



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

The Threat Of NGO Censorship

Hearing on
“Laws Regulating Foreign NGOs:
Human Rights Implications”

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2:00 – 4:00 p.m.

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

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Co-Chairman McGovern and Co-Chairman Smith, thank you for inviting me to testify.

The picture many people have of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is overwhelmingly positive. We perceive them as independent of governments, which people often view negatively. We view NGOs as apolitical and nonideological, free from the biases and passions of political parties. And we perceive them as charitable, focused on helping the needy, or concerned for the public's interest, not private or political interests.

And yet there is now overwhelming evidence that governments have funded and in some cases created NGOs to demand politically-motivated, unconstitutional, and dangerously ideological censorship. Other journalists, researchers, and I have documented how government intelligence and security agencies have done this in the US, Europe, and Brazil.¹ Those agencies work with existing or new NGOs to circumvent free speech protections, including the First Amendment, and legitimize what is politically and ideologically motivated as apolitical and non-ideological. This can accurately be described as "censorship-by-proxy."²

By pointing this out, I am not arguing against NGOs, justifying government crackdowns on civil society organizations, or advocating for new regulations or laws governing NGOs. I am the founder and board member of an NGO, have for 30 years worked with and for NGOs, and have a great deal of respect for many of them. I think we should require far greater transparency from them, and perhaps we need new laws, but I am not here today to argue for NGO reform.

Instead, I want to draw attention to the abuses of power by the Intelligence Community (IC) and policymakers who have sought to selectively empower biased NGOs to censor First Amendment-protected speech on social media platforms, including X, Instagram,

¹ Phoebe Smith, Alex Gutentag, Eli Vieira, and David Agape, "The Role of the U.S. Government in Brazil's Censorship Industrial Complex," Civilization Works, October 1, 2024.

<https://www.civilizationworks.org/cw-master-blog/the-role-of-the-us-government-in-brazils-censorship-industrial-complex>

² Michael Shellenberger, "The Censorship Industrial Complex," Testimony to The House Select Committee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, March 23, 2023.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF16/20230328/115561/HHRG-118-IF16-20230328-SD012.pdf>

Michael Shellenberger, "The Censorship Industrial Complex, Part II: U.S. and foreign government support for domestic censorship and disinformation, 2016 - 2022," Testimony by to The House Select Committee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, November 30, 2023.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FD/FD00/20231130/116615/HHRG-118-FD00-Wstate-ShellenbergerM-20231130.pdf>

Michael Shellenberger, Matt Taiibi, and Alex Gutentag, "The CTIL Files, Part 1: **US And UK Military Contractors Created Sweeping Plan For Global Censorship In 2018, New Documents Show**," Testimony by to The House Select Committee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, November 28, 2023.

Michael Shellenberger, "The Censorship Industrial Complex, Part III: The Foreign Censorship Threat," Testimony by to The House Judiciary Committee, February 12, 2025.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/JU/JU00/20250212/117881/HHRG-119-JU00-Wstate-ShellenbergerM-20250212-U4.pdf>

and Facebook. I want to do this because, at this moment, the Trump administration is negotiating trade agreements with nations that demand mass censorship. It is essential that Congress understands the malicious role that some NGOs have played in what can accurately be called the Censorship Industrial Complex, and that the Foreign Affairs Committee support strong free speech protections as part of America's foreign and trade policies.

Censorship by proxy operates similarly in every nation. NGOs claiming to be independent of governments, but funded by, created by, and working with government agencies, demand censorship based on their "independent reports," "fact checks," and "analyses." Often, the NGO "fact checks" are themselves misinformation, including misrepresentations of opinions as facts. As Twitter Files journalist Matt Taibbi noted in his 2023 testimony to Congress, "the bulk of censorship requests didn't come from government directly."³

Here are some examples of topics that were the subject of "fact-checking" that claimed accurate stories or legitimate opinions were false: the lab leak theory of Covid's origin; Covid vaccine side-effects; climate change's impact on coral reefs, extreme weather, and arctic ice; the origins of Hunter Biden's laptop; biological males in women's sports; and the adverse effects of transgender medicine, including hormonal and surgical interventions on minors. Having first spread misinformation about those things, NGOs and others then turned around and demanded censorship on the basis of it.⁴

Around the world, we have seen politicians and government employees attempting to establish special relationships between censorship NGOs and social media firms. Twitter and Facebook created special "portals" for government-funded NGOs to "flag" posts they wanted censored.⁵ The NGOs, staffed with ostensibly former military and intelligence employees, sought and won mass censorship with an aim at promoting the narratives they wanted and stomping out narratives they didn't want.

