

A NY Times Reporter Spoke At An Event Funded By #PaloAltoMafia Dirty Tricksters

New York Times reporter Scott Shane spoke at an event organized by the group who ran a disinformation op aimed at helping defeat Roy Moore in Alabama.

 Headshot of Craig Silverman

[Craig Silverman](#)

 Roy Moore

Joe Raedle / Getty Images

Roy Moore

Last week the New York Times [revealed](#) that money from tech billionaire Reid Hoffman was used to run a small disinformation “experiment” aimed at helping Democrat Doug Jones win last year’s Alabama special Senate election. That resulted in Facebook suspending five accounts and Hoffman issuing an [apology](#).

But left unmentioned in the Times story was that one of its authors learned about the Alabama campaign when he spoke at an off-the-record meeting organized by the same group who ran

the operation. A copy of a confidential report about the Alabama effort, obtained by BuzzFeed News, raises new questions about whether the project was — as the Times said — an “experiment,” or whether it was a straightforward Democratic attempt to replicate the model of the Russian Internet Research Agency.

[Scott Shane](#), a Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times national security reporter, was one of a handful of speakers at a meeting held in Washington in early September by American Engagement Technologies, according to an agenda obtained by BuzzFeed News. AET is run by Mikey Dickerson, who previously served in the Obama administration. The organization received \$750,000 in funding that originated with Hoffman and spent approximately \$100,000 of that on what was dubbed “Project Birmingham.”

During the meeting, Dickerson and Sara Hudson, a former Justice Department employee who now works for a company partly funded by Hoffman, detailed the results of their attempt to use social media and online ads to suppress Republican votes, “enrage” Democratic voters to help with turnout, and execute a “false flag” to hurt the campaign of Republican Roy Moore.

Shane told BuzzFeed News he did not know anything about Project Birmingham prior to accepting an invitation to speak about Russian disinformation at the AET event.

“It was basically a bunch of people getting together to talk about disinformation,” he said. “Part of the reason I agreed to speak, and somewhat reluctantly sign the NDA, is I was told by the organizer that I could follow up with any of the people on any of the projects after the meeting.”

Shane said it wasn't necessary to disclose to readers that he previously spoke at a meeting organized by people behind Project Birmingham.

"I don't think there's any kind of disclosure that's relevant, though I'm happy to be corrected," he said. "If you've been to meet with intelligence or defense officials at an off-the-record meeting ... it's always a trade-off as to what the ground rules are versus whether you get something useful for your readers. And in this case I did get something useful."

Shane said he followed up with people after the meeting to obtain information about Project Birmingham on the record so he could write a story.

The report provided to Shane and others at the meeting boasts of the campaign's effectiveness and positions itself as a serious effort to influence 650,000 Alabama voters. It does not use the word "experiment" to describe the effort.

BuzzFeed News obtained a copy of the report from a source who provided it on the condition that it not be republished in full. The source cited concerns about protecting their identity and also said some of the report's claims about its influence are overblown and could create a misleading impression of the operation's impact if the full report was released.

The source said that during the meeting Dickerson told the group that the report was prepared in collaboration with New Knowledge, a cybersecurity company that says it helps protect companies from online disinformation campaigns. Jonathon Morgan, New Knowledge's CEO, [described](#) the Alabama effort to

the Times as “a small experiment” and, contrary to claims in the report, said they designed it “to have almost no impact.”

Morgan subsequently had his Facebook account suspended by Facebook due to his involvement in the campaign. (He did not respond to a request for comment from BuzzFeed News.)

The Birmingham Project report states that between September and December of 2017 the group “ran a digital messaging operation to influence the outcome of the AL senate race.” It claims the effort contributed to high Democratic turnout and a drop in Republican turnout, and says that it “drove write-in votes to a number of candidates.” On one page it says its “sustained targeting” of Republican voters “had enormous effect” on turnout, though it does not back this up with relevant data.

The report also takes credit for what it calls a “false flag” operation that involved drawing attention to the fact that Roy Moore’s Twitter account was followed and amplified by thousands of Russian bots. Project Birmingham “tied that botnet to the Moore campaign digital director, making it appear as if he had purchased the accounts,” according to the report. It’s unclear who bought the Russian bot accounts for Moore's Twitter profile and what role Project Birmingham played.

Shane said he was “shocked” when he watched Dickerson and Hudson detail the operation back in September.

“It was a little breathtaking to hear this was going on in the States, carried out by Americans,” he said.

“I remember I asked a question along the lines of ‘Is there a line that you won’t cross?’ and there was some discussion of that.”

He declined to elaborate, citing his NDA.