagon.⁸ Samantha Power,

the USAID Director under President Barack Obama, evaded questions about the nature of USAID funding for WIV.⁹

Evidence of USAID withholding information from Congress is sufficient justification for Congress to shut down the organization, which may have been hiding from Congress its support for dangerous biomedical research.

And anyone who truly believes in public health for poor people in poor nations must agree that USAID needs to be reined in and cleaned up. That starts first with precisely the kind of audit some members of Congress are trying to stop. USAID and all other government agencies must justify what they are spending money on. The public's interest is ensuring that every dollar of taxpayer money is accounted for and justified.

The media and others in Washington, D.C., have known for decades that USAID was a hub of fraud and abuse. The Washington Post cited two individuals with the Center for Global Development, a center-left think tank funded by Bill Gates that has been defending USAID, who told the Washington Post that a claim by Elon Musk that just 10% of USAID money reached people on the ground was "wildly incorrect and misleading."¹⁰

But their clarification — that just "10 percent of USAID payments are made directly to organizations in the developing world" and the "remaining 90 percent" is delivered by organizations in the US and developed world — underscored that USAID fundamentally isn't working.

In truth, Democrats and Republicans alike have recognized for decades that USAID needed reform. In 2015, even the Center for Global Development urged a "top-to-bottom review of USAID's sector- and country-based activities based upon program effectiveness, allocation of USAID resources, alignment with partner priorities, and national security implications" followed by "comprehensive reform."¹¹

As recently as 2021, the media acknowledged the obvious. That year, the New York Times published an article headlined, "U.S. Aid to Central America Hasn't Slowed Migration. Can Kamala Harris?"¹² In it the Times acknowledged that "experts say the reasons that years of aid have not curbed migration" is in part because "much of the money is handed over to American companies, which swallow a lot of it for salaries, expenses and profits, often before any services are delivered" — precisely the reason President Trump shut down USAID.

While the subject of today's hearing is on USAID's wastefulness in general, I would like to focus the Committee's attention on USAID's efforts to take control over independent investigative journalism and advocate censorship, in particular. Together, USAID's censorship and disinformation activities comprise a complete vision of the

kind of information control in service of regime change that USAID and other US government agencies have sought in dozens of foreign nations over the last 75 years.

USAID Support for Censorship and Digital ID

USAID has in recent years been funding censorship advocacy worldwide through its “Countering Disinformation” program, which is part of its Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS). This work has included funding for so-called “fact-checking” organizations, including in Brazil,¹³ which governments use as a predicate for demanding censorship by social media companies. The USAID program lays out its strategy, which is to fund ostensibly “civil society” organizations to pressure social media companies like Facebook and X to censor more, and to conduct “fact-checking.”

The agency promoted “prebunking,” like the kind used by Aspen Institute to program journalists and social media companies to censor the Hunter Biden laptop, as well as “strategic silence,” which is similar to what Aspen promoted to journalists in the summer of 2020 before the New York Post published its first story about the laptop. USAID has funded the Aspen Institute in the past.¹⁴

USAID has encouraged its grantees to pressure advertisers to demand greater censorship by social media platforms. In its “Disinformation Primer,” USAID called for “advertiser outreach” to “disrupt the funding and financial incentive to disinform.”

At the World Economic Forum last year, a major USAID contractor, Internews, which received \$472.6 million from USAID over the last 17 years, urged advertiser boycotts to demand censorship.¹⁵ “Disinformation makes money,” said Jeanne Bourgault, Internews’ CEO. “We need to follow that money. We need to work with the global advertising industry. A lot of those dollars go to pretty bad, bad content. So you can work really hard on exclusion lists or inclusion lists to focus ad dollars and challenge the global advertising industry all around the world to focus their ad dollars towards the good news and information, the good, the accurate, and relevant news and information.”¹⁶

This “advertiser outreach” was precisely the advertiser boycott strategy used by groups with ties to the US intelligence community to pressure Twitter and Facebook to censor disfavored information. These groups, with uncritical support and amplification from the media, were able to use this strategy to successfully get Facebook and Twitter to censor more content.

