

# Billionaires' Media: The Smearing of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Toronto Globe and Mail Smears Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Calling him “a top voice of misinformation on social media.”

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*On Sept. 17, Toronto-based The Globe and Mail newspaper published an extraordinary and very lengthy article vilifying Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and calling him “a top voice of misinformation on social media.” The headline for the piece summarizes its range: “How a Kennedy became a ‘superspreader’ of hoaxes on COVID-19, vaccines, 5G and more”. [1]*

For more than a decade, Kennedy Jr. has raised issues about vaccine safety through the organization he founded, Children’s Health Defense. The Globe and Mail piece stated:

“Like other conspiracy theorists, [RFK Jr.] has gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting his anti-vaccine messages to fit the crisis, firing off false allegations against Microsoft founder Bill Gates [on COVID-19 vaccines, and other issues] and about the safety of 5G telecom networks. Since February, Mr. Kennedy Jr.’s social media support has tripled from 229,000 followers to 665,000 today.”

## How a Kennedy became a ‘superspreader’ of hoaxes on COVID-19, vaccines, 5G and more

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was once an acclaimed environmentalist, but his anti-vaccination advocacy and conspiracy theories have made him a magnet for misinformation in the pandemic

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**ALEXI MOSTROUS**

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At the end of what can only be called a smear piece, the print edition of The Globe and Mail stated, “This article was originally published by Tortoise, a different kind of newsroom committed to a slower, wiser news. To try Tortoise, Globe readers can get a 30-day free trial and a special half price offer...”

Strangely, the article made no mention of Children’s Health Defense, or of Kennedy’s Jr.’s August 29 speech in Berlin, where he addressed a huge rally. He told them that the COVID-19 pandemic is a “crisis of convenience for the elites” who are “destroying the middle class,” “using the quarantine to bring 5G into our communities” for “surveillance and data-mining”, and shifting us all “to digital currencies” and a cashless society that will benefit “the billionaires.”

Similarly, the Tortoise article didn’t mention that on August 17, Children’s Health Defense filed a lawsuit against Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg and three fact-checking companies, charging them with censoring truthful public health information. [2]

So what (or who) is Tortoise Media?

“Slower, Wiser News”?

Tortoise Media was launched in April 2019 by three people: James Harding, former editor at Rupert Murdoch’s Times newspaper, and subsequently head of BBC News until resigning in October 2017; Matthew Barzun, former US ambassador to the UK; and Katie Vanneck-Smith, former president of The Wall Street Journal and Dow Jones.

Initial financial backing for London-based Tortoise was provided by banker Bernie Mensah, Global Head of Emerging Markets for Bank of America Merrill Lynch, tech investor Saul Klein, and two anonymous backers. [3]

The Tortoise Media website now lists Harding as Editor; Vanneck-Smith as Publisher; Matthew Barzun as Chairman; and Ceci Kurzman (former founder of Nexus Management) as Independent Director. The website also currently lists 27 major funding partners, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, Edelman, Facebook, Google, and the Rockefeller Foundation. [4] This article will focus on the Gates Foundation, and Edelman – considered one of the largest public-relations firms in the world, with some 67 offices worldwide.

Tortoise Media used a November 2018 Kickstarter campaign to launch a drive for a membership boutique – a “redistributive model” for news funding by which expensive membership tiers provide funding for less expensive (or free) memberships.

By June of 2019, Tortoise Media had 8,000 members, with 40 per cent of them under the age of 30. Businesses are funding memberships to be distributed by charitable organizations, academies, and other groups in order to “fill Tortoise’s demographic gaps, such as those outside London, teenagers, the elderly, and the working class.” [5] Press Gazette also noted that only three months after the April 2019 launch, seven major brand names “including Santander bank and PR firm Edelman” had signed up to fund memberships. [6]

A Tortoise membership costs from 5 pounds sterling per month (or 50 pounds per year) for someone under-30, to 24 pounds per month (for other individuals) and 250 pounds per month (for businesses and wealthy sponsors). The first 5,000 founding student members

receive free membership. By November 2019, Tortoise Media was claiming “nearly 20,000 members,” with numbers climbing rapidly because of widespread corporate support subsidizing memberships. [7]

Tortoise hosts frequent “ThinkIns” (editorial meetings and conversations) between partners and members, between partners and stakeholders, and between partner companies and their employees. “We believe in opening up journalism,” their website states, “so we can examine issues and develop ideas for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We want to do this with our members and with our partners. We want to give everyone a seat at the table.” Tortoise calls its members “family.”

