

AND THEN THE RUSSIAN APOLOGISTS LEFT, COMPLAINING ABOUT TDS

Ben Smith has a much-discussed story about what he admits is just one of innumerable online chat threads that create unseen but powerful nodes of opinion formation. The Signal chat Ben writes about is, he says,

the single most important place in which a stunning realignment toward Donald Trump was shaped and negotiated, and an alliance between Silicon Valley and the new right formed.

He says that, in part, based on the centrality of Marc Andreessen, even though the piece also describes Andreessen participating on multiple different chats at once (indeed, doing little else with his life).

there is no equivalent to the intellectual counterculture that grew up over the last five years on the tech right, and no figure remotely like Andreessen, the towering, enthusiastic 53-year old who co-founded a16z and, before that, invented the modern web browser.

[snip]

he flipped on his phone from group chat to group chat, responding and engaging with manic speed.

And while, especially as someone who wrote a dissertation on some of these historical practices, it is amusing to hear the various words – samizdat, Republic of Letters, salons – self-indulgent billionaires use to describe the very male public sphere in which they

participate, the existence of networks of chats as a powerful influence on politics is not the breaking news Ben sells it as.

Crazier still, Ben dates the beginning of the group chat to 2018, when an entire criminal case was built around a series of such chats started in 2015 and professionalized by Daily Stormer webmaster Andrew Auernheimer, one which Donald Trump's failson appears to have used to make stolen John Podesta files go viral. Ben seems to think the billionaires – the Silicon Valley ones, not the scions of Queens real estate and reality TV wealth – invented Signal chats, when one thing we know to have happened is that the white nationalists and other far right activists cultivated certain billionaires into them.

That omission is pretty important given the way Ben allows Rufo to serve as the triumphalist tour guide of this story.

"A lot of these technologists hoped that the centrist path was a viable one, because it would permit them in theory to change the culture without having to expose themselves to the risk of becoming partisans," he said. "By 2021, the smartest people in tech understood that these people were a dead end – so the group chats exploded and reformulated on more explicitly political lines."

Rufo had been there all along: "I looked at these chats as a good investment of my time to radicalize tech elites who I thought were the most likely and high-impact new coalition partners for the right."

As far as we know, the Silicon Valley billionaires were not in those earlier far right chats, but there have been plenty of public breadcrumbs showing the Nazis and the billionaires joining together.

So the existence of the chat, which Ben brags he

has discovered, is useful information, but not earthshaking news. The mapping of the Chatham House chat he treats as his reporting subject (Ben is undoubtedly a participant in similar networks incorporating self-indulgent billionaires, but one does not treat those chats as a reporting subject) is useful, but a topic that other journalists also cover, and cover well.

It's in that mapping, though, that provides the main newsworthy thing about this piece.

The split we're seeing in public extends into these private chats.

Trump's destabilizing "Liberation Day" has taken its toll on the coalition Andreessen helped shape. You can see it on X, where investors joke that they'll put pronouns back in their bios in exchange for a return to the 2024 stock prices, and where Srinivasan has been a leading critic of Trump's tariffs.

"Group chats have changed on the economy in the last few weeks," said Rufo.
"There's a big split on the tech right."

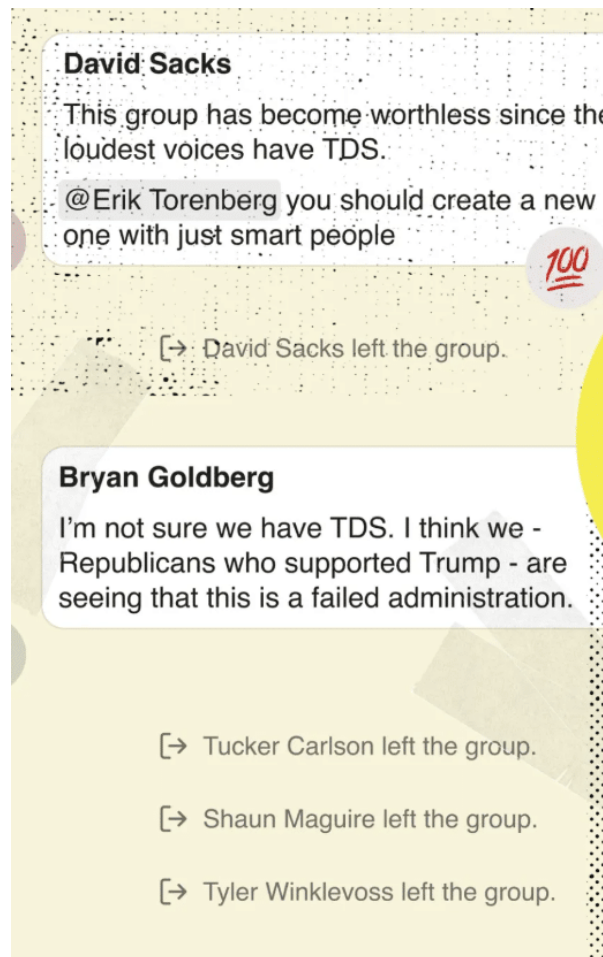
Billionaires, it turns out, react badly to innumerate destruction of the world economy. Who knew?

Ben ends the piece with this narrative, with no further comment.

By mid-April, Sacks had had enough with Chatham House: "This group has become worthless since the loudest voices have TDS," he wrote, shorthanding "Trump Derangement Syndrome." Then he addressed Torenberg: "You should create a new one with just smart people."

Signal soon showed that three men had left the group: The Sequoia partner Shaun Maguire, the bitcoin billionaire Tyler Winklevoss, and Carlson.

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their toys and going home, but (as Ben noted) Tucker Carlson and David Sacks, whose influence on these networks merit at least as much focus as Andreessen's.

David Sacks, who is probably not even a billionaire, *does* have tolerance for innumerate destruction of key economies, as he showed when he helped crash Silicon Valley Bank and subsequently begged for taxpayer help to reverse his work. But he is also, along with Carlson, one of the people in this network who most stupidly parrots Russian propaganda (though both men are being challenged on that front by Steve Witkoff).

Which is to say that one of the consequences for Trump's decision to destroy the global economy is not just that one of Marc Andreessen's chat groups is getting a divorce, but that *in the divorce*, two critically important Russian useful idiots are leaving.

In the weeks ahead, both those timelines – the

destruction of the global economy and Trump's attempts to capitulate to Vladimir Putin – will reach a head at the same time.

And it is genuinely useful to know that the Russian apologists have decided to start their own network of influence with “just the smart people” who applaud both destruction of the global economy and also obeisance to Russia.