USAID has heavily promoted digital identification systems, which could be tied to social media accounts to allow governments to punish individuals for what they say or read online.¹⁷ USAID pioneered digital identities in Ukraine with the Diia mobile app.¹⁸ It allows Ukrainians to access government services, store their identification, and also log in to bank accounts. In 2018, the WEF admitted that apps like Diia "open up (or close off) the digital world..."¹⁹ USAID has also promoted a digital ID for India.²⁰

USAID was a main funder for the groups behind overthrowing governments during the so-called "Arab Spring" and the Eastern European "Color Revolutions."²¹ USAID was among the first donors on the ground in Tunisia, giving \$19 million to political parties and activist mobilizations, as well as millions for similar activities in Egypt.²² USAID funded the Serbian youth movement Otpor!, which played a key role in overthrowing Slobodan Milošević, and the independent media outlet Rustavi-2, which was instrumental in mobilizing public opinion against the government to support the Rose Revolution in Georgia.²³

That work continued around the world. In 2014, the Associated Press [reported](#) that the Obama administration "secretly dispatched young Latin Americans to Cuba using the cover of health and civic programs to provoke political change, a clandestine operation that put those foreigners in danger even after a U.S. contractor was hauled away to a Cuban jail."²⁴

To combat alleged "misinformation," the Censorship Industrial Complex used counterterrorism and intelligence tactics developed abroad, including psychological operations, and repurposed them to shape domestic opinion and thought.²⁵ This repurposing of national security tools was a key feature of the weaponization of government against President Trump, his supporters, and other dissidents.

USAID Behind Trump Impeachment

The House of Representatives impeached President Donald Trump on December 18, 2019, after a White House whistleblower went public with evidence that Trump abused his powers by withholding military aid to Ukraine in order to dig up dirt on his rival, Joe Biden.

In the complaint, the whistleblower claimed to have heard from White House staff that Trump had, on a phone call, directed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to work with his personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, to investigate Joe Biden and Hunter Biden.²⁶ The whistleblower who triggered the impeachment was a CIA analyst who was first brought into the White House by the Obama administration.

Reporting by Drop Site News last year revealed that the CIA analyst relied on reporting by a supposedly independent investigative news organization called the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), which appears to have effectively operated as an arm of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which President Trump has just shut down.²⁷ The CIA whistleblower complaint cited²⁸ a long report by OCCRP four times.²⁹

The OCCRP report alleged that two Soviet-born Florida businessmen were “key hidden actors behind a plan” by Trump to investigate the Bidens. According to the story, those two businessmen connected Giuliani to two former Ukrainian prosecutors. The OCCRP story was crucial to the House Democrats’ impeachment claim, which is that Trump dispatched Giuliani as part of a coordinated effort to pressure a foreign country to interfere in the 2020 presidential election, which is why the whistleblower cited it four times.

In a 2024 documentary that German television broadcaster NDR made about OCCRP’s dependence on the US government, a USAID official confirmed that USAID approves OCCRP’s “annual work plan” and approves new hires of “key personnel.”³⁰ NDR initiated and carried out the investigation with French investigative news organization Mediapart, Italian new group Il Fatto Quotidiano, Reporters United in Greece, and Drop Site News in the United States.³¹

However, according to a Mediapart story published the same day as the Drop Site News article, NDR censored the broadcast “after US journalist Drew Sullivan, the co-founder and head of the OCCRP, placed pressure on the NDR management and made false accusations against the broadcaster’s journalists involved in the project.”³²

On December 16, Drop Site’s Ryan Grim posted a link on X to the 26-minute-long documentary.³³ “NDR, Germany’s public broadcaster, is facing a censorship scandal and has defended itself by saying it never killed a news report about OCCRP and its State Department funding — b/c no report was ever produced to kill,” said Grim. “That was absurd — and dozens, maybe hundreds, of journalists knew it to be false, and now of course, someone has leaked it.”

The journalistic collaboration revealed that OCCRP’s original funding came from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs of the State Department, and quotes a USAID official who says, “I think Drew is just nervous about being linked with law enforcement,” referring to Sullivan. “If people that are going to give you information think, ‘Oh, you’re just a cop,’ maybe it’s a problem.”³⁴

OCCRP does not operate like a normal investigative journalism organization in that its goals appear to include interfering in foreign political matters, including elections, aimed at regime change. Sullivan told NDR that his organization had

“probably been responsible for five or six countries changing over from one government to another government... and getting prime ministers indicted or thrown out.”³⁵

As such, it appears that CIA, USAID, and OCCRP were all involved in the impeachment of President Trump in ways similar to the regime change operations that all three organizations engage in abroad. The difference is that it is highly illegal and even treasonous for CIA, USAID, and its contractors and intermediaries, known as “cut-outs,” to interfere in US politics this way.