The Tortoise Media website stresses that “we don’t take ads...Instead, our journalism is funded by our members and our partners. We establish partnerships with businesses willing to back a new form of journalism, enable the public debate, share their expertise and communicate their point of view.” But Tortoise hastens to add: “Our partners, of course, know that we are a journalistic enterprise. Our independence is non-negotiable. If we ever have to choose between the relationship and the story, we’ll always choose the story.”

With regard to the September 17 piece smearing RFK Jr., Tortoise Media didn’t have to choose between the relationship with two of its funding partners (the Gates Foundation, Facebook) and “the story” because all three were nicely aligned.

#### Billionaires’ Media

Back in autumn 2018, when buzz was circulating about the upcoming launch of Tortoise Media, Emily Bell, the director of a digital journalism center at Columbia University’s graduate school of journalism, wrote an opinion piece for The Guardian. Bell called the Tortoise venture “mysterious,” but noted that mainstream media is under financial “pressure” and may be in need of a “redistributive model of news funding,” such as that being created by Tortoise. [8]

“There is an acceptance that billionaires might be the answer after all,” wrote Bell in her praise for the Tortoise approach, citing examples such as Apple founder Steve Job’s widow Laurene Powell Job’s purchase of The Atlantic; Salesforce founder Mark Benioff’s purchase of Time magazine; and Amazon head Jeff Bezos’ buy-up of the Washington Post. [9]

What Bell glaringly omitted is the fact that over the past decade, Facebook, Google, etc. have taken major ad revenues away from the mainstream media, enriching the firms’ executives and shareholders while gutting newsrooms across the globe. As thousands of journalists have been jettisoned, billionaires have stepped in to become media owners, furthering their control of information and public discourse on key issues.

Tortoise Media’s funding partners include two of the wealthiest billionaires on the planet: Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg.

Of course, that should remind Canadian readers that The Globe and Mail (which published the Tortoise Media piece) is owned by the richest family in Canada, the Thomsons, “who have seen their fortune increase by nearly \$9 billion during the pandemic, up to \$50.6 billion from \$41.7 billion in March.” [10]

Strangely, The Guardian's Emily Bell expressed hope that Tortoise would "encourage a rush of 1% wealth into more deprived areas of [news] coverage," such as "income inequality, racism, the health service, climate change, the march of authoritarianism, the inexorable rise of misogyny, the challenges of artificial intelligence and the collapse of democratic institutions." [11] This a very naive position, as though news coverage of such issues has nothing to do with *how* they are covered, but only *that* they are covered.

Indeed, the loss of so many professional journalists means that mainstream news outlets increasingly rely on corporate press releases, think tank reports, corporate pundits, and spin – the very backbone of PR firms like Tortoise funding partner Edelman, which exist to manage such issues for their clients. In fact, PR Watch has called Edelman "the world's largest PR company, synonymous with astroturf-style front groups and dirty tricks." [12]

## Event 201



Shortly after Tortoise Media was launched, two of its funding partners participated in a global-pandemic exercise called Event 201, which was held in New York City in October 2019 and involved 15 lead participants.

Independent journalist Rosemary Frei, who has written extensively about COVID-19, told me by email that Event 201 "simulated a novel-coronavirus pandemic – and eerily reflected what started to roll out in the real world shortly after that, including measures against the virus causing the markets to crash." Frei told me, "One of the event's main sponsors was the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation," and "a representative from the foundation was among the 15 lead participants. Another lead participant was Matthew Harrington, the Global Chief Operating Officer at Edelman."

According to Frei, citing video footage from Event 201 that she'd mentioned in her March 29 blog entry ([rosemaryfrei.ca/blog](http://rosemaryfrei.ca/blog)), "One of the central predictions in Event 201 was 'overwhelming amounts of dis- and misinformation circulating over the internet'. [Edelman's] Harrington opined at the roundtable that, in response, social-media platforms [Facebook, Google, Twitter, etc.] must recognize they are broadcasters and partner "with the scientific and health communities to counterweight [misinformation], if not flood the zone, [with] accurate information."

Frei told me, "Harrington also said 'there needs to be a centralized response around the communications approach, that then is cascaded to informed advocates representing the NGO communities, the medical professionals, etc.' and 'centralized on an international basis'."

With Edelman and the Gates Foundation worried about dis- and misinformation circulating over the internet, these two Tortoise partners appear to have joined forces with Tortoise partners Facebook and Google, which during the pandemic lockdown have been censoring public health information from a variety of websites. A Facebook spokesperson recently told The Guardian that "we have removed 7m [million] pieces of Covid-19-related misinfo between April and June..." [13]

One of the perks that Tortoise provides to its members is a "daily news feed" of selected articles from other sites, along with its own pieces. It looks like Tortoise Media is intended to be a "centralized response" on "an international basis". With Edelman's help, and its 67

offices worldwide, that is potentially possible.

