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# Ministry of Truth

The secretive government  
units spying on your speech

**BIG  
BROTHER  
WATCH**

[BigBrotherWatch.org.uk](http://BigBrotherWatch.org.uk)

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# About Big Brother Watch

Big Brother Watch is a civil liberties and privacy campaigning organisation, fighting for a free future. We're determined to reclaim our privacy and defend freedoms at this time of enormous change.

We're a fiercely independent, non-partisan and non-profit group who work to roll back the surveillance state and protect rights in parliament, the media or the courts if we have to. We publish unique investigations and pursue powerful public campaigns. We work relentlessly to inform, amplify and empower the public voice so we can collectively reclaim our privacy, defend our civil liberties and protect freedoms for the future.

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**Ministry of Truth: The secretive government units spying on your speech**

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# Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
COUNTER DISINFORMATION UNIT.....	4
What is the CDU?.....	5
How does the CDU operate?.....	5
Functions of the CDU.....	8
<i>Misinformation reports</i> .....	8
<i>Trusted flagger</i> .....	8
<i>Surveillance function</i> .....	11
<i>Summary of functions</i> .....	11
Examples of the CDU's activities.....	11
<i>Targeting criticism of modelling</i> .....	12
<i>Targeting lockdown harms dissent</i> .....	13
<i>Targeting opposition to Covid passes</i> .....	15
<i>Targeting government mass vaccination policy dissent</i> .....	20
<i>Flagging journalists</i> .....	22
<i>CDU receipt of Whitehall media monitoring emails</i> .....	24
RAPID RESPONSE UNIT.....	27
What is the RRU?.....	28
How does the RRU operate?.....	29
Functions of the RRU.....	31
<i>Social media monitoring</i> .....	31
<i>Press monitoring</i> .....	32
<i>Supporting Whitehall departments with communications and propaganda</i> .....	32
<i>Summary of functions</i> .....	33
Examples of the RRU's activities.....	35
<i>Targeting criticism of lockdown modelling</i> .....	35
<i>Targeting criticism of tiered regulations and local lockdowns</i> .....	38
<i>Protest during lockdown</i> .....	41
<i>Targeting Covid pass dissent among the public, journalists and MPs</i> .....	41
<i>Surveilling dissenting academics</i> .....	47
<i>Monitoring criticism of care home policy</i> .....	51
<i>Monitoring criticism of Government conflation of law and guidance</i> .....	52
<i>Monitoring the reaction to Dominic Cummings at a select committee</i> .....	56
<i>Monitoring test logistics</i> .....	57

<i>Monitoring the Afghanistan evacuation</i> .....	59
<b>77TH BRIGADE</b> .....	60
What is the 77th Brigade?.....	61
77x and COVID-19.....	61
<b>ANONYMOUS: A whistleblower reveals what the 77th Brigade's 'disinformation' operation during COVID-19 was really like</b> .....	66
<b>GOVERNMENT INFORMATION CELL</b> .....	69
What is the Government Information Cell?.....	70
<b>RESEARCH, INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS UNIT</b> .....	73
What is RICU?.....	74
How does RICU operate?.....	75
RICU and state-funded propaganda.....	77
<b>POLICY ANALYSIS</b> .....	82
A note on the term "disinformation".....	84
Violations of the right to freedom of expression.....	85
Extra-judicial censorship.....	87
Violations of the right to privacy.....	88
Lack of transparency.....	89
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	91
Appendix: Legal commentary by Gavin Millar KC.....	94



**Ministry  
of Truth**

# Introduction

*Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.*

The search for truth is as old as civilisation. After centuries of “truth” being determined by religious authorities, the first information revolution in the West – the invention of the printing press – democratised reading and learning. Post-Enlightenment democracies would come to champion the open forum as the landscape for discovery. Truth and reason could only be sought by allowing conflicting ideas to meet and be tested – and as such, even heresy could be seen by liberals as a virtue, not a sin. Technology had democratised truth from fists of institutional power.

But our current technological revolution has redefined both the relationship between people and power, and truth and power. Whilst billions of people across the globe can speak to the world instantaneously, a handful of billionaires define the parameters of what they can and cannot say. The internet has given rise to the possibility of the greatest democratisation of information in the history of humankind, and the greatest control of information and speech. As the open forum has been magnified, so too has the desire for control by those who, whether benevolently or not, seek the power to define its limitations.

The preservation of “truth” has re-emerged as a motivation for censorship on the internet’s open forums. The internet contains masses of incorrect information – but this is a defining feature of an open forum, not a flaw. John Milton wrote in his 1644 essay *Areopagitica*, “Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple; whoever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?” Almost four centuries later, faced with technological dystopia, we find ourselves having to make this foundational liberal argument afresh. As former Supreme Court judge Lord Sumption wrote, arguing against a particularly censorious version of the government’s Online Safety Bill,

“We have to accept the implications of human curiosity. Some of what people say will be wrong. Some of it may even be harmful. But we cannot discover truth without accommodating error. It is the price that we pay for allowing knowledge and understanding to develop and human civilisation to progress.”<sup>1</sup>

The basis of a belief in freedom of expression and its necessity for democracy is not only that truth can withstand the mistruths that exist in an open forum, but that it requires it – the discovery of truth and the evolution of knowledge is served by the most open possible forum.

As with almost all authoritarian arguments, modern pro-censorship views are partly defined

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<sup>1</sup> The hidden harms in the Online Safety Bill – Jonathan Sumption, *The Spectator*, 20 August 2022: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-hidden-harms-in-the-online-safety-bill/>

by exceptionalism. Technocrats argue that the digital revolution poses exceptional, new threats and that the ability for people to post incorrect information or harmful views on such a far-reaching platform, without the gatekeeping associated with the printing press' information revolution, makes wrong information particularly pernicious - even if is lawful.

The solution often offered to tackle the scourge of "misinformation" is censorship, in one form or another. From de-ranking certain content to taking down posts or directing people to approved information sources, the antidote to misinformation has been posed as giving those with power the ability to control speech further. In doing so, enormous power over the public's freedom of expression has been seized in a swift and silent coup – first by Big Tech corporations, then by governments, and increasingly, by a convergence of the two.

Whilst presented as in the public interest, these censorship "solutions" centralise powerful interests, positioning them the arbiters of truth. The misinformation industry, combining Big Tech companies, governments, international governance organisations and start-up "fact-checker" style organisations present themselves as the judges and juries of information, determining the parameters of acceptable speech.

It is the growing confluence of power between Big Tech and state powers that is the subject of our investigation, and this report.

Four key units operate out of Whitehall as the government's social media special forces, each with a distinct purpose.

The **Rapid Response Unit (RRU)**, part of the Cabinet Office, was tasked with "tackling a range of harmful narratives online" during the pandemic, "from purported 'experts' issuing dangerous misinformation, to criminal fraudsters running phishing scams".<sup>2</sup>

The **Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU)**, which was tasked to monitor what it deems to be disinformation and flags content to social media companies, sits inside the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Whilst the Government's use of these terms appears to be very loose, misinformation refers to any type of inaccurate information whereas disinformation refers to deliberate false information, often spread with malicious intent.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the war in Ukraine, the Foreign Office established the **Government Information Cell (GIC)** focused on identifying and countering Russian disinformation in the UK and abroad about the Kremlin's war.

Meanwhile, the Home Office's **Research, Intelligence and Communications Unit (RICU)**

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2 Government cracks down on spread of false coronavirus information online – Cabinet Office, UK Government, 30th March 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-spread-of-false-coronavirus-information-online>

3 Factsheet 4: Types of Misinformation and Disinformation – UNHCR, February 2002: <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Factsheet-4.pdf>

operates to push official lines that support counter-extremism and has even set up domestic front organisations to publish propaganda.

A further unit is purported to actively counter “disinformation” within the Ministry of Defence – the **77<sup>th</sup> Brigade**, which is “a combined Regular and Army Reserve unit” which aims to “challenge the difficulties of modern warfare using non-lethal engagement and legitimate non-military levers as a means to adapt behaviours of the opposing forces and adversaries”.<sup>4</sup> However, our investigation, which includes an exclusive whistleblower account, reveals that the reality of the unit’s activities is far different.

All of these units operate in the shadows and are rarely forthcoming about their capabilities, activities or reach, with the CDU being the least forthcoming with answers to transparency questions. This is despite the CDU being part of the government department responsible for the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Huge sums of public money, running into the tens of millions of pounds, have been spent on these units which have the potential to influence discussion online and even news reporting. It is dangerous for freedom of speech and democracy for unaccountable officials to be empowered to shape online discourse, yet the government refuses to answer questions about the topics they monitor or accounts they flag to platforms.

