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One Hundred Eighteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

May 1, 2023

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

Last year, after the State's Department's Inspector General issued a detailed report¹ chronicling inappropriate actions by the Global Engagement Center (GEC), members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee determined it was appropriate to delay reauthorizing the GEC until issues related to internal staffing, organizational structure, and policy priorities were resolved.

Since that time, however, additional news has come to light that suggests the GEC continues to stray from its founding mission through its subsidized censorship of free speech and disfavored opinions – particularly by established conservative media and individuals – through grants, partnerships, and awards to entities including the Global Disinformation Index,² the Institute for Strategic Dialogue,³ the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab,⁴ and Moonshot CVE. The GEC also appears to take the official position that populism – whether at home or

¹ Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Dep't of State, *Inspection of the Global Engagement Center*, Sept. 2022.

² Letter from Darrell Issa, Rep., U.S. House of Reps., to Antony J. Blinken, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of State (Mar. 3, 2023), https://issa.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/issa.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/20230303_rep-issa-letter_sec-state_gec.pdf; see also Gabe Kaminsky, *Disinformation Inc: Watchdog Launches Sweeping Investigation into Conservative Blacklists*, WASH. EXAM'R (Feb. 22, 2023, 3:46 P.M.), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/disinformation-inc-watchdog-investigation-into-conservative-blacklists-global-disinformation-index>.

³ See Kaminsky, *supra* note 1; Ailan Evans, *State Department Helped Fund 'Disinformation' Research Group That Reportedly Blacklists Conservative News Sites*, DAILY CALLER (Feb. 9, 2023, 7:03 P.M.), <https://dailycaller.com/2023/02/09/state-department-disinformation-conservative-news-site/>.

⁴ See Christopher Hutton, *Twitter Resisted Blacklist Requests from Outside Group That Got Government Funding*, WASH. EXAM'R (Mar. 2, 2023), <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/twitter-resisted-blacklist-requests-from-outside-group-that-got-government-funding/ar-AA189jT8> (reporting that DFRLab sent Twitter a list of 40,000 accounts alleged to be Hindu nationalists to be censored, which Twitter found to be American accounts); Evans, *supra* note 2.

abroad – is an affront to democracy and the First Amendment rights of all Americans. For example:

- In 2021, the GEC spent \$275,000 producing a “counter-disinformation video game” that programmed audiences to associate citizen critiques of government waste, fraud, and abuse with a social media disinformation campaign.⁵
- In 2020, the GEC produced a similar “counter-disinformation video game” explicitly targeting “political misinformation,” apparently modeled off the U.S. 2020 presidential election cycle.⁶
- In the above “counter-disinformation video games,” the GEC selected and supported⁷ the University of Cambridge Social Decision-Making Lab, whose recent “disinformation research” includes:
 - Targeting U.S. conservatives⁸
 - Targeting “climate change deniers”⁹
 - Targeting “vaccine skeptics”¹⁰
 - Targeting “election deniers”¹¹
- The GEC provided support¹² to the Global Disinformation Index, which created blacklists of U.S. domestic media voices to cripple U.S. citizen journalists’ advertising revenue.
- The GEC partners on disinformation¹³ with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, whose other “disinformation research” includes advocacy for censoring:
 - “Climate misinformation”¹⁴

⁵ See Adam Andrzejewski, *State Dept Paid \$275K for Video Game to “Counter Disinformation”*, REAL CLEAR POL’Y (Dec. 7, 2022), https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2022/12/07/state_dept_paid_275k_for_video_game_to_counter_disinformation_868137.html?mc_cid=da6ac80146&mc_eid=02f9b34dcf#!; *Funding for new Counter-Disinformation Game*, DUKE UNIV., <https://researchfunding.duke.edu/funding-new-counter-disinformation-game> (last visited Apr. 13, 2023); Mike Benz, *US Gov’t Funding ‘Disinformation’ Video Game ‘Cat Park,’ Leaked State Dept Memo Reveals*, FOUND. FOR FREEDOM ONLINE (Nov. 17, 2022), <https://report.foundationforfreedomonline.com/11-17-22.html>.