In a response to an inquiry from my colleague and me, Miranda Patrucic, the Editor in Chief of OCCRP, linked to a website with a screenshot from OCCRP’s own agreement with USAID. The agreement states, “Requests for approval of new Key Personnel shall include (a) written justification; and (b) CV curriculum vitae in English... Key personnel positions, candidates and changes to such personnel will require concurrence from the AOR [Agreement Officer’s Representative] and approval from the AO [Agreement Officer].”

OCCRP claims on its website that USAID’s oversight of OCCRP is not what it appears to be. “This represents a serious misunderstanding of a common procurement procedure. This person or persons, referred to as the grant’s ‘key personnel,’ ensures that the money we get is spent appropriately and that the work gets done. This is not an editorial role, but a logistical one.”³⁶

But there is nothing in the agreement that suggests USAID’s approval of OCCRP’s work plan and senior staff are unimportant to the editorial content produced by OCCRP.

Indeed, USAID’s Shannon McGuire emphasizes, in the NDR documentary, that USAID controlled OCCRP through what is known as a “substantial involvement clause.” “There’s a substantial involvement clause in a cooperative agreement,” said McGuire. “So, specifically for this Cooperative Agreement with OCCRP, it’s things like reviewing and approving an annual work plan. And there’s key personnel. If OCCRP needs to change key personnel, for example, the chief of party, which is Drew Sullivan, then they submit a request with a resume and we review it and say, ‘Okay, we approve your nominee for a new chief of party,’ or whoever it is listed in the key personnel.”

Sullivan confirmed this. “Under cooperative agreements, which we don’t like to take,” he said, “they have a say on who the people are, but they can veto somebody.”

Patrucic told Public, “I am the editor-in-chief of OCCRP and was appointed during a USAID grant, but my CV was never sent to USAID and no approval was sought or received. OCCRP is governed only by its board of directors and no one else.”

But a second USAID official, Mike Henning, confirmed to the NDR filmmakers that USAID approval is not just for “logistical” or “administrative” functions.

“A cooperative agreement has more strings attached,” said Henning, “than a grant... Some of the strings that are attached in a cooperative agreement are approval of key personnel, approval of an annual work plan, approval of sub grants of a certain amount above a certain amount.”

USAID, he added, would have to approve “the editor in chief or who’s the CEO, who’s the, you know, managing editor.”

Sullivan said, “We try to keep [OCCRP journalists] away from the donors as much as possible so they don’t have to worry.” He then added, “We’re not always successful. There’s always some embassy official from some country somewhere seeking to do something.”

Samantha Power, then head of USAID, said in November 2021 that OCCRP was a “partner” of the US government. Under its Strengthening Transparency and Accountability through Investigative Reporting (STAIR) program, USAID allocated \$20 million to OCCRP from September 2022 to September 2027 to support investigative journalism in Europe and Eurasia. One of the reporters on the Giuliani story was based in Ukraine. Although OCCRP claims to assign grants retrospectively, it appears that a USAID STAIR grant may have funded the story.

Steve Engleberg, managing editor of the investigative journalism nonprofit, ProPublica, said that OCCRP’s relationship with the U.S. government undermines OCCRP’s claim to independence.

“The point at which a funder has influence over the personnel who do the news,” said Engleberg, “that is a very powerful lever because we all know in journalism that a lot of what happens depends on who does it, right? I mean, who’s the editor? Who’s the reporter? Who’s the, the leader, right? You know, the preferences of that person are going to shape the coverage. So I think if you are worried about pleasing a funder, particularly a governmental funder, which has clear viewpoints on things, to me that would be a bit problematical.”

Indeed, as the NDR reporter notes, “If you look at the [1961] Foreign Assistance Act [which created USAID] it says several times in there that the funds should be used to advance American foreign policy.”

In May 2024, found Drop Site, the OCCRP wrote a report with the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) paid for by the UK government. “The RUSI has close links with the defense and security professions,” noted Drop Site. “One of its senior vice presidents is General David Petraeus, a former director of the CIA.”

Elsewhere in the documentary,³⁷ Sullivan described re-routing the original grant from the State Department's INL through USAID. State Department "got the money and then they turned it over to USAID," said Sullivan.