## Gates & Media

That may help explain Tortoise Media's Sept. 17 article expressing concern that "Since February, Mr. Kennedy Jr.'s social-media support has tripled from 229,000 followers to 665,000 today." [14]

Ironically, those numbers come nowhere close to the millions of people reached through the media by Bill Gates, who has been pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into mainstream news outlets across Europe and North America.

In a feature article for the Columbia Journalism Review (August 21, 2020), Tim Schwab stated: "As philanthropists increasingly fill in the funding gaps at news organizations - a role that is almost certain to expand in the media downturn following the coronavirus pandemic - an underexamined worry is how this will affect the ways newsrooms report on their benefactors. Nowhere does this concern loom larger than with the Gates Foundation, a leading donor to newsrooms and a frequent subject of favorable news coverage." [15]

Schwab examined "nearly twenty thousand charitable grants the Gates foundation had made through the end of June [2020] and found more than \$250 million going toward journalism." Recipients included the BBC, NBC, Al-Jazeera, ProPublica, National Journal, The Guardian, Univision, Medium, the Financial Times, The New York Times, The Atlantic, the Texas Tribune, Gannett, Washington Monthly, Le Monde, the Seattle Times, the Center for Investigative Reporting, Participant, the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, the National Press Foundation, the International Center for Journalists, and the American Press Institute.

Schwab called the list incomplete because the Gates Foundation doesn't have to report everything it funds.

Schwab stated: "In the same way that the news media has given Gates an outsize voice in the pandemic, the foundation has long used its charitable giving to shape the public discourse on everything from global health to education [favouring charter schools] to agriculture [pro-GMOs] - a level of influence that has landed Bill Gates on Forbes' list of the most powerful people in the world." [16]

Germany's major newspaper Der Spiegel recently reported that, like other news outlets, it has received "around 2 - 3 million euros over three years" from the Gates Foundation, and noted that this raises "questions about a covert agenda to influence the news." [17] Gates responded that for any news outlet funded by him, "what they actually write in those articles is totally up to them." [18]

But according to CJR's Tim Schwab, "When Gates gives money to newsrooms, it restricts how the money is used - often for topics, like global health and education, on which the foundation works - which can help elevate its agenda in the news media." [19]

Noting that critical coverage of Gates is "rare," Schwab stated that "a larger worry is the precedent the prevailing coverage of Gates sets for how we report on the next generation of tech billionaires-turned philanthropists, including Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg." [20]

But that's where a site like Tortoise Media comes in, with its courting of the under-30 age group, its ThinkIns, its free subscriptions for the disadvantaged, its daily news feeds for

members, its consideration of members and partners as “family”, and its partnership with a major PR firm.

### “Dirty Tricks”

When PR Watch called Edelman “synonymous with astroturf-style front groups and dirty tricks” in August 2014, it was referring to past scandals such as the revelation in 2008 that the firm had created fake “grassroots” bloggers for a digital astroturfing campaign assisting its client Walmart during a battle with unions. PR Watch could not have known that, just months later in November 2014, another scandal would erupt that would expose Edelman’s PR tactics in detail.

In November 2014, Greenpeace released documents that revealed Edelman’s internal PR advice for its client TransCanada Corp. in an effort to win the Canadian public’s support for a tar sands pipeline called Energy East. Greenpeace called the advice “dirty tricks”.

The documents unveiled Edelman’s plan for a “permanent campaign” to turn Canadians into “champions” for the pipeline, which would move tar sands bitumen across six provinces.

As CBC News reported:

“It starts with getting people to simply click on an Energy East project website to request more information about the project. Edelman says it can turn the ‘average citizen into issue activists’. ‘Using targeted messaging and behaviour tracking to directly appeal to the individual’s trigger points and develop them from a supporter to an activist to a champion,’ said one of the documents... It says advocacy can develop from people simply signing a petition and develop into testifying at public meetings or lending their personal stories for ads and promotions. ‘They provide us with a rich base of advocates who passionately understand and support our cause and are willing - more often than not - to do what’s asked of them’.” [21]

Edelman further recommended that “Third-party voices must also be identified, recruited and heard to build an echo chamber of aligned voices” in the media. In order to “neutralize risk,” Edelman suggested “detailed background research on key opposition groups” such as Council of Canadians, Equiterre, the David Suzuki Foundation, Avaaz, and Ecology Ottawa. They also advised: “Add layers of difficulty for our opponents, distracting them from their mission and causing them to redirect their resources.” [22]

Even the mainstream media called these “creepy tactics,” with one columnist referring to “communications black ops, phony grassroots campaigns, squadrons of dutiful Twitter trolls and search-and-destroy missions on opponents...rooting out skeletons in the closets” of opponents. [23] TransCanada Corp. had to distance itself from Edelman’s advice, and later cancelled the Energy East pipeline project.