⁶ See Patricia Watts, *Global Engagement Center Game Counters Foreign Disinformation*, STATE MAG. (Feb. 2021), <https://statemag.state.gov/2021/02/0221itn05/>.

⁷ See *Game Combats Political Misinformation by Letting Players Undermine Democracy*, UNIV. OF CAMBRIDGE (Nov. 6, 2020), <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/game-combats-political-misinformation-by-letting-players-undermine-democracy>.

⁸ See Steve Rathje et al., *Letter to the Editors of Psychological Science; Meta-Analysis Reveals That Accuracy Nudges Have Little to No Effect for U.S. Conservatives: Regarding Pennycook et al. (2020)*, PSYCH. SCI., Jan. 2022.

⁹ See Mikey Biddlestone et al., *Climate of Conspiracy: A Meta-Analysis of the Consequences of Belief in Conspiracy Theories About Climate Change*, 46 CURRENT OP. PSYCH., Aug. 2022.

¹⁰ See Maryline Vivion et al., *Prebunking Messaging to Inoculate Against COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation: An Effective Strategy for Public Health*, 15 J. COMMUN IN HEALTHCARE 232 (2022).

¹¹ See Aaron C. Weinschenck et al., *Democratic Norms, Social Projection, and False Consensus in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election*, 20 J. POL. MKTG. 255 (2021).

¹² See Gabe Kaminsky, *Disinformation Inc: Congress Receives Classified Briefing on Conservative Blacklist Group*, WASH. EXAM’R (Mar. 2, 2023, 12:10 P.M.), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/house/disinformation-inc-classified-briefing-conservative-blacklist-gdi>.

¹³ See *U.S.-Paris Tech Challenge*, ATL. COUNCIL, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/u-s-paris-tech-challenge/> (last visited Apr. 19, 2023).

¹⁴ See CLIMATE ACTION AGAINST DISINFORMATION, DENY, DECEIVE, DELAY (VOL 2): EXPOSING NEW TRENDS IN CLIMATE MIS- AND DISINFORMATION AT COP27 (2023); EISHA MAHARAINGAM-SHAH & PIERRE VAUX, INST. FOR

- “Covid misinformation,” “anti-vaccine misinformation,” and “Anti-Lockdown Activity”¹⁵
- “Abortion misinformation”¹⁶
- The GEC partners on disinformation¹⁷ with the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Research Lab, which appears to have played a significant role in censorship of U.S. citizens during both the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 and 2022 US elections.¹⁸
- The GEC partners on disinformation¹⁹ with Moonshot CVE, which previously used its “redirect method” to automatically redirect US citizens searching YouTube for right-wing political content to the channel of a left-wing anarchist instead.²⁰
- The Twitter Files revealed GEC’s potential role in censoring speech online,²¹ often under a flimsy pretense with thinly sourced evidence from non-credible sources.²²
- The GEC allegedly also pressured LinkedIn to join domestic censorship efforts.²³

The GEC’s founding mission, effectively, was to provide a ready resource for the truth about America and our fight against global terror, particularly ISIS. We therefore are forced to wonder about the authority by which the GEC justifies its mission creep, and the direction of its current evolutionary trajectory.²⁴

Congress originally authorized the GEC to “support the development and dissemination of fact-based narratives and analysis to counter propaganda and disinformation directed at the United

STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, ‘CLIMATE LOCKDOWN’ AND THE CULTURE WARS: HOW COVID-19 SPARKED A NEW NARRATIVE AGAINST CLIMATE ACTION (2021).