"USAID administered it," said the reporter, to clarify, "but the money came from the State Department's Law Enforcement and Narcotics division."

"Yes," said Sullivan.

Meg Gaydosik, a USAID official, "confirmed she had not only pushed to get funding for OCCRP internally but even helped re-write the group's application for a major USAID grant," reported Drop Site. Gaydosik said, "It was from USAID," about the OCCRP's initial support.

Evidence of USAID Seeking To Silence Journalists

OCCRP threatened to file a lawsuit against my coauthor and me merely in response to a set of emailed questions. "The premise of your article is factually false and defamatory," wrote Patrucic. "The claim by Dropsite News and partner media that USAID has control over editorial appointments has been disproven³⁸ and we suggest you read our response³⁹ to that."

OCCRP also threatened Drop Site News, it said. "The news outlets involved in this project, including Drop Site, have been on the unpleasant end of increasingly aggressive legal threats from Drew Sullivan, co-founder and head of OCCRP," the authors wrote. "While we strived to be as fair as possible, and have posted most of Sullivan's responses,⁴⁰ what we're not going to do, of course, is back down to threats, even ones backed with the resources of the federal government."

In December 2022, OCCRP launched Reporters Shield, a program aimed at protecting international journalists and outlets from lawsuits and providing them with legal support. USAID gave Reporters Shield \$9 million in 2023.⁴¹ The "shield" appears to be an offensive measure by a US government agency to deflect scrutiny of its political meddling and manipulation of narratives abroad.

Stefan Candea, a Romanian investigative journalist previously involved with OCCRP, made public his concerns about the organization's lack of transparency, funding, and governance structure. In response, OCCRP attempted to smear Candea, accusing him of holding conflicts of interest and calling his actions "malicious and unprofessional." Candea and his colleagues wrote a series of articles exposing OCCRP's strategic disinformation efforts aimed at undermining the credibility of its critics.⁴²

USAID Behind Trump-Russia Collusion Hoax

OCCRP describes itself as a cost-effective arm of the US government's anti-corruption efforts, writing that "our stories have helped return more than \$11 billion to public coffers through seizures and fines" and that "OCCRP has brought in at least ten times more money to the U.S. government than it has received in grants."

But if it's an arm of the US government, it's also one that was weaponized against Trump. OCCRP played a significant role in developing the narrative that Trump and his associates had ties to Russian banking and Russian money laundering, as well as other undisclosed conflicts of interest with Russia.

Trump's first term was plagued by accusations that he had coordinated with senior Russian officials to interfere in the 2016 election, and that Russian President Vladimir Putin held leverage over him due to "*kompromat*" that included financial information. In 2017 and 2018, reports suggested that Trump properties were used for money laundering by Russian financial criminals and Russian state entities. Trump's entanglements with Russian oligarchs, Democrats and political commentators argued, had made him "Putin's puppet."

Much of this now-debunked conspiracy theory originated with the Steele dossier, which included allegations that Russians had purchased Trump properties using illicit funds, that Trump and his associates had ties to organized crime in Russia, and that Trump's businesses had suspicious links to Russian entities. This was part of a broader allegation that the Russian government had cultivated Trump as an asset and had financial leverage over him.

But some of the dossier's claims may have had a basis in reporting from OCCRP about the "Russian laundromat," an alleged Russian money laundering scheme that funneled \$20 billion out of Russia between 2010 and 2014 through a Moldovan banking network and shell companies in other countries.

The first efforts to frame Trump as corrupted by Russians was in the summer and fall of 2016. In early August, a Defense Department contractor at Georgia Tech and another "researcher" claimed to have found a connection between the Trump organization and a Russian bank, Alfa Bank. A Hillary Clinton attorney, Michael Sussmann, then brought the supposed evidence of a connection to the FBI in September 2016. The Alfa Bank allegations proved to be baseless and emails revealed they were motivated by anti-Trump sentiment.⁴³

Concurrent with this effort, in August 2016, references to OCCRP investigations made their way into the U.S. Justice Department. It was then that Nellie Ohr, an employee at Fusion GPS, the political consulting firm that the Hillary Clinton campaign

had hired for opposition research, sent⁴⁴ articles⁴⁵ about Russia to her husband, Bruce Ohr, at the Department of Justice. Several referenced OCCRP reports related to money laundering.