Big Brother Watch has submitted numerous FOIA requests to the government about the four units, analysed a further tranche of records requests already in the public domain and scraped the web for discussions of their activities and contracts signed to support the units’ work. Subject Access Requests have shed further light on the activities of the CDU and RRU and how they have stepped outside of their remits to treat political dissent as fake news. What this investigation has found should trigger an alarm bell for democracy and freedom of speech in the UK.

In this report, we shine a light onto these disinformation units, offering the first detailed investigation into some of their capabilities, budgets and activities. From Whitehall’s pervasive political surveillance, to domestic military surveillance of public sentiment, the findings in this report are shocking. However, some questions remain unanswered and there is still work to be done to uncover just how influential Whitehall’s disinformation units are in shaping narratives online, suppressing dissent, and pushing government lines.

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<sup>4</sup> 77th Brigade: Information and Outreach – British Army, Ministry of Defence: <https://www.army.mod.uk/who-we-are/formations-divisions-brigades/6th-united-kingdom-division/77-brigade/> (accessed 12th December 2022)





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# Counter Disinformation Unit

# Counter Disinformation Unit

## Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

*Purpose: Social Media Content Monitoring*

### What is the CDU?

The Counter Disinformation Unit was established in its current form in March 2020 to “crack down” on “false coronavirus information online” and its role centres on fighting what the government calls disinformation.<sup>5</sup>

Previously the unit, also known as the Counter Disinformation Cell, was stood up for specific events such as the 2019 European and General elections, but now ministers say there are no plans to wind down the unit.<sup>6</sup> During the pandemic, the unit’s remit was widened to also cover the “inadvertent sharing of false information” as well as the deliberate misinformation and disinformation covered in its previous iterations.<sup>7</sup>

Emails between the Department of Health and Social Care and Twitter at the start of the pandemic underline the close relationship between the company and the CDU. In one email from 23rd March 2020 a Twitter staffer told officials that the company is “speaking regularly with the DCMS disinformation unit”, but gave no more detail about the conversations, suggesting that the CDU worked closely with tech companies from the start of the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

Although the pandemic triggered the most recent establishment of the CDU, its work has since expanded dramatically to cover what the Department of Digital, Culture Media and Sport calls “periods of acute disinformation risk”.<sup>9</sup>In addition to working on COVID-19, the CDU has worked on the May 2021 United Kingdom Local Elections, COP-26, the NI Assembly Elections, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### How does the CDU operate?

The level of resources allocated to the CDU, its activities or relationships with Big Tech companies is very unclear. It is still not known how much is spent on the unit nor how many staff it has. Big Brother Watch has asked for details of staffing and budget levels in

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5 Government Cracks Down On Spread Of False Coronavirus Information Online, Government Press Release, 30th March 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-spread-of-false-coronavirus-information-online>

6 Letter to Lord Putnam from DCMS, 29th May 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1280/documents/11300/default/>

7 Internal Review of a Freedom of Information Request to DCMS, IR2022/09923, 8th August 2022

8 Annex H, Freedom of Information Request to the Department of Health and Social Care, FOI-1429268, 10th January 2023

9 Freedom of Information Request to DCMS, FOI2022\_09703, 17th August 2021

two separate FOIA requests, which have been refused.<sup>10</sup> Other members of the public have asked similar questions at least once more, which were also declined.<sup>11</sup>

Members of Parliament have also tried to find out how much public money and how many civil servants are working at the Unit. At least 13 written parliamentary questions have been put to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) about the CDU's resourcing since March 2020. Ministers have consistently refused to tell MPs about the budget or staffing levels of the unit, claiming that even these basic details would allow "malign actors" to gain insight into the CDU's capabilities.<sup>12</sup> The most transparency achieved on how public money is being spent came in a May 2020 answer where a DCMS Minister claimed that the team's size had tripled - but no further detail was given.<sup>13</sup>

The only insight into the amount of public money spent on one of the most opaque units in government outside of the security services comes from public procurement documents. More than £1 million has been spent by DCMS on tools and services for social media monitoring. These contracts serve as both a window into the CDU's likely levels of resourcing and the activities it undertakes.

The contracts included:

- £761,000 was paid to AI company Logically across two separate contracts spanning January 2021 to February 2022 for mis/disinformation monitoring and analysis, and disinformation analytical support.<sup>14,15</sup>
- £503,392 was handed to Logically for another contract, from July 2022 to March 2023, for disinformation technical services to build a picture of potentially harmful misinformation and disinformation.<sup>16</sup>
- £114,000 was awarded to the Disinformation Index for 6 months of research services to help detect disinformation at scale in April 2020.<sup>17</sup>

10 Freedom of Information Request to DCMS, FOI2021/17056, 21st September 2021

11 Freedom of Information Request to DCMS, FOI2022/00172, 6th January 2021 [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/disinformation\\_unit#incoming-2080240](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/disinformation_unit#incoming-2080240)

12 Written Parliamentary Question on the Counter Disinformation Unit, UIN 6720, 23rd May 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-23/6720>

13 Written Parliamentary Question on Coronavirus Disinformation, UIN 43224, 20th May 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-05-04/43223>

14 Mis Disinformation Monitoring and Analysis Contract, 15th November 2021 <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/cbcb66d9-e212-4828-90a2-d057ee047d8a?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

15 Disinformation Analytical Support Contract, DCMS, 13th February 2021, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/ecffdb0a-92fd-4e26-ad62-c6c144b4a16b?origin=SearchResults&p=1>,

16 Disinformation Technical Services Contract, DCMS, 31st August 2022, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/ba50694b-def7-4991-8584-e259e87d67c4?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

17 Detecting Coronavirus Disinformation at Scale Contract, 11th February 2021, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/2e0d0f01-aab8-4157-b165->

- £1.3 million was paid to controversial tech company Faculty Science for a year-long contract offering technical support on understanding the threat of disinformation and how to counter it from April 2022.

Logically is a high-tech internet monitoring firm which employs artificial intelligence, open source techniques and fact-checkers that allow governments to “identify and mitigate harmful content”.<sup>18</sup> The company offers AI-based tools to assist in fact-checking, tools to fight extremist content and a platform allowing users to monitor “threats” and counteract them. This involves issuing takedown recommendations to platforms, something that the CDU admits to doing, as well as identifying the audiences impacted by misinformation and facilitating communication with them, including the production of rebuttal content.

The Disinformation Index describes itself as a data and intelligence service to support the disruption of disinformation. It works across three areas – the first uses artificial intelligence-supported analysis to index the risks of a website pushing disinformation. The second uses open-source data to track disinformation across the web while the third conducts policy research to support governments, regulators and social media companies.<sup>19</sup> Its core product is a list of news outlets deemed to be “high-risk for disinformation”, which advertisers and platforms can use to de-list and de-rank outlets seen to be untrustworthy. It is not clear which services DCMS procured from the Disinformation Index but its fundamental offering appears to facilitate censorship online and allow the promotion of approved narratives at the whim of officials and tech companies.

Faculty is a large British AI and machine learning firm that has already signed several contracts with the NHS. Under its counter-terror banner, it offers services that allow governments to monitor “harmful and illegal content”.<sup>20</sup> An AI tool sold to the Home Office is used to identify extremist content online with automation used to find Daesh Islamist-related posts. The nature of Faculty’s work with DCMS on disinformation is not yet known but there are significant parallels between the methodology of detecting terrorists and other undesirable content online. Faculty includes Daesh propaganda and child abuse material alongside disinformation as comparable online harms its AI tools are deployed against, suggesting the tactics used against “harmful and illegal content” are similar.<sup>21</sup>

These three contracts strongly imply that the CDU conducts extensive, large-scale monitoring of discussions and trends on social media. Disinformation may even be treated as a threat on a par with violent extremism. Officials are directly influencing what content

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[298d62e5d640?origin=SearchResults&p=1](https://www.logically.ai/use-cases)

18 Logically Case Studies, accessed 19th August 2022, <https://www.logically.ai/use-cases>

19 Disinformation Index Products, accessed 19th August 2022, <https://www.disinformationindex.org/product>

20 Faculty Science Counter-Terror, accessed 19th August 2022, <https://faculty.ai/data-science-for-counter-terrorism/>

21 ‘Online Safety Data Initiative’ Launches To Transform Data Access For Online Harms, Faculty Science, accessed 19th August 2022 <https://faculty.ai/blog/online-safety-data-initiative-data-access-for-online-harms/>

is removed by platforms through flagging and AI-powered content identification tools sought from contractors. Placing disinformation, as defined by the government, on a par with terrorist material places the freedom of lawful speech under threat. Automating the identification process only facilitates potential further censorship by allowing it to happen on an industrial scale.

