

# The media entrepreneur making antisemitism education go viral

*'This whole battle of antisemitism is being fought and waged online,'  
says ATTN's Matthew Segal*

By Gabby Deutch May 23, 2023



On a warm August day in 2017, Arnold Schwarzenegger watched with alarm as former President Donald Trump said there were “very fine people on both sides” of the violent neo-Nazi “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Va. The Austrian-born Schwarzenegger, who has spoken publicly about grappling with his father’s past as a member of the Nazi storm troopers, decided he needed to say something about it.

The bodybuilder and movie star was by that point six years past the end of his term as California’s governor, and he couldn’t count on the audience that his commentary might once have received.

So he turned to a digital media company called ATTN: (pronounced ‘attention’), which specializes in creating viral content with a social-justice twist. It was the early days of the Trump presidency, when some media organizations were playing outrage at the former reality TV star for clicks. And as an early investor in ATTN, which was created by civic-engagement entrepreneurs Matthew Segal and Jarrett

Moreno, Schwarzenegger knew that a video shared widely on social media was his best shot at getting his message across.

“There are no two sides to bigotry. There are no two sides to hate,” Schwarzenegger said in a close-cropped video that looked as though it was being filmed on an iPhone. After a minute, the “Terminator” star looked directly into the camera and said: “Let’s terminate hate.”

Within hours, the video went viral. Tens of millions of views. Dozens of write-ups in other news outlets. Exactly what ATTN promised.



“His goal is obviously not just giving a speech, but it’s getting as many people to watch it as possible,” said Daniel Ketchell, who currently serves as Schwarzenegger’s chief of staff.

This is what ATTN views as its sweet spot: briefly capturing the attention of the distracted masses — those who otherwise may not care about racism, for

instance, or antisemitism, or voting — and teaching them a lesson in just a minute or two. Its videos have featured major political voices such as Barack and Michelle Obama, Joe Biden and Doug Emhoff, and ATTN’s social media accounts total more than 6 million followers.

In the years since the Schwarzenegger video blew up, Segal, 37, has devoted significant resources to combating antisemitism.

“Our whole theory of change is, can you find clever and creative ways, sometimes putting chocolate or sugar on vegetables, as they say, to get people to care about things that matter?” Segal, ATTN’s co-CEO, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. “It’s catered to people who have shorter attention spans, which is the world we live in, where you’re constantly scrolling.”

Investors have bought into that theory of change — or at the very least, they have identified it as a sound investment decision. ATTN was acquired last year for \$150 million by Candle Media, a Blackstone-backed company that operates the brands behind the popular Israeli TV series “Fauda” and Hello Sunshine, Reese Witherspoon’s production company.

For Segal, ATTN’s focus on antisemitism is not just a business decision but a personal one. Growing up in Chicago’s heavily Jewish North Shore suburbs, his grandfathers told him stories about serving in the military during World War II. One was a pilot, and the other was a doctor.

“You learn about the Holocaust, and how Jews were such a persecuted minority, and that the population of Jews still hasn’t fully recovered,” said Segal. “You feel a sense of being an underdog and you feel a sense of injustice that you want to correct. And that’s very much something that’s core to who I am. I’m happiest when I’m fighting for something.”

Segal's path to ATTN wound through politics, not media. As a student at Kenyon College in Ohio, he became an advocate for voting rights after having to wait hours to cast a ballot in the 2004 election. That led to the creation of several advocacy organizations working on voter participation. Through it all, Segal figured out a way to tap into the minds of young people looking for a way to engage with the political process.

“The whole goal of that was to leverage media and pop culture to get people to vote,” Segal noted. “But in doing so, I realized that there was more of a dearth of understanding of the issues. You needed to create really compelling storylines, and videos and arguments to get people to care about things, so that they would see the value in their civic engagement and their vote.” That thesis is what led Segal and Moreno, who were at the time running the nonprofit OurTime[dot]org, to launch ATTN in 2014.

If social change is ATTN's raison d'être, “shareability” is its North Star. Still, not all of ATTN's videos are meant to go deep on complicated topics.

“You need to stop believing these myths about your cast iron [skillet],” said one recent video, tagged with the hashtag #kitchenhacks. “Concert etiquette that makes everyone hate you,” said another. These are interspersed with short videos explaining the debt ceiling standoff in Congress and talking about better understanding mental illness.

