



22<sup>nd</sup> April 2022

Dear Mr. Ciurcanu, Ms. Cerantola,

Despite repeated requests, you have been less than transparent—with both Philip Morris International (PMI) and the public—in explaining your relationship with your donor client Vital Strategies.

Vital Strategies most recently published [Form 990](#) shows that The Journalism Development Network, Inc. (the 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization which operates the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project) received a grant from them in 2020 for “investigative journalism”. They also report a grant to an undisclosed recipient in Europe for “investigative journalism”. In the same form, Vital Strategies states that, as part of their grant management process, they review “completion of scope of work deliverables”. In the 2020 [audit report](#) for The Journalism Development Network, Inc., you disclosed a grant from Vital Strategies, that your funding from Vital Strategies was “restricted”, that it is subject to “expenditure for specified purpose”, and that you have “satisfied the restricted purposes specified by the donors”. For the sake of transparency, are you prepared to disclose what these “deliverables” in the scope of work are, as well as the criteria used to judge that The Journalism Development Network, Inc/OCCRP had “satisfied” Vital Strategies?

Vital Strategies tobacco control work is solely funded by US billionaire Michael Bloomberg through his foundation “Bloomberg Philanthropies”. Vital Strategies is also a partner in “Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products (STOP)”, a self-proclaimed tobacco industry watchdog that is also solely funded by US billionaire Michael Bloomberg through his foundation “Bloomberg Philanthropies”. “Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products (STOP)” has a highly partial and politicized agenda which, among other issues, seeks to undermine Philip Morris International by making false and misleading statements through paid, owned and earned media (see for example [Prohibition at any cost | Philip Morris International \(pmi.com\)](#) and the outcome of PMI’s complaint to the BBC [Health Check, BBC World Service, 23 September 2020 | Contact the BBC](#)).

The subject matter of your “press request” has been in the public domain for several years and yet seems to have recently caught the attention of the “Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products (STOP)” partners. Two articles have been published by authors from the partnership covering similar themes to your “press request” in the last six months ([Smoke-free Destinations - TobaccoTactics](#) and <https://blogs.bmj.com/tc/2021/11/29/philip-morris-internationals-partnerships-with-local-authorities-in-europe-violate-article-5-3-of-the-fctc/>). Additionally, “Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products (STOP)” have recently lobbied on the subject matter, together with other NGOs ([2021-09-08-Letter-for-Spanish-president-campaing-La-Graciosa-sin-Humo-English-with-logos-1.pdf \(netdna-ssl.com\)](#)). It is interesting that organizations who claim to want to see an end to smoking should divert so much time and resource to criticizing initiatives designed to do just that, raising the question whether these groups are serious about improving public health or more interested in perpetuating dogma that continues to ensure their existence and funding.

Your founder Drew Sullivan is quoted as saying that *“It would be more useful to treat collaborations with them [NGOs] as strategic alliances, in which partners share resources and risks toward an agreed-upon goal. In strategic partnerships, working methods, standards, and desired outcomes are matters of negotiation.”* ([Collaborating with NGOs: A Strategic Alliance Approach for Journalists](#))



## PHILIP MORRIS INTERNATIONAL

([ethicaljournalismnetwork.org](http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org)). When asked about the blurring of roles between activists, bloggers, citizen journalists, watchdogs, and journalists, he is also quoted as saying “*If you can’t tell them apart, they are doing the same thing*” ([sambrook Global Teamwork 1711.indd \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)). This ‘blurring’ and sharing of resources for ‘an agreed upon goal’ seems evident in the case of your “press request” and causes us to remain extremely concerned about the nature of your relationship with Vital Strategies and your ability to maintain editorial independence from your donor client, which is actively lobbying on topics you are writing about.

Taken together, all these observations raise enormous questions about the claimed editorial independence of OCCRP on issues relating to the tobacco industry and PMI specifically. Further, your failure to transparently disclose that you deliver projects with a “specified purpose” for a U.S. special interest group is a clear sign that you are not acting as a *bona fide* independent media outlet on these issues, but are instead providing paid-for content for your donor client.

As such, we will not be providing any response to your “press request”, which appears to be nothing more than an unwarranted fishing expedition with the goal of supporting your donor client’s lobbying efforts. If you are prepared to share your editorial guidelines and details of independent journalistic standards/press codes that you are signed up to, and if you have specific allegations that you wish to put to us, then we will reconsider our position.

Finally, we hope that you will be completely transparent about the nature of your restricted funding from Vital Strategies with anyone else you may be contacting about this story.

In keeping with PMI’s commitment to fostering open and transparent dialogue, we will make this correspondence available to the public via our website and through our owned media channels.

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Yours sincerely,  
Dr. Moira Gilchrist  
Vice President – Strategic and Scientific Communications