## Functions of the CDU

### *Misinformation reports*

Reports on certain topics are created by the CDU which are circulated to other parts of Whitehall as part of the unit's work. One is titled "CDU Vaccine Mis/disinformation: Narratives and Engagement" which featured an analysis of engagement with news articles about vaccines. This included a Daily Mail piece covering the introduction of compulsory booster jabs for care home staff and foreign travel. As part of the report, the CDU outlined which individuals had been sharing the article, commenting on their perceived attitudes towards vaccines.<sup>22</sup> These reports raise questions about the CDU's remit, as the routine monitoring of mainstream media outlets and their article's social media reach is a long way from battling propaganda from hostile entities. With live topics and fast-moving debates, it is incumbent on the state to refrain from overzealously labelling outlets and views as fake news and disinformation given the risk that legitimate minority views could be hit with these labels and consequentially censored.

Parts of the CDU's work were outsourced to AI company Logically, which produced a number of reports for officials according to information obtained from SARs. These included a "COVID-19 Mis/Disinformation Report", a "COVID-19 Mis/Disinformation Platform Terms of Service Report", a flash report analysing the response to the approval of COVID-19 vaccinations for teenagers and general COVID-19 weekly reports. DCMS has refused to disclose copies of any of the reports Logically gave it, claiming: "malign actors could exploit the information contained within the report - such as by reusing and tailoring content so that it is likely to receive high levels of engagement - to continue spreading harmful mis/disinformation."<sup>23</sup>

### *Trusted Flagger*

DCMS claims the CDU does not mandate that platforms remove content and that the unit's primary purpose is not to identify every instance of disinformation.<sup>24</sup> However, DCMS does enjoy a special relationship with several social networks, by holding Trusted Flagger status.<sup>25</sup> This fact was revealed by a Government response to Alistair Carmichael

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22 Subject Access Request by Adam Brooks

23 Freedom of Information Request to DCMS, FOI2022/13494, 16th December 2022

24 Internal Review of a Freedom of Information Request, IR2021\_06943, 29th April 2021

25 Written Parliamentary Question to DCMS, UIN 158869, 25th April 2022 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-04-25/158869>

MP's written parliamentary question – DCMS had refused to tell us whether it had Trusted Flagger status in response to our Freedom of Information requests, claiming that doing so would undermine its relationship with tech companies.<sup>26</sup> Other public bodies, including the Metropolitan Police, have been much more forthcoming about their hotline to social media moderators.<sup>27</sup>

YouTube, owned by Google, states that its Trusted Flagger programme includes:<sup>28</sup>

- A web form that government agencies and NGOs can use to contact YouTube directly
- Visibility into decisions on reported content
- Prioritised flag reviews for increased actionability
- Ongoing discussion and feedback about YouTube content areas
- Occasional online training

Clearly, this programme would give DCMS officials extra weight when flagging content for review, due to their insights into decision-making and the prioritisation of their flags. When a piece of content is flagged by the state to a social media company, it is likely to add pressure on the company to censor the material in question – but we do not know, as this data is unavailable. Giving officials an unaccountable hotline to flag lawful speech for removal from the digital public square is a worrying threat to free speech. These are secret, extrajudicial requests (dressed as 'flags') by government for foreign companies to take action against lawful speech. Not only can the government exercise its own discretion at the content it thinks is objectionable and may breach terms of services, undermining the universal application of the right to freedom of speech, but this special relationship could put content in the VIP deletion lane and hasten censorship as a result.

A November 2022 review conducted by the Oversight Board, the quasi-independent "supreme court" that examines some content moderation decisions made by Meta, shone a light on the additional weight given by Meta to reports made by governments and law enforcement. The Oversight Board found that Meta had wrongly applied rules over "veiled threats" when it removed a drill music video by a London-based rapper.<sup>29</sup> In a lengthy ruling the Board outlined how flags from the state are handled – stating that as well as the

<sup>26</sup> Freedom of Information Request to DCMS, FOI2022/02671, 22nd June 2022

<sup>27</sup> London Mayor's Question Time, 16th December 2021, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2021/5071>

<sup>28</sup> YouTube Trusted Flagger Programme, accessed 22nd August 2022, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7554338?hl=en-GB>

<sup>29</sup> Oversight Board Overturns Meta's Decision In "UK Drill Music" Case, Oversight Board Press Release, November 2022, <https://www.oversightboard.com/news/413988857616451-oversight-board-overturns-meta-s-decision-in-uk-drill-music-case/>

publicly available reporting processes, requests for review from police and other arms of government are handed “at escalation” meaning they are sent to specialist internal teams at Meta, not general content moderators.

These decisions also have no right of appeal, whether relating to illegal content or lawful material.<sup>30</sup> In the ruling, the Board was critical of the lack of transparency and appeal rights when content moderation decisions are made “at escalation”, highlighting that Meta teams often relied on evidence to justify bans from the same third parties that reported the content in the first place, including government agencies, undermining moderators’ ability to make independent judgements.

If DCMS flags are handled at escalation, it is very likely they are vulnerable to the same criticisms as police takedown requests as, likewise, there is a lack of accountability on decisions and blurred lines between flaggers and evidence-providers.

Google, and by extension YouTube, are the only big platforms which publish data about the number of requests received from government to remove content for breaches of both the law and the platforms’ terms. Even then, they do not publish each report – the most detail that can be found is a few broad categories either on the reason for the request [e.g national security, privacy, defamation] or the authority that filed the request [police force, local authority, court]. The specifics of the requests, or a breakdown of the reasons relied upon by each type of public authority for its requests, are not available so it is not possible to examine the reasons why arms of the state flagged content to Google. It also does not specify why public authorities made the requests, so flags made by the disinformation units cannot be identified.<sup>31</sup>

The government would claim that these “trusted flags” are not extrajudicial censorship requests since the content is only flagged for the company to review – but the reality of the power status of government means that these flags are highly likely to result in enforcement action that suppresses either speech or the speaker. Further, the (then) Digital Minister Chris Philp claimed the CDU’s job was to “work with social media firms to get it [disinformation] taken down”, and revealed that “in some cases, Ministers have engaged directly with social media firms as well to encourage them to remove content that is clearly inappropriate.”<sup>32</sup> In January 2022, (then) Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries revealed in the House of Commons that “daily, we work to remove that content online, which is both harmful (...) and provides misinformation and disinformation. Daily, we have

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30 UK Drill Music 2022-007-IG-MR, Oversight Board Ruling, accessed 1st December 2022, <https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/IG-PT5WRTLW>

31 Google Transparency Report, accessed 16th November 2022, [https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/government-requests/GB?lu=country\\_request\\_explore&country\\_request\\_amount=group\\_by:requestors&country\\_request\\_explore=p:4](https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/government-requests/GB?lu=country_request_explore&country_request_amount=group_by:requestors&country_request_explore=p:4)

32 Online Safety Bill (Sixteenth sitting), debated on Tuesday 28 June 2022 – Hansard, Col. 645: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-06-28/debates/3f5927ca-1ba5-47e0-863c-ea1d051dab47/OnlineSafetyBill\(SixteenthSitting\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-06-28/debates/3f5927ca-1ba5-47e0-863c-ea1d051dab47/OnlineSafetyBill(SixteenthSitting))

those contacts with the online providers and the work is ongoing.”<sup>33</sup>

### ***Surveillance function***

In December 2022, the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), which is the Parliamentary body with oversight of the UK’s Intelligence Services, attacked the lack of transparency from DCMS in relation to the CDU in its 2021/2 Annual Report.<sup>34</sup> In the report the Committee expressed concern that “intelligence activities” are being increasingly devolved to policy departments, such as DCMS, which are outside the ISC’s remit. As the ISC is the only Parliamentary committee that can regularly work with classified documents, there is real concern that if scrutiny of intelligence-linked activities is assigned to departments only subject to ordinary select committee oversight there will be an “absence of proper scrutiny”. The ISC demanded that a host of new units, including the CDU and other teams from departments including, be added to its remit to ensure proper scrutiny of intelligence activities conducted by ordinary Whitehall departments.

This shows that one of Parliament’s most important oversight committees has found the government’s transparency around the CDU seriously insufficient, and that its activities resemble security service-style surveillance.