Nellie Ohr had previously worked as a CIA contractor from 2008 to 2014.⁴⁶ John Durham's 2023 report found that Nellie's work for Fusion GPS influenced the Steele dossier's key claims about collusion. Bruce Ohr had passed his wife's findings to the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane team investigating Trump. This created what Durham called "circular reporting," in which Nellie's work both informed the Steele dossier and the FBI investigation used to corroborate its claims.

But OCCRP's influence on the Trump Russia collusion hoax extended well beyond Nellie Ohr's emails. On March 20, 2017, OCCRP revived a series⁴⁷ it had published years earlier on Russian money laundering to suggest some involvement with a Trump golf course, which the Associated Press and other outlets picked up.⁴⁸ OCCRP claimed in 2017 that companies "unwittingly took part" in Russian money laundering, including Total Golf Construction Inc., which renovated Trump's golf course in the Grenadines.

The 2017 series involved records of over 75,000 financial transfers, and OCCRP worked with dozens of media outlets to release particular bits of information. OCCRP's editor Paul Radu stated that the investigation was prompted when "law enforcement" in the UK, Moldova, Russia, and other countries became "frustrated" over Russian government inaction, suggesting that "law enforcement" may have been behind the leak to OCCRP.⁴⁹

"OCCRP assembled a team of reporters from 32 countries on three continents to track down the money and produce 'The Russian Laundromat Expose' investigative series," explained Radu. OCCRP's partnership with international outlets established an appearance of global consensus around the story. With so much international participation, the series, and its selective allegations, became fact.

"We're proud to expose truths that empower people to decide their own futures, but we do not advocate for any specific political outcome or government," said OCCRP in its response to our story. "not in the U.S. and not anywhere."

In contrast to OCCRP's dismissal of any wrongdoing by Hunter Biden, who we now know brought in tens of millions of dollars to the Biden family by selling access to his father, including to the Chinese government, the timing and volume of OCCRP's laundromat series appeared aimed at supporting the media narrative of Russian collusion and election interference. The release coincided with Democrats' demands that Congressional probes into Russian election interference investigate Trump's

financial ties to Russia. Although OCCRP did not state explicitly that this was the purpose of its laundromat reporting, some of its partners suggested it.

In an article from [Barron's](#), listed by OCCRP as a “partner” story, Bill Alpert made the purpose of the laundromat coverage clear: “As Congress holds hearings on suspected Russian meddling in the recent U.S. presidential election and the Federal Bureau of Investigation probes for ties between Trump campaign officials and Russia, *Barron's* now presents a detailed examination of what Eastern European authorities claim is questionable money leaving the Russian Federation to fund payments around the world.”⁵⁰

OCCRP was also the key source for a Guardian story headlined, “Bank that lent \$300m to Trump linked to Russian money laundering scam.” The article stated, “The German bank that loaned \$300m (£260m) to Donald Trump played a prominent role in a money laundering scandal run by Russian criminals with ties to the Kremlin, the Guardian can reveal.”⁵¹

The story cited OCCRP and relied upon its “Russian Laundromat” reporting. But there was never anything that tied Trump to Russian criminals other than the fact that they shared the same bank. After OCCRP fed this narrative to The Guardian, the New York Times and many other major news media wrote story after story suggesting a conspiracy between Trump, Deutsche Bank, and Russian criminals – all without evidence.

Seven paragraphs into a September 2017 New York Times article, the three authors noted, “Although Deutsche Bank recently landed in legal trouble for laundering money for Russian entities — paying more than \$600 million in penalties to New York and British regulators — there is no indication of a Russian connection to Mr. Trump’s loans or accounts at Deutsche Bank, people briefed on the matter said.”⁵²

Consistently, journalists wrote articles with assumptions, remote connections, and loose sets of facts to insinuate that Trump was criminally guilty of something. “The scandal-hit bank that loaned hundreds of millions of dollars to Donald Trump has conducted a close international examination of the US president’s personal bank account to gauge whether there are any suspicious connections to Russia, the Guardian has learned,” wrote one Guardian report.⁵³ Readers had to wait until the fourth paragraph to learn that “The internal review found no evidence of any Russia link...”