³ <https://x.com/mtaibbi/status/1633830029410070528>

⁴ Alex Gutentag and Andrew Lowenthal, "Stanford Group Helped US Government Censor Covid Dissidents and Then Lied About It, New Documents Show," Public, November 10, 2023. https://www.public.news/p/stanford-group-helped-us-government?utm_source=publication-search

⁵ Alex Gutentag and Andrew Lowenthal, "Stanford Group Helped US Government Censor Covid Dissidents and Then Lied About It, New Documents Show," Public, November 10, 2023. https://www.public.news/p/stanford-group-helped-us-government?utm_source=publication-search

There have been various legislative,⁶ regulatory, and judicial efforts in the US, France,⁷ Brazil, and other countries to require social media platforms to share user data with NGOs selected by government agencies.⁸ The idea is that those NGOs would then secretly demand “content moderation,” or censorship, based on that data, preventing public controversy or debate over what gets censored. The people behind those efforts, in seeking measures like deamplification, rather than removal, appear to have sought to hide what they were doing. Twitter, for example, did this with tweets calling to “#StopTheSteal,” in reference to the 2020 elections.⁹

What censorship NGOs demand is never neutral. It is consistently anti-populist and pro-globalist. Censorship NGOs labeled genuine citizen concerns over Covid vaccine mandates, mass migration, the invasion of Ukraine, and other topics as somehow Russian disinformation, as part of a clear IC strategy of demonizing domestic dissent as foreign, disloyal, and perhaps treasonous.

The IC has long used front groups and collaborated with private philanthropic entities to conceal government funding.¹⁰ It is notable that, in our investigations, the same

⁶ See for example, **PS.1876 - Platform Accountability and Transparency Act**
118th Congress (2023-2024)
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/1876/text>

“PATA would require the National Science Foundation to establish a review process to approve social media researchers, who would have to be affiliated with academic institutions,” noted Luke J. Matthews, Heather J. Williams, Alexandra T. Evans in **“Protecting Free Speech Compels Some Form of Social Media Regulation,” Rand Corporation, October 23, 2023.**

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/10/protecting-free-speech-compels-some-form-of-social.html>

⁷ Pascal Clérotte and Thomas Fazi, “Twitter Files - France,” Public, September 3, 2025.
<https://www.public.news/p/twitter-files-france>

⁸ Pascal Clérotte and Thomas Fazi, “Twitter Files - France,” Public, September 3, 2025.
<https://www.public.news/p/twitter-files-france>

⁹ <https://x.com/shellenberger/status/1601749506764046337>

¹⁰ TK

philanthropies — George Soros’ Open Society Foundations,¹¹ Omidyar Foundation,¹² and Craig Newmark¹³ philanthropies — kept showing up as private sector patrons to the censorship NGOs that the US and other governments also funded.

Since taking office, President Trump has defunded much of this censorship industrial complex, including by cutting NSF funding and eliminating USAID.

Unfortunately, these efforts continue abroad, and their aim remains to censor social media platforms, including those used by Americans. “Last week,” said X last Friday, September 5, “a Brazilian judge... ruled that removing content deemed unlawful under Brazilian law is not enough if limited to Brazil. The judge is now demanding the global removal of online content under threat of hefty fines for the platform.”¹⁴

The same thing is happening in Europe. Last year, its top censor, Thierry Breton, warned Elon Musk that interviewing Trump on X could violate Europe’s digital censorship act

¹¹ Michael Shellenberger, “Elite Crackdown on Free Speech Worldwide Intensifies,” August 24, 2023. https://www.public.news/p/elite-crackdown-on-free-speech-worldwide?utm_source=publication-search

Ben Scallan, “Soros-Funded NGOs Demand Crackdown On Free Speech As Politicians Spread Hate Misinformation,” Public, August 23, 2023. https://www.public.news/p/soros-funded-ngos-demand-crackdown?utm_source=publication-search