### ***Summary of functions***

Even from the extremely limited explanations DCMS has given of the CDU, mission creep in the unit’s mission is clear. Despite its title as a “disinformation” unit, by January 2022 DCMS claimed to be countering “false narratives” by “ensuring public health campaigns are promoted through reliable sources”, in a response to a written parliamentary question; whilst, as per the statements above, Ministers began referring to CDU as “the disinformation and misinformation unit” and swept up “inappropriate” content in descriptions of the subject of its work.

Our investigation uncovered examples of the CDU’s activities, which show how its threat to free speech has manifested in reality.

## **EXAMPLES OF THE CDU’S ACTIVITIES**

This analysis is based on examining Subject Access Requests (SARs) – legal requests under the Data Protection Act 2018 through which an individual can obtain any data an organisation holds about them - submitted by individuals who we thought may have been

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33 Online Safety Bill Volume 706: debated on Thursday 6 January 2022 – Hansard, Col. 129: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-01-06/debates/484ECC23-71D8-4C01-AFC9-906BF093326A/OnlineSafetyBill>

34 Annual Report 2021-22, Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, HC 922, 13th December 2022, <https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISC-Annual-Report-2021%E2%80%932022.pdf>



affected by the CDU's activities, and who agreed both to participate in this research and share their responses with us. The following information was obtained from SARs made to DCMS, requesting information held or generated by the CDU in particular.

**Targeting criticism of modelling**

Elected politicians and ex-Ministers were not exempt from the CDU's monitoring, with Conservative MP David Davis's views on modelling during the pandemic drawing the attention of the DCMS disinformation team. In an entry in his SAR response vaguely titled "analysis of online content", the senior Tory MP's tweets questioning the modelling put forward at the start of the pandemic were monitored and recorded. Similar labels in other SARs have subsequently been confirmed to be CDU or Logically documents, so it is reasonable to assume this document is of a similar ilk.

**David Davis MP SAR to the CDU**

31	Analysis of online content	15/5/2020	The lockdownsceptics.org article received widespread attention, particularly on Twitter. A series of posts by influential and verified Twitter users such as David Davis MP and [REDACTED] were highly critical of the government, with the majority of comments criticising Imperial College and blaming [REDACTED] personally for the shutdown. [Includes a screenshot of the tweet]
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31/08/2022	JuliaHB1 1351850022787231744 <a href="https://twitter.com/JuliaHB1/status/1351850022787231744">https://twitter.com/JuliaHB1/status/1351850022787231744</a> LIVE	Report on online activity
31/08/2022	JuliaHB1 1357077333379792904 <a href="https://twitter.com/JuliaHB1/status/1357077333379792904">https://twitter.com/JuliaHB1/status/1357077333379792904</a> LIVE	Report on online activity

Julia Hartley-Brewer SAR extract, with similar heading. This was later confirmed as an extract from a Logically Covid Mis/Disinformation Report

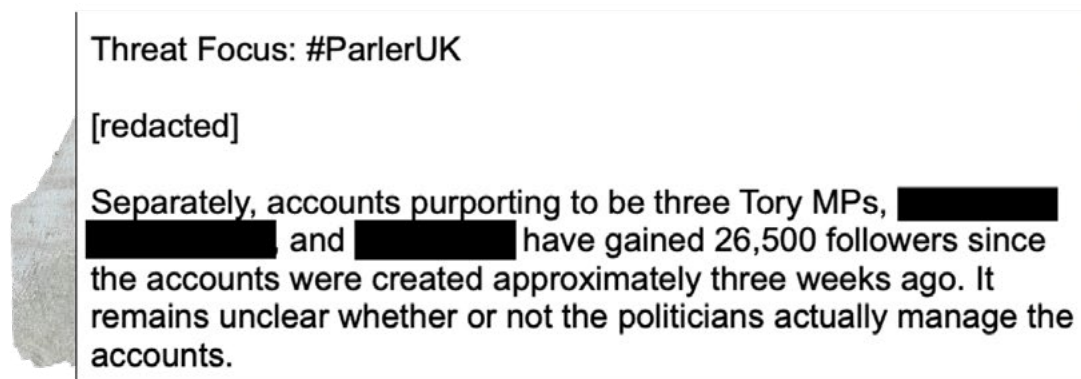
The entry does not cite which specific statements from Mr Davis warranted attention but mentions him as "critical of the government" . In the weeks preceding the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the date on the entry, he tweeted questioning the model and co-authored a Daily Telegraph article questioning the mathematical reasoning underpinning the Imperial College model that influenced the government's early COVID-19 decision-making. Both of these examples are likely to be relevant.

Neither the Daily Telegraph piece, co-written with the science writer Lord Ridley, nor Mr

Davis's tweets say the Imperial model is necessarily incorrect – rather, they raise concerns about the code and mathematical assumptions contained within it.<sup>35</sup> Mr Davis called for transparency about the model, which formed part of the basis for incredibly important policy decisions. Encouraging openness and scrutiny as he did is the very antithesis of a disinformation campaign.<sup>36</sup>

As an elected politician Mr Davis, must be free to hold ministers and officials to account on behalf of his constituents and the country, including scrutinising the evidence that underpinned major policy decisions such as lockdown – without being covertly monitored, recorded and potentially even put in the cross-hairs for corporate censorship by the government. It is simply unjustifiable for a government unit to expend resources monitoring a Member of Parliament for seeking transparency and accountability in a sensitive policy area. Free speech across the board is under threat if concerns about disinformation can be used to rebrand scepticism as the peddling of falsehoods – but it is in total crisis if parliamentary scrutiny can be rebranded as disinformation.

Another three unnamed Conservative MPs also came to the CDU's attention in the summer of 2020 by joining the free speech social network Parler, which became associated with the alt-right. Despite the unit not suggesting that the accounts were posting much of any interest to the government, their creation was monitored by the CDU – underlining that even politicians of the government's party had their activities surveilled.



Extract from a DCMS Covid-19 Disinformation Report

Some MPs, including former and current Ministers, were affected by CDU activities in relation to their criticism of government policies during the pandemic, but chose not to be named in this report.

### ***Targeting lockdown harms dissent***

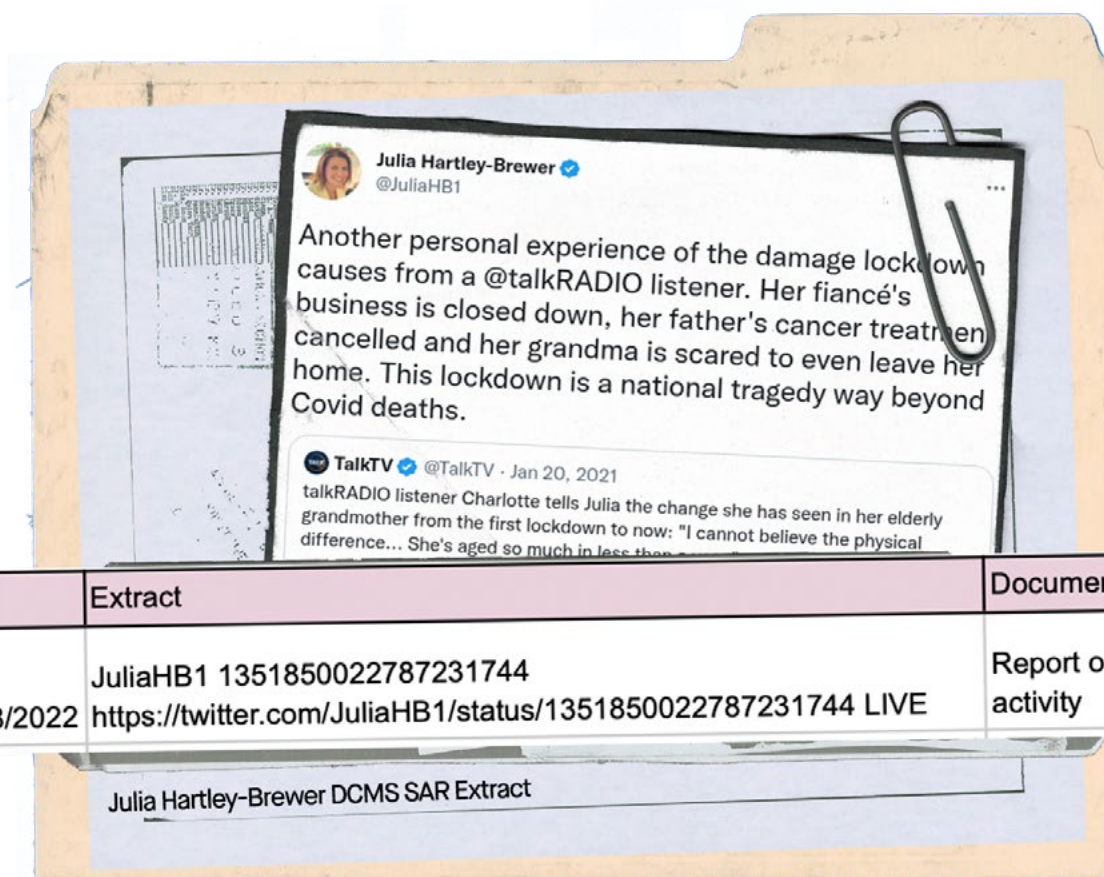
Journalist, broadcaster and political commentator Julia Hartley-Brewer was featured