¹⁵ See HANNAH WINTER ET AL., INST. FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, DISINFORMATION OVERDOSE: A STUDY OF THE CRISIS OF TRUST AMONG VACCINE SCEPTICS AND ANTI-VAXXERS (2021); INST. FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, ANTI-LOCKDOWN ACTIVITY: UNITED STATES COUNTRY PROFILE (2022); JACOB DAVEY & MILO COMERFORD, INST. FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, BETWEEN CONSPIRACY AND EXTREMISM: A LONG COVID THREAT? AN INTRODUCTORY PAPER (2021).

¹⁶ See CLARA MARTINY ET AL., INST. FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS’ RESPONSE 100 DAYS AFTER US SUPREME COURT DECISION OVERTURNING ROE V. WADE (2022); CLARA MARTINY ET AL., INST. FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, EVALUATING PLATFORM ABORTION-RELATED SPEECH POLICIES: WERE PLATFORMS PREPARED FOR THE POST-DOBBS ENVIRONMENT? (2022).

¹⁷ See *U.S.-Paris Tech Challenge*, *supra* note 12.

¹⁸ See Mike Benz, *DHS Censorship Agency Had Strange First Mission: Banning Speech That Casts Doubt on ‘Red Mirage, Blue Shift’ Election Results*, FOUND. FOR FREEDOM ONLINE (Nov. 9, 2022), <https://report.foundationforfreedomonline.com/11-9-22.html>.

¹⁹ See *U.S.-Paris Tech Challenge*, *supra* note 12.

²⁰ See Anita Chabria & Evan Halper, *Effort to Stem Online Extremism Accidentally Pushed People Toward an Anarchist*, L.A. TIMES (Mar. 30, 2021, 5:00 A.M.), <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-03-30/google-moonshot-redirect-far-right-online-extremism-anarchist>.

²¹ See Matt Taibbi (@mtaibbi), TWITTER (Mar. 2, 2023, 12:00 P.M.), <https://twitter.com/mtaibbi/status/1631338650901389322>.

²² See Matt Taibbi (@mtaibbi), TWITTER (Mar. 2, 2023, 12:00 P.M.), <https://twitter.com/mtaibbi/status/1631338756417499136>.

²³ Ed Morrissey, *Why Was the State Dept Pushing LinkedIn to Join the Gov’t-Industrial Censorship Complex?*, HOT AIR (Apr. 12, 2023, 11:21 A.M.), <https://hotair.com/ed-morrissey/2023/04/12/why-was-the-state-dept-pushing-linkedin-to-join-the-govt-industrial-censorship-complex-n543268#>.

²⁴ See, e.g. Catherine Salgado, *Federal Government-Backed Big Tech Censorship Colluder Decries ‘Gendered Disinformation’*, NEWSBUSTERS (Mar. 29, 2023, 5:59 P.M.), <https://newsbusters.org/blogs/free-speech/catherine-salgado/2023/03/29/federal-government-backed-big-tech-censorship>.

States and United States allies and partner nations.”²⁵ While the GEC performs some unquestionably important work,²⁶ it has also provided social media companies with access to tech applications that “detect and either knock down or flag malign-foreign-influence activity,” but, according to the FBI, also “might accidentally pick up U.S. people[’s] information.”²⁷

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits government officials from censoring disfavored speakers and viewpoints.²⁸ Merely labeling speech “misinformation” or “disinformation” does not strip away First Amendment protections, and government officials may not circumvent the First Amendment by inducing, threatening, and/or colluding with private entities to suppress protected speech.²⁹

In 2019, Richard Stengel, the very first head of the GEC after its 2016 founding, published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* calling for an effective end to the First Amendment.³⁰ This fact calls into question not only the founder, but the founding vision of the GEC itself. Stengel went on to say in a televised interview: “[T]he basis of the First Amendment, the marketplace of ideas model, is actually not working. Marketplace of ideas is this notion that good ideas will drive out bad ideas. Well, it was kind of a mystical notion coming from Milton and John Stewart Mill and that doesn’t really happen anymore ... I’m actually very sympathetic now to the U.S. adopting some versions of hate speech laws in Europe.”