But all attempt to reach the fleeting, elusive goal of virality. Segal has brought the company's formula for viral success to its antisemitism-focused content.

**“It's one thing to know what the message is. It's another thing to articulate it in a way that it's effective,” said Tom Werner, the producer of several hit TV shows including “The Cosby Show” and “Roseanne.”**

“You have to sort of retrofit your content and storytelling approach to the way that technology now prioritizes content,” said Segal. ATTN makes longer videos for YouTube and shorter ones for TikTok; videos that fall in the middle perform best on Facebook, ATTN has found. But the algorithms change over time, sending ATTN back to the beginning to figure out how best to reach people.

“Let’s at least flood the algorithms with content that has some degree of substance and caloric value, because so much of it is empty calories,” he argued.

Videos with Holocaust survivors sharing their stories have garnered millions of views and led to primetime TV specials on Holocaust remembrance and Jewish heritage that aired on CBS, MTV and the Smithsonian Channel.

“It’s one thing to know what the message is. It’s another thing to articulate it in a way that it’s effective,” said Tom Werner, the producer of several hit TV shows including “The Cosby Show” and “Roseanne.” He partnered with ATTN to create a Holocaust TV special. “Together, I think we created something that really did have impact and was very powerful and heart-wrenching.”

**“It’s become more important to me as I’ve aged, because you get out in the world, and you see how Jewish people are often portrayed or misportrayed. You see Jewish people who are maligned,” Segal said. “You see illiberalism on college campuses and throughout society that I think is dangerous for the Jewish people. You see attacks on Israel that really are thinly veiled antisemitism.”**

ATTN recently partnered with the World Jewish Congress to produce a video with Secretary of State Tony Blinken for Yom HaShoah. The two-minute clip of Blinken, interspersed with archival footage of World War II, ran under the banner, “How my stepfather escaped the Nazis.” The video has been viewed more than 2 million times on Twitter. It was ATTN — and not

WJC — that leveraged personal connections to get Blinken to appear in the video.

“They help us break outside the echo chamber of just the Jewish audience,” said Cory Weiss, WJC’s communications director. WJC hired ATTN as its creative agency, so ATTN also produces videos that run only under the WJC banner.

Since ATTN launched in 2014, antisemitism in America has skyrocketed, leading Segal to feel a deeper sense of urgency to address the problem.

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Last week, ATTN produced a video for WJC and the Anti-Defamation League that touted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism, thereby wading into a debate between mainstream Jewish organizations who support the IHRA definition and some progressive groups who argue the IHRA definition does not allow sufficient space for criticism of Israel.

The White House is set to release a national strategy to combat antisemitism in the coming days. Biden administration officials have been conflicted about the matter of how to define antisemitism in light of lobbying from opponents and supporters of the IHRA definition.

“Some people argue such a definition would be a violation of the right to free speech. It is not. In fact, this definition does not change any laws or

criminalize any speech. It simply provides the Jewish people the right to define what anti-Jewish hate actually is,” the video says.

ATTN is officially nonpartisan, but its videos skew liberal. Take the Schwarzenegger video going after Trump, or another popular one from that era, “Julia Louis-Dreyfus and these Holocaust survivors have a message for Donald J. Trump and all Americans.” (Attacking Trump proved to be one shortcut to going viral.)

Still, ATTN’s occasional posts about Israel, like a 2022 video praising the country for decriminalizing marijuana, have been subject to the same hostile comments that are familiar to anyone who posts about Israel online. But that hasn’t stopped Segal from wanting to spotlight Israel.

“You see Israel singled out as being innately oppressive. That to me is just a false narrative,” Segal said. “We just approach it from the standpoint of, the very idea of Israel’s a liberal idea. It’s to give a persecuted minority a state to protect them.”

Reshaping the narrative around Israel fits in with Segal’s personal commitment to civic education, he noted, and ATTN’s interest in promoting news literacy. It’s all a matter of how you tell the story, he argues.

“People don’t have the attention spans to read history,” he added. “If we can make a small difference by creating a 45-second to two-minute piece that actually someone watches and changes their viewpoint, or says, ‘I learned something I didn’t know,’ that makes a big impact. And that’s sort of the thesis behind how we want to inform. Plus, this whole battle of antisemitism is being fought and waged online.”