<sup>35</sup> Is The Chilling Truth That The Decision To Impose Lockdown Was Based On Crude Mathematical Guesswork?, The Daily Telegraph, 10th May 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/05/10/chilling-truth-decision-impose-lockdown-based-crude-mathematical/>

<sup>36</sup> Tweet from David David MP, 5th May 2020, <https://twitter.com/DavidDavisMP/status/1257761434039136256>

repeatedly in the Logically “COVID-19 Mis/Disinformation Platform Terms of Service Report” commissioned by DCMS, a fact that was only disclosed after repeatedly asking the Department to clarify the reasons for holding her data. DCMS’ initial response to her SAR masked the name of the documents she was included in as “reports on online activity”.

The tweets from Ms Hartley-Brewer that were included in the reports suggest that the DCMS contractor was stretching its remit and broadening the definition of disinformation unjustifiably to include comments critical of the government.



For example, Logically reported a tweet to government in which Ms Hartley-Brewer shared an interview with a listener who had suffered during the lockdown. The other drew attention to deaths from cancer that may have been impacted by the NHS’s COVID-19 focus, leading to fewer referrals for malignancies – an issue that has been documented in peer-reviewed research.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear that lockdown had serious harms and downsides associated with it, which can be acknowledged separately from the debate over whether it was the best policy at the time or not.<sup>38</sup> From businesses closing to a lack of contact with loved ones and a loss of

<sup>37</sup> Impact Of The COVID-19 Pandemic On The Detection And Management Of Colorectal Cancer In England: A Population-Based Study, Professor Eva Morris et al, The Lancet: Gastroenterology & Hepatology 6(3), 1st March 2021, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langas/article/PIIS2468-1253\(21\)00005-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langas/article/PIIS2468-1253(21)00005-4/fulltext)

<sup>38</sup> Coronavirus Lockdown: Costs and Benefits, Chris Smith, The House of Lords Library, <https://>

civil liberties, lockdown was not harm-free and people should be free to both talk about their experiences and express their own views on the level of harm experienced as a result of lockdown policies compared to the direct harm caused by the virus. Experiences and opinions should not be classified as disinformation.

In another example, Logically reported a tweet to government in which Ms Hartley-Brewer quoted the UK's number of cancer deaths per day, with the figure matching data from the Office for National Statistics.<sup>39</sup> Cancer charities had been flagging the negative impact that coronavirus had on treatment for the disease, and this was widely considered an important topic for discussion. – not so-called misinformation.

10/11/2021 <https://twitter.com/JuliaHB1/status/1450540608980914182> Report on online activity

Julia Hartley-Brewer DCMS SAR Extract

### ***Targeting opposition to Covid passes***

Evidence from SARs submitted by our director, Silkie Carlo, and Advocacy Manager, Mark Johnson, show that Logically, and by extension, the CDU, strayed significantly from their “disinformation” remit to monitor and delegitimise domestic political dissent in their reports.

Big Brother Watch led the campaign against mandatory domestic COVID-19 certification

[lordslibrary.parliament.uk/coronavirus-lockdown-costs-and-benefits/](https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/coronavirus-lockdown-costs-and-benefits/), 22nd July 2020

39 Total Cancer Deaths In The UK In 2019 and 2020, Office for National Statistics, 30th July 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/totalcancerdeathsintheukin2019and2020>

in the UK, rallying a cross-party coalition of 99 parliamentarians to oppose the policy on human rights and equality grounds.<sup>40</sup> The Conservative rebellion against mandatory Covid passes in the December 2021 House of Commons vote marked the biggest rebellion since the vote on the Iraq War.

Logically monitored and recorded our criticism of the mandatory Covid pass policy in two of its reports, with Mark Johnson’s tweet included in the COVID-19 Mis/Disinformation Report and a tweet of an interview clip of Silkie Carlo on OFCOM-regulated talkRADIO included in the COVID-19 Mis/Disinformation Platform Terms of Service Report. The latter report appears to function to “indicate [to the government] that content might potentially breach Twitter’s terms of service”, according to a SAR response from Logically to Silkie Carlo. It is not clear how or why the Tweet would breach the terms of service.



64	Logically, Covid Mis/disinformation Platform Terms of Service Report, Annex 2 (general statistics on platform actions)	30/11/21	Silkie Carlo, Big Brother Watch director, tells Julia that people "have been beaten down into submission" over vaccine passports and warns: "What's being proposed is a vision of checkpoint Britain."  @JuliaHB1   @silkiecarlo <a href="https://t.co/flAk6XRmAN">https://t.co/flAk6XRmAN</a>
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Mark Johnson’s tweet advocated that people sign a petition on the official parliamentary petitions website, where all petitions are vetted and fact-checked before they are published, urging the government not to roll out COVID-19 vaccine passports.<sup>41</sup> At the time of the tweet and the report, scores of MPs held the same view and the government was conducting a consultation on Covid passes - it was not a settled policy to implement them.<sup>42</sup> The petition had over 275,000 signatures on the day the Logically report was

40 Stop Vaccine Passports, Big Brother Watch, accessed 9th November 2022, <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/campaigns/stopvaccinepassports/#crosspartycampaign>

41 Do Not Rollout COVID-19 Vaccine Passports, Closed Parliamentary Petition, accessed 9th November 2022, <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/569957>

42 COVID-19: PM Promises Review On Issues Of Vaccine Passports, BBC News, 23rd February

dated;<sup>43</sup> 10,000 signatures triggers a government response, and 100,000 signatures leads to a debate in Parliament. Neither the petition nor the tweet discussed the vaccine itself, but focused on the negative human rights implications of vaccine passports. It is inconceivable that any reasonable person could view this as “disinformation” and its inclusion betrays a concerning level of mission creep.

Item number	Date	Extract	Document
1	10/03/2021	Vaccines will be mandatory – 01 March <a href="http://twitter.com/Mark_AJohnson/statuses/1366344572083834882">http://twitter.com/Mark_AJohnson/statuses/1366344572083834882</a>	Internal report

Mark Johnson DCMS SAR Extract

This raises questions about why the CDU contracted a company to surveil opposition to a policy among human rights groups, especially when the government had supposedly yet to decide on the policy’s appropriateness.

The issue of COVID-19 passports was a controversial, live and important debate in Britain at the time. It is very worrying that a private company, at the behest of the government, secretly monitored, recorded and reported on mainstream political dissent under the guise of tackling “disinformation”.

The monitoring and recording of Silkie Carlo’s interview with Julia Hartley-Brewer shows that attention paid to vaccine passport opposition was not a one-off incident, but a theme. The interview, which coincided with the launch of Big Brother Watch’s cross-party coalition of 99 parliamentarians opposing Covid passes and the publication of Big Brother Watch’s report *Access Denied: the case against a two-tier Britain under COVID-19 certification*, focused entirely on the social harms that vaccine passports could have, yet appears in a report titled “COVID-19 Mis/Disinformation Platform Terms of Service”.<sup>44</sup> The

2021  
43 Do Not Rollout COVID-19 Vaccine Passports Archive, Parliamentary Petition, archived 9th March 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210309163330/https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/569957>

44 Silkie Carlo Interview on TalkRadio, 2nd April 2021, <https://twitter.com/i/status/1377890760360615936>

lack of context in the SAR response and refusal by DCMS to disclose the full report mean it is difficult to understand the purpose of the inclusion of the interview – however, it is concerning that monitoring of political dissent was being conducted under the banner of countering “disinformation”.

