

How USAID handed out millions to buy journalists and media groups?

Journalism for sale: How USAID handed out millions to buy journalists and media groups. PRESSTV

WikiLeaks revealed that USAID has been funding media outlets globally for years, raising questions about press independence and freedom.

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Earlier this month, in a shocking revelation, WikiLeaks exposed that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has funded hundreds of media organizations around the world for years, raising concerns about press independence and freedom.

In a post on X (formerly Twitter) on February 6, the notorious leak platform claimed that USAID had funded more than 6,200 journalists at 707 media outlets, as well as 279 media-focused NGOs.

This explosive revelation immediately sparked debate over whether such financial ties could compromise the integrity of journalism and the credibility of media outlets receiving such funding.

The leak came days after the US government announced in late January the freezing of foreign aid through an executive order titled “Reassessing and Reorienting US Foreign Assistance.”

The order, which imposed a 90-day pause on all US foreign development assistance programs, was intended to allow the Donald Trump administration to reassess the effectiveness and alignment of these initiatives with the widely promoted “America First” agenda.

During a speech in Las Vegas on January 25, 2025, Trump defended the decision, calling it a necessary step to redirect resources toward domestic priorities.

The executive order, which argued that certain foreign aid programs were “not aligned with American interests” and in some cases were “antithetical to American values,” has been interpreted in a new light following the WikiLeaks revelations in early February.

Media analysts have warned that USAID funding could easily serve as a tool of manipulation in media outlets that have been recipients of US funding for years or even decades.

According to WikiLeaks, USAID has provided financial support to media outlets in more than 30 countries.

A briefing document, later removed from the agency's website, revealed that since at least 2003, USAID has funded training and resources for approximately 6,200 journalists, supported 707 non-state media outlets, and supported 279 civil society organizations, thereby exposing the vast direct influence of the US on global media systems over the past two decades.

The extent of this influence is also reflected in the 2025 foreign aid budget, which included a \$268.4 million allocation from the US Congress specifically earmarked for "independent media and free flow of information" initiatives.

One of the most striking aspects of this revelation involves the US-funded nonprofit Internews Network (IN), which has reportedly funneled nearly \$500 million into media projects around the world.

This raises fundamental questions: Is true media independence possible when its financial livelihood depends on foreign governments with their own political agendas?

Leaked documents indicate that Internews has collaborated with 4,291 media outlets, producing 4,799 hours of programming in a single year and reaching approximately 778 million people. 19 -

Although Internews claims that its mission is to strengthen "independent journalism" and expand "access to information," the immense scope of its operations has raised legitimate concerns about its potential undue or even manipulative influence on media narratives.

USAID has allocated \$472.6 million to Internews over the years, although the organization also receives financial support from private donors, such as the AOL-Time Warner Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among others.

Specific grants highlight the magnitude of these initiatives. For example, USAID awarded \$10.7 million to Internews to support "high-quality, responsible journalism" in Liberia and \$11 million for a "pro-democracy media" program in Moldova.

The U.S. State Department also provided \$1.48 million to establish “safe, accessible, and vital information services” in South Sudan, according to the leaked documents.

In Jordan, USAID awarded a \$19.5 million grant to Internews to help “position Jordanian society to effectively advocate for citizen-driven interests.”

Founded in 1982, Internews is headquartered in California and operates in more than 30 countries, with main offices in the US, London and Paris, as well as regional hubs in Kyiv, Bangkok and Nairobi.

Over the years, Internews has significantly expanded its global reach, positioning itself as a key player in international media development. However, the organization has come under severe criticism for its role in social media censorship efforts.

Jeanne Bourgault, who leads Internews, reportedly earns an annual salary of \$451,000. She previously worked at the US embassy in Moscow during the 1990s, where she managed a \$250 million budget, much of which was spent on “regime change” projects.

In 2023, Internews received nearly \$500 million from USAID, underscoring its importance in global “media initiatives” and evidencing the personal influence of Bourgault, a former USAID official.

The organization partners with 4,291 radio, television and print stations around the world, as well as training more than 9,000 media professionals annually.

Last year, Internews produced or facilitated the creation of 4,799 hours of television and radio programming, reaching approximately 396 million listeners and 382 million viewers.

In Ukraine, USAID funding has been particularly extensive, supporting “nine out of ten” media outlets in the country, whose work has been to amplify pro-NATO and pro-war narratives.

Additionally, 25 media organisations, including Stuff, NZME, BusinessDesk, Newshub and 1News, have received financial support through USAID and Internews. However, the recent freeze on foreign aid has had immediate consequences, with several Ukrainian media outlets announcing the “suspension” of their operations due to the loss of funding.

Anna Babinets, CEO and co-founder of Slidstvo.Info, a Kyiv-based outlet, highlighted the severe impact of these cuts on her organisation: “At Slidstvo.Info, 80% of our budget has been affected,” she said.

Oksana Romaniuk, director of the Institute for Mass Information (IMI), echoed these concerns about the disruption of funding, pointing to the heavy reliance of Ukrainian media on foreign financial resources.

Romaniuk highlighted the difficulties of the advertising market, particularly in regional media.

“The advertising market has not recovered, especially in regional media. While national media have found advertisers and started generating revenue, this is not enough to cover 100% of their needs,” she stressed.

“We have found that in regional media, advertising revenues range from 3% to 10%. It is simply impossible to survive on such figures,” she noted.

She also warned of the broader consequences of reduced funding for media organisations.

WikiLeaks has also revealed financial links between New Zealand's major media groups and Internews, raising questions about the extent of US government influence over the country's media landscape.

