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Has Google's Spy Operation: 'New America Foundation', Lost its Way?

A scandal over the encroachment of big business triggered a debate over the identity of a prestigious Washington think tank.

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TWEET

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Anne-Marie Slaughter looked exhausted.

It was late summer 2017, and for the past week her Washington think tank had been at the center of a national media scandal, beginning with an embarrassing *New York Times* [story](#) about her firing of a certain employee. Slaughter, the president and CEO of [New America](#), had been vacationing in Italy when the news broke. Now she was back, about to confront her bewildered organization at an all-staff meeting and to try to do some damage control.

The ousted staffer, Barry Lynn, was a critic of big tech companies and headed [Open Markets](#), a New America program on corporate power and monopolies. Earlier in the summer, he had gone out of his way to praise the European Union for fining Google \$2.7 billion for antitrust violations.

The chairman of Google's parent company at the time, Eric Schmidt—who, along with his foundation and Google, had by that point donated nearly \$20 million to New America—was not pleased, Lynn told the *Times*, and called Slaughter to say so. Lynn was informed that his actions had endangered the institution, and he was ultimately fired.

The debacle raised all sorts of questions about New America's coziness with corporate funders, and as staffers gathered in the conference room—across the lobby from the “Eric Schmidt Ideas Lab”—they were impatient for answers. Many worried that the think tank's intellectual integrity had been compromised, and they feared for their reputations. What would happen the next time someone's work ran crosswise with the interests of a big donor?

Instead of stanching the anxiety, Slaughter stoked it. According to a recording of the meeting, she said that while she recognized that the standard in journalism was never to show sources what you were writing, New America's “norm can't be that. We're an organization that develops relationships with funders. And you know, these are not just black boxes; they're people. Google is a person, the Ford Foundation—these