Logically also reported a tweet by Silkie Carlo in a “COVID-19 Mis/Disinformation Platform Terms of Service” report shared with DCMS, in which she compared the enforcement and impact of vaccine passports to mandatory vaccines. DCMS did not disclose this in response to her SAR, but Logically did, further disclosing that they viewed the tweet as a potential breach of Twitter’s terms of service, claiming that it supported a “narrative” that “vaccine passports are a form of mandatory vaccination” and that the analysis “speculates” and “distorts facts”. However, her description of how both policies are generally enforced was factually accurate. Their report entry on her also interpreted the tweet as “saying [vaccine passports] will inevitably lead to mandatory vaccines” which the tweet evidently did not do; rather, it was a comparison of the enforcement mechanism and impact of both policies. In any event, Twitter’s medical misinformation policy from early March 2021 made no mention of vaccine passports and defended the right for people to express strong opinions or commentary.<sup>45</sup> Logically’s misrepresentation of our director’s policy analysis, and inclusion of it in a “disinformation” report, is highly inappropriate and indicates that protected speech was monitored and flagged for potential censorship with disturbing casualness.

The image shows a screenshot of a tweet by Silkie Carlo (@silkiecarlo) from March 3, 2021. The tweet text reads: "Vaccine passports are a hair's breadth away from mandatory vaccines. Compulsory vaccines are primarily enforced by penalties like denial of services, exclusion or fines (not physical force). Vaccine passports will enforce denial of services, exclusion + economic disadvantage." Below the tweet, there is a summary and analysis by Logically. The analysis includes the following points:

- **Summary:** High-reach account vocal against vaccine passports saying these will inevitably lead to mandatory vaccines.
- **Original Platform:** Twitter
- **Original Platform Reach:** 269403
- **Cross-Platforms:** N/A
- **Cross Platforms Reach:** N/A
- **Narratives Supported:**
  - Vaccine passports are a form of mandatory vaccination.
- **Credibility Score:** N/A
- **CIB Flag if applicable:** N/A
- **ToS Violation:** The post distorts the facts surrounding vaccine passports through a comparison and speculates on how they might be enforced.

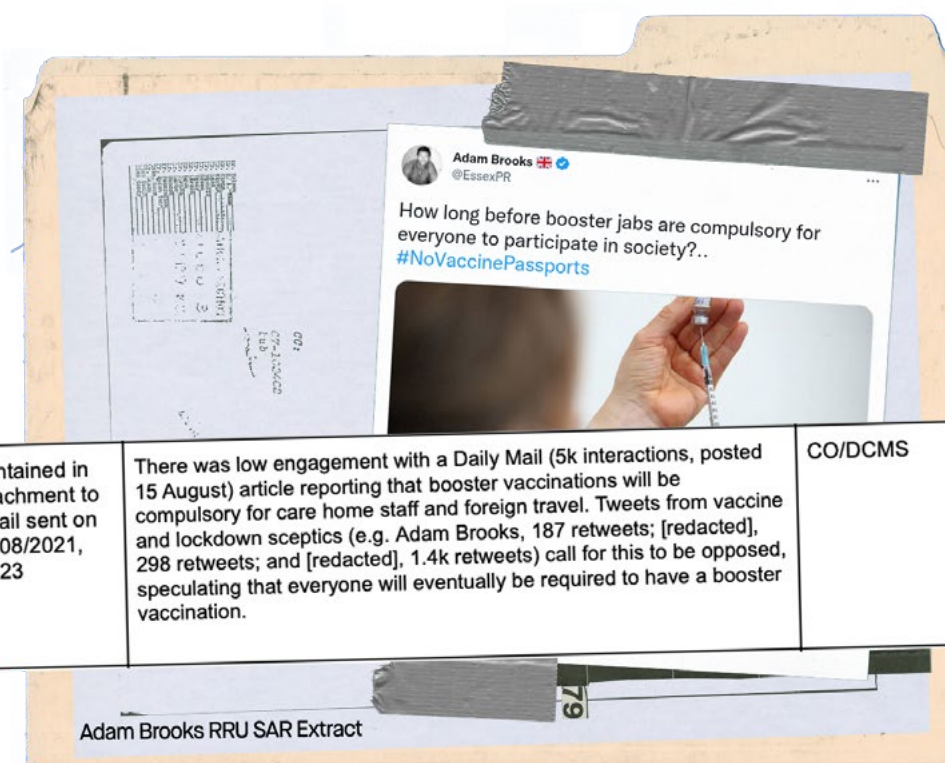
Silkie Carlo's SAR to Logically

45 Twitter Medical Misinformation Policy, archived 6th March 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210306141333/https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/medical-misinformation-policy>

The CDU highlighted a tweet by Adam Brooks, the pub landlord and political commentator, in an August 2021 internal report titled “Vaccine Mis/Disinformation: Narratives and Engagement” in which he opposed both vaccine passports and compulsory vaccines – but not vaccination itself.

In the report, CDU officials discussed a Mail on Sunday article covering the news that vaccine requirements for travel and care home workers would extend to require a third dose to qualify, and the engagement with it online.<sup>46</sup> The CDU report claimed there was “low engagement” with the piece and highlighted “tweets from vaccine and lockdown sceptics” opposing the measure, naming Mr Brooks as one of the people advocating for that position.

Mr Brooks’s tweet did not make any claims about the vaccine itself – rather, he opposed coercion or compulsion around vaccines, a position widely held across society. By including his tweet in a report on disinformation the CDU appears to have used an alarmingly broad definition of the term that covers general opposition to government coronavirus policy.



<p>CDU Vaccine Mis/disinformation: Narratives and Engagement, 6 August - 23 August 2021</p>	<p>Contained in attachment to email sent on 23/08/2021, 12:23</p>	<p>There was low engagement with a Daily Mail (5k interactions, posted 15 August) article reporting that booster vaccinations will be compulsory for care home staff and foreign travel. Tweets from vaccine and lockdown sceptics (e.g. Adam Brooks, 187 retweets; [redacted], 298 retweets; and [redacted], 1.4k retweets) call for this to be opposed, speculating that everyone will eventually be required to have a booster vaccination.</p>	<p>CO/DCMS</p>	<p>Covid-19 related Media Monitoring</p>
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Labelling Mr Brooks as a lockdown/vaccine sceptic, the latter of which comes with negative connotations, suggests that the CDU had decided which views or people were worth listening to, and who should be quickly dismissed. Dissent is not disinformation but it appears that the CDU is blurring the lines between the two to invoke powers to monitor

46 COVID-19 Booster Shots Will 'be Obligatory For Trips Abroad And Care Home Staff' - As Millions Are Set To Offered A Third Jab From September, Mail on Sunday, 15th August 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9894487/Booster-COVID-19-vaccines-mandatory-care-home-staff-foreign-trips-UK.html>

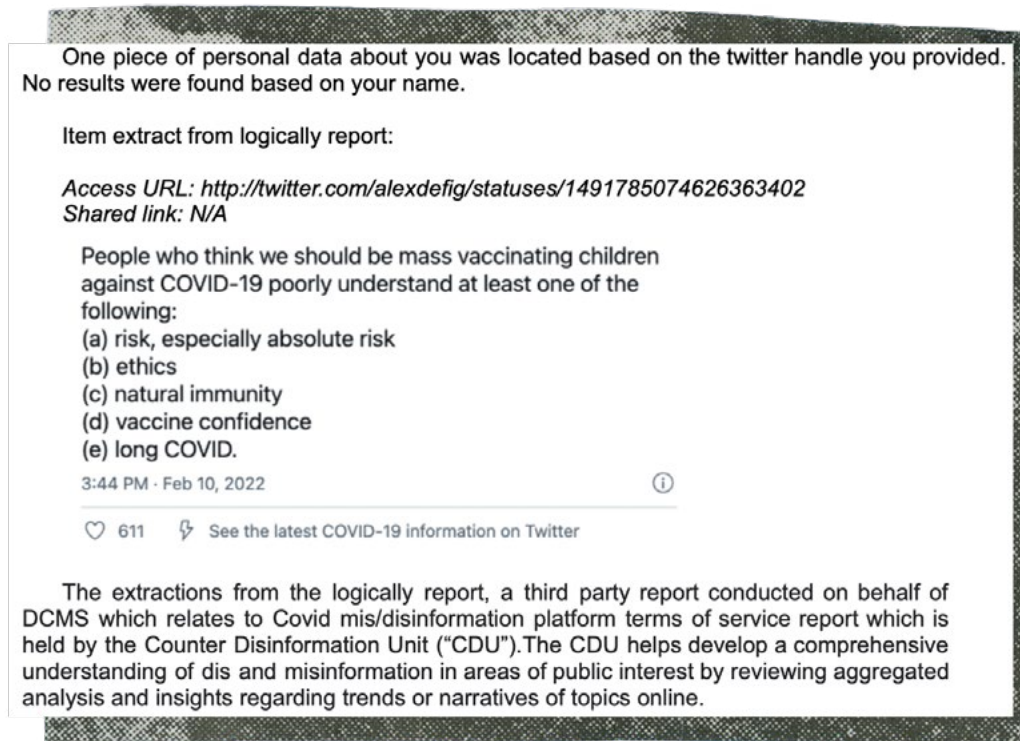


and suppress criticism. Whitehall officials are tasked to make a success of government policies – not to act as an authority on truth. These two roles clearly conflict.