The leaked documents suggest that USAID funding has placed these outlets in a precarious position of dependency, meaning that without foreign financial support and an externally managed advertising structure, their survival could be at risk.

Through Internews, USAID has funded 25 leading media organisations in New Zealand, including Stuff, NZME, BusinessDesk, Newshub and 1News.

In New Zealand, these funds have been channeled through initiatives such as GroupM New Zealand's “Back to News” campaign, which aims to redirect advertising revenues to what they describe as “credible” media outlets.

These revelations are particularly sensitive given New Zealand's membership in the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, an association that includes the US, UK, Canada and Australia.

Internews, which has received \$470 million from USAID over the years, has spent decades building global media networks, training journalists and promoting “freedom of expression” in former Soviet states and other regions.

However, media analysts argue that the organisation's mission has never been neutral. According to them, Internews has pushed narratives aligned with NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), particularly in its effort to counter pro-Kremlin media in countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia.

According to internal documents, Internews' initiatives have not focused on fostering a "free press," but rather on using the media as a tool to "effect social and political transformations."

Internews' influence dates back to the late 20th century, when it partnered with the Soros Foundation to fund media outlets in post-Soviet nations.

Its work played a significant role in shaping media narratives during the so-called "color revolutions" of the 2000s in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine.

During the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, Internews provided funding and training to journalists from Rustavi-2, a leading television channel that became a key player in the events. 49 -

Marc Behrendt, former director of Internews in Georgia, commented at the time: "The media did an excellent job of informing the public about what was happening, and they played a huge role in bringing people to the streets."

According to Internews' 2004 annual report, Rustavi-2 was instrumental in the "non-violent uprising" that led to the resignation of Georgia's president.

The report described the network as "bold" and independent, highlighting its willingness to challenge the government. Coverage of Rustavi-2 helped mobilize public support and galvanize mass protests.

In Ukraine, Internews had an equally significant impact. By 2003, the organization had conducted 220 media training programs, trained more than 2,800 journalists, and produced more than 220 television programs and 1,000 radio programs.

It also funded Telekritika, a digital outlet that played a central role in the 2004 "Orange Revolution."

By 2005, Internews was producing Proyav Chasu, one of Ukraine's most popular television programs, which covered mass protests against "electoral fraud" during the revolution.

By 2007, Internews had expanded its global reach, training 60,000 journalists, establishing more than 2,500 independent media outlets, and promoting media laws in 21 countries.

With operations in 70 countries and offices in 42 cities, the organization claimed to reach an audience of nearly one billion people.

Activists have described Internews' work in shaping media landscapes as “unprecedented” in magnitude.

The Washington Post, more than two decades ago, called the organization “one of the most successful agents of change in the former Soviet Union.”

Internews has acknowledged its role in shaping geopolitical dynamics, including debates about NATO expansion.

In May 1990, the organization co-sponsored a meeting at Crottorf Castle, organized with the Soros-funded Institute for East-West Studies, to discuss “the future architecture of Europe,” including the possible integration of a unified Germany into NATO.

By 2016, following major political changes such as Brexit and the election of Trump, Internews began to reorient its focus.

The same organization that once promoted “free speech” as a tool to challenge foreign governments began to present “free speech” online as a potential danger, advocating for greater content moderation and censorship in Western democracies.

In collaboration with the USAID-funded World Economic Forum, Internews shifted its strategy toward using advertising boycotts as a mechanism to control online speech.

Critics have pointed to this shift in Internews’ policies, warning that the same media tools used to influence foreign governments have now turned inward, targeting American citizens, political dissidents, and alternative media that challenge established narratives.

Internews was founded during the Cold War with the stated goal of fostering open dialogue between the United States and the Soviet Union, seeking to reduce tensions between East and West.

However, critics argue that under the influence of USAID and Western elites, the organization became a tool to promote NATO expansion, thus fueling the resurgence of Cold War rivalries.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson, American politician Robert F. Kennedy Jr. criticized USAID for its long-standing influence on global media narratives. The interview went viral on social media following the WikiLeaks leaks that exposed USAID funding of media outlets.

“Journalists have become government propagandists... A significant part of this dynamic is the influence of intelligence agencies on the press. Today, they are the largest funder of journalism globally, primarily through USAID.”

Kennedy noted the magnitude of this funding, stating, “They spend about \$10 billion a year funding journalism around the world.”

He also referenced a 2012 executive order issued by then-President Barack Obama:

“President Obama issued an executive order that allowed the CIA (US Central Intelligence Agency) to once again engage in propaganda targeting Americans... Since then, we have seen the press openly become a propaganda vehicle for the CIA.”

Before Kennedy, former CIA agent John Stockwell had already denounced the use of the media as a tool of the agency. In his testimony, Stockwell detailed how the CIA leverages “gathered intelligence” for a variety of purposes, some of them highly controversial.

“There are other functions... One is to conduct secret wars... Another is to spread propaganda to influence public opinion, and this is one of the main functions of the CIA. And unfortunately this overlaps with intelligence gathering,” Stockwell explained.

He also revealed the agency’s tactics for manipulating journalists, describing a calculated process in which reporters are first fed truthful information to gain their trust and then fed false information.

Stockwell cited a concrete example of how the CIA uses the press, based on his experience managing the conflict in Angola:

“Well, for example, in my war, the Angola war that I helped run, a third of my team was engaged in propaganda. Ironically, within the CIA, this is known as covert action... which is the violent part. I had propagandists all over the world, primarily in London, Kinshasa and Zambia.”

These revelations, coupled with evidence of extensive US government funding of media to promote “politically motivated stories,” have fueled intense debate among analysts.

They argue that media organizations that receive these funds end up promoting narratives favorable to the interests of the United States.

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