Due to the lack of transparency regarding the GEC, and its potential violations of the Constitution, I write to request that you provide the committee the following documents and information no later than May 11, 2023:

1. All documents and communications between the GEC and any entity with a domestic presence in the United States, including media outlets, mentioning “disinformation”, “disinfo”, “misinformation”, “misinfo” or “malinformation.”
2. All documents and communications regarding the U.S. Department of State’s contracts, grants, cooperative agreements, or other agreements for assistance covered in section 200.40 Federal financial assistance of the OMB Uniform Grant Guidance to any of the following entities:
 - a. Alliance for Securing Democracy;
 - b. Atlantic Council;
 - c. Digital Public Square;
 - d. German Marshall Fund of the United States;

²⁵ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, 114 Pub. L. No. 328 § 1287(b)(3) (2016).

²⁶ See Michael R. Gordon and Dustin Volz, *U.S. Steps Up Effort to Fight Against Russian Disinformation*, WALL ST. J. (Apr. 12, 2023, 1:24 P.M.), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-steps-up-fight-against-russian-disinformation-90ecee55?mod=mhp>.

²⁷ Deposition of Elvis Chan at 138, *Missouri v. Biden*, No. 3:22-CV-01213, 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 46918 (W.D. La. Nov. 29, 2022).

²⁸ *W. Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943); *Ashcroft v. ACLU*, 535 U.S. 564, 573 (2002).

²⁹ *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 718.

³⁰ Richard Stengel, *Why America Needs a Hate Speech Law*, WASH. POST (Oct. 29, 2019), <https://archive.fo/vGMLV>.

- e. Global Disinformation Index;
 - f. Google Jigsaw;
 - g. Institute for Strategic Dialogue;
 - h. Moonshot CVE;
3. All documents, emails, and correspondence to/from employees, contractors, subcontractors, or consultants at the GEC mentioning “disinformation”, “misinformation, or “malinformation” in conjunction with the Washington Examiner, Real Clear Politics, the *Federalist*, *Newsmax*, *Breitbart*, *the Daily Wire*, *One America News*, and the *New York Post*; and
 4. All documents, emails, and correspondence to/from employees, contractors, subcontractors, or consultants at the GEC pertaining to content moderation decisions by social media or online tech platforms in connection with Covid-19 policies and practices, including all GEC documents, emails and correspondence with private sector and civil society intermediaries with such social media or online tech platforms.

Material preservation is essential for Congress to conduct a comprehensive fact-finding investigation into actions by the GEC and grantees in stifling, censoring, and silencing conservative speech through the guise of labeling it as misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation.

More specifically, this request should also be construed as an instruction to preserve all documents, communications, and other information, including electronic information and metadata, that is or may be potentially responsive to this congressional inquiry. This includes electronic messages about the determined topic that are sent using official and personal accounts or drives, including records created using text messages, phone-based messaging applications, or encryption software. For purposes of this request, “preserve” includes taking reasonable steps to prevent the partial or full destruction, alteration, deletion, shredding, wiping, relocation, migration, theft, mutilation, reckless, or negligent handling of responsive documents, communications, and information that could render the information incomplete or inaccessible.

Please notify all relevant current and former employees, colleagues, officials, contractors, subcontractors, and consultants who may have worked on documents, communications, or information that is or would be potentially responsive to this congressional inquiry. Thank you for your cooperation in this critical oversight matter.

Respectfully,



Michael T. McCaul
Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee



Brian Mast
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight & Accountability



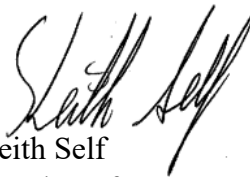
Christopher H. Smith
Chairman
Subcommittee on Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations



Darrell Issa
Member of Congress



Maria Elvira Salazar
Member of Congress



Keith Self
Member of Congress



Cory Mills
Member of Congress



Ken Buck
Member of Congress