### ***Targeting government mass vaccination policy dissent***

Even the statistics lead at the Vaccine Confidence Project, which exists to “monitor public confidence in immunisation programmes” and “ensure sustained confidence in vaccines”<sup>47</sup>, Dr Alexandre de Figueiredo, had his social media posts recorded by DCMS contractor Logically in its “COVID-19 Mis/Disinformation Platform Terms of Service” report. The research fellow at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine published significant work looking at the negative impact Covid passports could have on vaccine confidence and criticised policies for the mass vaccination of children. Despite his expertise, AI company Logically filed his tweet below in a disinformation report to the government.

Dr de Figueiredo’s tweet expressed concern about the decision to offer vaccination to every healthy child in the country, arguing that those advocating for that policy poorly understood either absolute risk, ethics, natural immunity, vaccine confidence or long COVID-19. The researcher had previously endorsed vaccination for the vulnerable and those who want it. The post reflected his informed opinion at the time and cannot be considered “disinformation”.<sup>48</sup>



Dr de Figueiredo DCMS SAR Extract

47 Vaccine Confidence Project: <https://www.vaccineconfidence.org/about> (accessed 14th December 2022)

48 Gettr Post, Alex de Figueiredo, 2nd January 2022, <https://gettr.com/user/alexfigueiredo>

Unfortunately, DCMS failed to give the full entry to the Logically Report in response to his SAR, so the company's justification for flagging this tweet is unclear. This example of an academic, who works on understanding vaccine confidence, being flagged for questioning the government's approach shows how criticism of government policy around COVID-19 was treated as "disinformation". Dr de Figueredo was not calling the vaccine unsafe - he was debating the cost/benefit analysis of vaccinating all children, something the UK government's vaccine advisors also expressed uncertainty about.

In September 2021, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) called the benefits of vaccination "marginally greater" than the harms while expressing uncertainty about potential harms, leading them to not recommend widespread vaccination for 12-15 year olds.<sup>49</sup> However the UK's Chief Medical Officers decided to recommend vaccination when taking into account wider public health benefits.<sup>50</sup> Subsequently, the JCVI recommended in February 2022 that children aged 5-11 are offered the vaccine on a "non-urgent basis" arguing that most of the benefits pertained to future waves of the disease rather than the Omicron variant.<sup>51</sup> This illustrates that the decision to universally vaccinate children, although deemed to be beneficial overall by the UK vaccine authorities, was not clear cut. Discussion around this important and sensitive issue was legitimate - yet treated by the government and its contractors as a threat. In doing so, the government threatened academic freedom and scientific debate.

The contract DCMS awarded to Logically was for "analytical support relating to potentially harmful disinformation online".<sup>52</sup> Squaring this brief against the inclusion of any of these tweets appears to be an unjustifiable stretch of the remit. Disagreement with the government and criticism of its policies are part of a healthy political debate in a democracy and branding this as disinformation risks delegitimising democratic dissent.

DCMS and the Counter Disinformation Unit are accountable for their contractor's actions and it is alarming that they have repeatedly signed deals, totalling more than £1 million, to monitor political criticism of government policies and recommend content for potential censorship. Given the scale of the contracts held by Logically there are likely many other tweets that were unjustifiably flagged as possible breaches of platforms' terms, to be potentially scrubbed from the internet.

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49 Jcvi Statement On COVID-19 Vaccination Of Children Aged 12 To 15 Years, 3rd September 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jcvi-statement-september-2021-COVID-19-vaccination-of-children-aged-12-to-15-years/jcvi-statement-on-COVID-19-vaccination-of-children-aged-12-to-15-years-3-september-2021>

50 Universal Vaccination Of Children And Young People Aged 12 To 15 Years Against COVID-19, UK Cheif Medical Officer's Letter, 13th September 2021 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-vaccination-of-children-and-young-people-aged-12-to-15-years-against-COVID-19>

51 Jcvi Statement On Vaccination Of Children Aged 5 To 11 Years Old, 16th February 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jcvi-update-on-advice-for-COVID-19-vaccination-of-children-aged-5-to-11/jcvi-statement-on-vaccination-of-children-aged-5-to-11-years-old>

52 Disinformation Analytical Support Contract, 13th February 2021, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/ecffdb0a-92fd-4e26-ad62-c6c144b4a16b?origin=SearchResults&p=1>,

The “disinformation” net spreading so far is a serious threat to free expression and open debate, and when combined with the AI-powered surveillance of the internet to capture supposed transgressions, there is growing evidence that the CDU is dangerous for free speech and democracy.

***Flagging journalists***

On some occasions, unnamed CDU staff showed some awareness that their activities posed a risk to the right to freedom of speech. In a SAR response obtained by associate editor of the Spectator, editor-in-chief of the Daily Sceptic and director of the Free Speech Union, Toby Young, extracts from internal emails show CDU staff debated whether to flag several of his tweets to Twitter as a potential breach of its terms. In considering what action to take, staff note that reporting the journalist would “require further analysis of the FoS [freedom of speech] implications”.

There were three cases where the CDU considered flagging Mr Young’s tweets, but decided not to [Mr Young’s SAR obtained no evidence that any social media posts were flagged]. The three tweets included Mr Young sharing the Daily Sceptic coverage of the size of the French petition opposing vaccine passports, the site’s report on a British Medical Journal investigation that questioned data ethics in the Pfizer vaccine trial, and an article on the UK Health Security Agency data about the efficacy of the vaccine against the Omicron variant versus prior variants. All three were considered in the context of Twitter’s COVID-19 misinformation policy.



32	Assessment of Tweet against Twitter COVID-19 misinformation policy. This Tweet was not flagged to Twitter.	19/1/2022	<p>Tweet shares article from the Daily Sceptic regarding a French petition protesting vaccine passports.</p> <p>It is worth noting that Toby Young helps run/contributes to the Daily Sceptic, reporting this site would therefore require further analysis of the FoS implications.</p>
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Toby Young CDU SAR Extract

In two of the three cases recorded in the SAR, the CDU admitted there were freedom of speech concerns in flagging Mr Young's tweets to Twitter – demonstrating that even among the unit's officials there was an awareness of the human rights risks of censoring a journalist. It is worrying that government officials were considering to recommend that a foreign Big Tech giant censored a British journalist, only opting not to on account of the individual's profile.

The content of the posts raises further concern about the motivation for the CDU's monitoring, recording, and consideration of recommending suppression of Mr Young's speech. The number of people opposing vaccine passports in France is a factual claim. There is no interpretation either by the state or by Twitter that should view this as false; it simply reflected opposition to a government policy direction, yet was actively considered as a case of misinformation. This suggests that either certain people, such as Mr Young, were subjected to specific scrutiny for their tweets around the coronavirus or the dis/misinformation net was cast so wide by the CDU that vast amounts of legitimate, lawful speech was caught up in it.

There is also some evidence pointing to the monitoring of particular outlets. A SAR submitted by the writer Laura Dodsworth found that a Cross Whitehall Weekly Counter Disinformation Report from June 2021 mentioned the launch of her book *A State of Fear*. Her book was covered by outlets including the Daily Telegraph, the Times and the Daily Mail – yet it was the coverage by Kremlin-linked news outlet Russia Today that was picked up by the CDU, pointing to Ms Dodsworth's description of government advisers as "unelected psychocrats".

6	Cross Whitehall Weekly Counter Disinformation Report	01/06/2021	Russia's RT reported on a new book by Laura Dodsworth entitled "State of Fear" claiming that 'Dystopian 'unelected psychocrats' have cynically manipulated the British people by weaponising fear to ensure compliance with lockdowns.'
19	Internal correspondence	20/07/2020	May I also suggest that you read Laura Dodsworth "A State Of Fear", succinctly laying bear the Government, programming of - Fear.
31	Internal correspondence	07/04/2022	I have enclosed with this letter a copy of "A State of Fear: How the UK Government Weaponised Fear During the Covid-19 Pandemic" by Laura Dodsworth. It is a thoroughly researched account of how the Government used behavioural modification technique to push the public to comply with Covid-19 lockdown policies.