Even so, noted the Guardian, “Deutsche Bank is coming under pressure to appoint an external and independent auditor to review its business relationship with President Trump,” citing a Democratic Congressman, who explained that the

investigation was needed simply because Deutsche Bank had lent to Trump and was under investigation for other reasons.⁵⁴

Rachel Maddow of MSNBC and other commentators engaged in repeated conspiracy theorizing about a supposed association between Trump and Russian criminals on the basis of no evidence other than sharing a bank, the ninth largest in Europe.

On top of the vague Deutsche Bank connection and link to one of Trump's golf courses, OCCRP provided additional source material for the efforts to smear the president as compromised by financial dealings with corrupt Russian oligarchs. In November 2017, OCCRP collaborated with the Washington, D.C.-based International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) on the "Paradise Papers," a trove of 13.4 million records that were, again, selectively released. One "Paradise Papers" story showed ties between Russia and Trump's commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, as well as 120 other politicians around the world. ICIJ, another ostensibly independent organization, receives funding from the US State Department.

"In the aftermath of the election, investigations by Congress and the U.S. Department of Justice have explored potential business ties between Russia and members of President Trump's administration," noted OCCRP.⁵⁵ "While several of Trump's campaign and business associates have come under scrutiny, until now no business connections have been reported between senior Trump administration officials and members of Putin's family or inner circle."

The German journalists who previously published the "Panama Papers" with ICIJ and OCCRP, Bastian Obermayer and Frederik Obermaier, contributed to the Ross story. Earlier that year, in January 2017, Obermayer and Obermaier had made the case for investigating Trump in *The Guardian*, writing, "Donald Trump alone has his hands in hundreds of companies, so it is impossible for one news outlet alone to investigate this properly. But it is not impossible if there's a collaborative investigation."⁵⁶

The collaboration, they argued, should be international. "Another project could be to investigate his ties to Russia and his past with Russia, which also is very promising, even if you don't believe a single word of the Trump dossier⁵⁷ BuzzFeed made public," they wrote. "Unknown conflicts of interests in both fields can turn out to be a huge danger to the national security of the US."

In September 2017, OCCRP collaborated on a documentary with Dutch public television, in part of a series called "The Dubious Friends of Donald Trump," about the links between former Trump business associate Felix Sater and Kazakh money laundering.⁵⁸

In a connected story, published in June 2018, OCCRP alleged a “complex offshore trail” connecting the purchase of three Trump SoHo tower apartments to a Kazakhstan fraud and money laundering case.⁵⁹ Although not the first to report on the purchase of Trump’s SoHo property by a money laundering network, OCCRP claimed to directly link illicit funds from Kazakhstan to the condo purchases, thereby suggesting potential criminal activity by Trump and his business.

All this reporting, from an ostensibly neutral anti-corruption organization, helped seed and legitimize the narrative that Trump had financial ties to Russia and had thus collaborated with Putin to steal the 2016 election. Democrats, commentators, and activists urged special counsel Robert Mueller to “follow the money” and include alleged evidence of Trump’s corruption in his investigation.

The basis for this cloud of suspicion traces back to the supposedly legitimate cross-border reporting by OCCRP, which identified numerous records and transactions incriminating Trump and his associates, including the Deutsche bank link, the golf course development, and deals with money launderers. Why was OCCRP, a news organization created and funded by the State Department and USAID, so involved in sourcing and developing a key element of the Russia collusion hoax?

USAID Aimed To Control Investigative Journalism

The US government has, largely through USAID and the State Department, for decades funded NGOs and media organizations to act as agents of American soft power abroad. These groups can engage in influence operations or sow unrest to spark “color revolutions,” while hiding their activities under the mantle of free expression and freedom of the press.

Media outlets have successfully framed US government financing of opposition media and civil society groups as support for “independent” journalism. “Strongmen celebrate as Trump aid freeze hits the media,” a Financial Times headline read last week, tacitly admitting that the US government is the primary funder of adversarial media in former Soviet states.

It is possible that groups like OCCRP and ICIJ serve passthrough organizations that intelligence agencies can use to launder information as news and investigations. The Panama Papers, in which OCCRP was heavily involved, were mysteriously leaked by a “John Doe.” Some have speculated that the US intelligence community leaked the information as part of information warfare against Putin.⁶⁰ Unlike WikiLeaks, OCCRP and the ICIJ do not fully release documents, allowing for significant narrative manipulation by the reporters involved.