This background on Edelman’s PR tactics does make one wonder to what extent Tortoise Media is adopting a somewhat similar strategy.

### Cashless Society

Readers of the smear piece on RFK Jr. may have been wondering what the “and more” part



of the “hoaxes on COVID-19 vaccines, 5G and more” headline refers to. Quite likely, it refers to Kennedy Jr.’s comment in Berlin about the billionaires shifting us all into “digital currencies” to their benefit.

The Gates Foundation is part of the “Better Than Cash Alliance,” which in 2016 allied with USAID and pushed India’s Narendra Modi government to remove several banknotes – the 500 Rupee and the 1,000 Rupee – from circulation. That would be like suddenly removing all ten-dollar and 20-dollar bills from circulation in North America and declaring that holders of those notes would have to deposit them in a bank by a certain deadline or they would be worthless. [24]

Besides the Gates Foundation and USAID, the “Better Than Cash Alliance” includes Mastercard and Visa, the Ford Foundation, Omidyar Network (EBay), banking giant CitiGroup and others. [25]

USAID and its corporate partners knew in advance that only 55% of India’s population had a bank account, and 95% of all transactions were conducted in cash. So the sudden change had a huge effect on India’s poorest, working in the informal sector for cash. As a result of this decree, there was massive famine and thousands of people died because they had no way to buy food. Furthermore, thousands of small businesses went under. [26]

In Der Spiegel’s recent interview with Bill Gates, he expressed concerns about poor countries and insisted “Our foundation is about saving lives.” [27] But that certainly wasn’t true in India in November 2016.

As Columbia Journalism Review’s Tim Schwab stated: “Bill Gates has shown how seamlessly the most controversial industry captain can transform his public image from tech villain to benevolent philanthropist. Insofar as journalists are supposed to scrutinize wealth and power, Gates should probably be one of the most investigated people on earth – not the most admired.” [28] But if Tortoise Media and its “family” of partners and members have their way, that’s how things will remain.

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## Notes

[1] Alexi Mostros, “How a Kennedy became a ‘superspreader’ of hoaxes on COVID-19, vaccines, 5G and more,” The Globe and Mail, September 17, 2020.

[2] Julia Woodford, “Woodford Files,” Vitality Magazine, Fall 2020.

[3] Emily Bell, “Can James Harding’s Tortoise be more than a rich person’s club?” The Guardian, October 22, 2018.

[4] [www.tortoisemedia.com/partners/](http://www.tortoisemedia.com/partners/)

[5] Charlotte Tobitt, “‘Slow News’ venture Tortoise creates ‘inclusive’ members’ model with potential to

partner with local publishers," Press Gazette, June 28, 2019.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Freddy Mayhew, "Tortoise claims nearly 20,000 members as it eyes move into podcasting," Press Gazette, November 8, 2019.

[8] Bell, op. cit.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Derrick O'Keefe, "COVID sucks, unless you're a billionaire. Canada's richest have raked in \$37 billion since March," Ricochet, September 17, 2020.

[11] Bell, op. cit.

[12] Nick Surgery, PR Watch, "Edelman Makes a Climate Change Pledge, but Forgets About ALEC," Truthout, August 17, 2014.

[13] Niamh McIntyre and Ben Quinn, "Engagement with anti-vaccine Facebook posts trebles in one month," The Guardian, September 19, 2020.

[14] Mostrous, op. cit.

[15] Tim Schwab, "Journalism's Gates keepers," Columbia Journalism Review, August 21, 2020.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Veronika Hackenbroch and Marc Pitzke, "Bill Gates on COVID-19: 'It's Mind-Blowing That We're Not Further Along,'" Der Spiegel, Sept. 16, 2020.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Schwab, op. cit.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Margo McDiarmid, "Energy East pipeline 'advocates' targeted in TransCanada PR move," CBC News, November 18, 2014.

[22] Suzanne Goldenberg, "Revealed: Keystone company's PR blitz to safeguard its backup plan," The Guardian, November 18, 2014.

[23] Jeffrey Jones, "PR trickery tarnishes oil patch's credibility," The Globe and Mail, November 19, 2014.

[24] Joyce Nelson, "Resisting the Push for a Cashless Society," Bypassing Dystopia: Hope-Filled Challenges to Corporate Rule, Comox: Watershed Sentinel Books, 2018, pp. 48-50.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.



[27] Quoted in Hackenbroch and Pitzke, op. cit.

[28] Schwab, op. cit.

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