Gregor Baszak, “Soros, Facebook, And Omidyar Money Behind Attacks On German Farmers,” Public, January 29, 2024 https://www.public.news/p/soros-facebook-and-omidyar-money?utm_source=publication-search

David Agape, “FBI, Soros, And Secret Police In Vast Censorship Conspiracy In Brazil,” Public, January 30, 2024. https://www.public.news/p/fbi-soros-and-secret-police-in-vast?utm_source=publication-search

Michael Shellenberger and Gregor Baszak, “Government-Funded NGOs, Linked To NATO, Are Interfering In European Elections,” Public, April 5, 2024 https://www.public.news/p/government-funded-ngos-linked-to?utm_source=publication-search

David Agape, “Soros And US Government Behind Conspiracy Theories And Attacks On ‘Twitter Files Brazil’,” Public, May 14, 2024. https://www.public.news/p/soros-and-us-government-behind-conspiracy?utm_source=publication-search

¹² Michael Shellenberger, “Now They’re Trying Censor Your Text Messages,” Public, April 26, 2023. https://www.public.news/p/now-theyre-trying-censor-your-text?utm_source=publication-search

Michael Shellenberger and Gregor Baszak, “Government-Funded NGOs, Linked To NATO, Are Interfering In European Elections,” Public, April 5, 2024 https://www.public.news/p/government-funded-ngos-linked-to?utm_source=publication-search

¹³ Michael Shellenberger, “Victory! Stanford Shuts Down Censorship Operation,” Public, June 14, 2024. https://www.public.news/p/victory-stanford-shuts-down-censorship?utm_source=publication-search

¹⁴ TK

(DSA), and most analysts expect the EU to demand social media companies take down content globally, making the argument that their own citizens could see it by using a VPN. The UK's Online Safety Act (OSA) has already resulted in one American social media site shutting down there to avoid the high cost of compliance.¹⁵

There is already evidence of "the Brussels effect," the EU's economic power, causing even the most prominent US firms, Google and Meta, to decide to simply impose European demands for censorship on Americans, for cost and political reasons. Internal emails subpoenaed and released by Congress show that Facebook executives felt pressure to comply with White House censorship demands in order to resolve a European Union ban on the social media company's ability to transfer the data of European users to its servers in the United States.

In July 2021, after a White House official demanded that Facebook censor more information, Facebook's Vice President of Global Affairs and Communications, Nick Clegg, asked his colleagues to comply. The reason? Because of "the bigger fish we have to fry with the Administration — data flows etc..."¹⁶

We should take stock after the Fri meeting, but my sense is that our current course — in effect explaining ourselves more fully, but not shifting on where we draw the lines or on the data we provide (subject to the agreement last night that we'd offer up VPVs of content we've removed but only if demanded from other platforms on the same basis) is a recipe for protracted and increasing acrimony with the WH as the vaccine roll out continues to stutter through the Fall and the Winter. **Given the bigger fish we have to fry with the Administration — data flows etc** — that doesn't seem a great place for us to be, so grateful for any further creative thinking on how we can be responsive to their concerns.

The Trump administration and Congress should view protecting the First Amendment as a make-or-break condition for trade agreements with Europe, Brazil, and other nations. Americans are obligated under NATO to protect its members, but the NATO charter requires members to have "democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law." If NATO members, including Britain, France, and Germany, are no longer going to respect free speech and democracy, then the US should no longer participate in NATO. I urge Congress to make clear its support for strong free speech protections as part of America's foreign and trade policies.

In the meantime, we should change our view of most NGOs. Many are not true "civil society" groups, but have direct ties to the IC. They are governmental rather than nongovernmental. Many are political and ideological, reflecting the biases and passions of specific political parties. And it is many of those NGOs that have been involved in demanding

¹⁵ Aaron Mak, "The UK's new tech law triggers upheaval," Politico, July 29, 2025.

¹⁶ Michael Shellenberger, Alex Gutentag, and Leighton Woodhouse, "New Facebook Files Expose Biden Censorship-for-Spying Scheme," Public, August 23, 2025.
https://www.public.news/p/new-facebook-files-expose-biden-censorship?utm_source=publication-search

censorship around the world. Anyone who cares about free speech and democracy should not only support halting taxpayer funding of such NGOs but also investigate their funding, governance, and practices, as they pose a direct threat to our fundamental freedoms.