Another aspect of the relationship between the US government and global investigative journalism may be the use of journalists as sources of information. Said State Department official Mike Henning in a censored German documentary, “The beauty of investigative reporters and truly independent journalists—and independent in a serious way—is that people will talk maybe more to a journalist than they might necessarily to a government official.” In other words, the government can use a pretense of journalism to gain intelligence. “So having journalists do this work lends a certain—reduces some fear and encourages more openness,” said Henning.

In his 2020 PhD thesis, Candea suggested that the USAID funding structure for international investigations is a way to centralize journalism in alignment with the US State Department and foreign policy establishment. Central to this project is the framing of journalism as an elite activity in need of special protections. “Over the last decade, the emphasis on an elite carrying out important work has persisted and multiplied,” wrote Candea. Reporters involved in organizations like OCCRP “are signalling that they are part of something special that is not available to all journalists... It is so special that it has a mystery aura... This kind of special group needs extra security and protection for doing the work...”

This air of expertise and secrecy creates the illusion that special US government-created or funded nonprofits and media groups are needed to execute the special craft of “independent journalism.”

USAID and the State Department appear to have created a vast network to coopt the international press. These agencies funneled \$472.6 million to Internews, which operates in over 100 countries, over the last 17 years. Internews trained thousands of journalists and collaborated with hundreds of media outlets globally. Jeanne Bourgault, Internews’ CEO, advocated⁶¹ for exclusion lists on social media “to combat disinformation” of disfavored views at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2024. The WEF then issued a report naming “misinformation” as the number one “Global Risk.”⁶²

That same year, an Internews publication advocated for “deplatforming,” meaning bans on individuals like Facebook and X imposed on President Trump in 2021, and other forms of censorship.⁶³

Through these methods, USAID specifically, and the US deep state in general, have used taxpayer money not only for censorship, but also for propaganda, agenda setting, and information control around the world.

Narratives like the Trump Russia collusion hoax, which once seemed to be emerging organically in response to a body of evidence, were actually the product of a sophisticated and coordinated campaign to shape public opinion through an

appearance of media consensus. This consensus was artificially constructed by a US government-created “independent media” apparatus, with taxpayer-funded legal protection, to promote the deep state’s interests abroad under the guise of professional journalism.

This weaponization of the press was yet another tool of foreign intervention and regime change that, to combat the rise of populism, was turned against the American people in general, and Trump in particular. The agencies that taxpayers fund to ensure our security began treating the domestic population as an enemy force, and repurposed the national defense and foreign policy toolkit for illegal censorship and influence operations at home.

While OCCRP may continue to deny its role as an arm of US deep state propaganda, the impact of USAID’s defunding speaks for itself. Now cut off from USAID support, OCCRP has already lost 29% of its funding and has been forced to lay off 20% of its staff.

A Way Forward

Many members of Congress are deeply enmeshed with the USAID, which supports both Democrat and Republican think tanks, the National Democratic Institute (NDI)⁶⁴ and the International Republican Institute (IRI),⁶⁵ which bring members of Congress to foreign nations on various junkets. NDI calls its work with Democrats “Legislative Development” while IRI calls it “Legislative Strengthening.” The efforts appear to be open efforts to influence members of Congress to support USAID. Those members may next week register their upset with Trump.

But both the American people and foreign leaders want reform. Sixty-percent of Americans have long supported cutting foreign aid, which has long been popular with the public.⁶⁶ Left-wing Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said that USAID is “This agency has funded everything from research projects to groups that oppose the government. In Mexico, 'Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción' has received proven support from this agency. So how is it that these so-called 'aid' agencies get involved in politics? Its involved in so many things that, honestly, it's better if they just shut it down. If there's going to be aid, it should come through other transparent channels—that's the real issue.”⁶⁷ And Right-wing El Salvador President Nayib Bukele [wrote](#) on X, “Most governments don’t want USAID funds flowing into their countries because they understand where much of that money actually ends up. While marketed as support for development, democracy, and human rights, the majority of these funds are

funneled into opposition groups, NGOs with political agendas, and destabilizing movements.”⁶⁸

Congress should defund all and any federal programs and contractors that promote or engage in censorship and propaganda. Recommitment to an America First foreign policy should require an unwavering commitment to free speech. Congress should cut off funding to groups, including the Aspen Institute, which interfered in the 2020 election. Trump should order the State Department, the National Science Foundation, the Department of Homeland Security, and other agencies to end all contracts with censorship advocates and “misinformation researchers.”

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