Extracts from Laura Dodsworth's DCMS SARs

It is unclear why the write-up of the book by an outlet with minimal reach compared to the mainstream newspapers, which also covered its publication, was selected for mention by the CDU, especially when Russia Today appeared to cover the book in a similar way to other outlets. This raises questions about whether RT was given special attention by the CDU, even before its ban following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Although the article about Laura Dodsworth's book was flagged in a disinformation report, her SAR revealed that not everyone in Whitehall disliked the book. Two separate internal emails in DCMS recommended her work to colleagues, describing it as "thoroughly researched" and as "succinctly laying bear the Government, programming of – Fear". Clearly, what the CDU views as borderline disinformation is viewed as essential reading by other colleagues in DCMS.

It is deeply concerning that the CDU's definition of "disinformation" appears to encompass domestic criticism of government policy. When considered in the context of the unit's censorship functions, the threat this secretive body poses to free speech in the UK is clear.

#### ***CDU Receipt of Whitehall media monitoring emails***

Several people who submitted Subject Access Requests were told that although the CDU had not generated any information on them itself, their data had "incidentally" been seen by the unit via media-related emails. Sometimes this took the form of external newsletters which individual staff will have subscribed to. On other occasions, people's data, mostly their names and quotes, was held due to the circulation of internal DCMS or cross-Whitehall media monitoring emails.

The regular receipt of civil service media monitoring emails by CDU staff suggests that attention was being paid to the broader media narrative surrounding the government coronavirus response. The vast majority of media summaries or media briefings returned in responses to Subject Access Requests focused on coronavirus and were mostly critical of the government, implying that the CDU received regular media round-ups of negative coverage.

This included a wide variety of high profile individuals, such as:

- Gracie Bradley, Liberty interim director between October 2020 and December 2021, taking issue with the Met Police's appalling handling of the Sarah Everard Vigil on Clapham Common during the pandemic, arguing that they exacerbated the public health risk and even targeted her in the crowd

- Former Supreme Court Judge Lord Sumption arguing that coercive lockdowns were a threat to the survival of liberal democracy
- One record comprised selective quotes from a live broadcast interview on BBC Radio Four's Today programme by a highly respected senior public health academic. The whole interview was not included, meaning that the context of the comments was missing. The quotes related to factually correct statements made concerning biases, flaws and omissions in government claims about the effectiveness and efficiency of mass asymptomatic testing for coronavirus
- Tweets sharing journalist Ian Birrell's column arguing that the Matt Hancock affair revealed the "rotten stench of corruption" at the heart of our government
- Labour peer and former Liberty director Baroness Shami Chakrabarti's criticism of the government on a host of issues from vaccine passports [when she appeared in the media to promote Big Brother Watch's anti-Covid pass pledge], the draconian Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (then) bill and government attempts to ignore international law on torture

CDU staff also received media monitoring emails outside of the COVID-19 sphere. Streatham's Labour MP Bell Ribeiro-Addy appeared in an update about the Stop the War Coalition in February 2020 that was sent to at least one CDU official. The MP had signed a statement from the anti-war group that argued NATO should "call a halt to its eastward expansion", though later removed her signature. Foreign policy is well outside the remit of DCMS or the CDU, raising questions about why this media monitoring email was circulated to those officials. It should be noted that DCMS staff have contributed to the Government Information Cell, which works on narratives surrounding the war in Ukraine out of the Foreign Office. However, with the limited context given in Ms Ribeiro-Addy's SAR response, it is difficult to understand why the Culture Department held this email.

It is difficult to square the sheer quantity of mainstream media round-ups being circulated to the CDU with the unit's supposed brief of providing "a comprehensive picture of the extent, scope and the reach of disinformation and misinformation on COVID-19", especially when the overwhelming majority of the media summary excerpts seen by Big Brother Watch were negative comments about the government. Criticism of the government, or offering an alternative viewpoint, is not misinformation and it is concerning for free discussion that a unit supposedly focused on misinformation was regularly being sent summaries of the government's bad headlines.

DCMS has claimed that these summaries were only seen "incidentally" by CDU officials as the media briefings were circulated to staff, which raises questions about whether their work was influenced by the wider narrative around COVID-19 perhaps with an eye

on the government's reputation, or whether the remit had quietly expanded to cover the mainstream press as well as social media.



Ministry  
of Truth

# Rapid Response Unit



# Rapid Response Unit

## Cabinet Office

*Purpose: Cross-Whitehall Narrative Monitoring and Rebuttal*

### What is the RRU?

The Rapid Response Unit (RRU) sits at the heart of government in the Cabinet Office. Senior civil servants described it as a “social media capability” set up to support “the reclaiming of a fact-based public debate” at the RRU’s launch in 2018.<sup>53</sup> Initially, the RRU’s remit spanned the entire news landscape from domestic crime to foreign affairs.<sup>54</sup> However, since early 2020 and the beginning of the pandemic, most of the unit’s work has been focused on COVID-19.<sup>55</sup> Officials denied that the RRU would be a “fake news unit” or a “rebuttal unit” at its launch,<sup>56</sup> but by March 2020 a government press release announced the unit would “crack down” and “combat false and misleading narratives” about coronavirus by either issuing “a direct rebuttal on social media” or “working with platforms to remove harmful content”<sup>57</sup> - precisely what it had promised not to do, again demonstrating the rapid function creep associated with truth units. Much of what is known about RRU’s work centres on monitoring traditional and social media for narrative trends, and co-ordinating government responses across Whitehall to “rebut false narratives” and “promote” government campaigns through “reliable sources”.<sup>58</sup>

In the months after the RRU launched, the Executive director of Government Communications Alex Aiken gave a rare interview outlining the unit’s work.<sup>59</sup> He said that the disinformation covered by the RRU had included monitoring online networks around the 2018 UK airstrikes on Syria in response to the Douma chemical weapons attack by Bashar Al-Asad’s regime,<sup>60</sup> as some groups had claimed the attacks were a false flag operation by Syrian rebels.<sup>61</sup>

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53 Alex Aiken Introduces the Rapid Response Unit, 19th July 2018. Government Communication Service, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20200203104056/https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/alex-aiken-introduces-the-rapid-response-unit/>

54 Ibid.

55 Government Cracks Down On Spread Of False Coronavirus Information Online, Government Press Release, 30th March 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-spread-of-false-coronavirus-information-online>

56 Alex Aiken Introduces the Rapid Response Unit, 19th July 2018. Government Communication Service, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20200203104056/https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/alex-aiken-introduces-the-rapid-response-unit/>.

57 Government Cracks Down On Spread Of False Coronavirus Information Online, Government Press Release, 30th March 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-spread-of-false-coronavirus-information-online>

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 How We Created a Virtual Crime Scene to Investigate Syria’s Chemical Attack, The New York Times, 24th June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/24/world/middleeast/douma-syria-chemical-attack-augmented-reality-ar-ur.html>

61 What Happened in Douma, The Intercept, 9th February 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/09/douma-chemical-attack-evidence-syria/>

The senior official also pointed to RRU’s work to combat an online narrative that emerged in April 2018, based on news articles containing “sensationalist data”, that the London murder rate had exceeded the traditionally high murder rate of New York.

Although the pandemic has radically changed the government’s focus on its information operations these early examples underline the potential breadth of the RRU’s remit. Tellingly, the RRU was set up to work closely with the National Security Communications Team, suggesting that there was more than a simple media rebuttal remit to the unit.

## How does the RRU operate?

Significant financial resources have been allocated to the Rapid Response Unit, which was given a £600,000 budget across its work 2020/21, £451,000 solely for staffing in 2021/22 and £352,000 for staff in 2022/3.<sup>62,63</sup> This budget covered the salary for eight staff in 2021/22 [five permanent staff and three on fixed contracts] and six the following year [four permanent and two on fixed contracts]. Other requests covering the RRU’s resourcing have suggested that during the pandemic additional civil servants were also working alongside the unit.<sup>64</sup>

Tens of thousands of pounds have been spent on tools specifically for the RRU. £75,600 was spent in November 2021 on a one-year licence for Brandwatch, a social listening tool owned by public relations tech company Cision.<sup>65</sup> The tool allows users to “tap into conversations” on social networks and review sites. Procurement documents also show that RRU staff would have access to unlimited searches, a dashboard, and could monitor unlimited searches across 30 queries.<sup>66</sup> Brandwatch is marketed as an AI-powered tool capable of monitoring “thousands” of conversations online, producing a huge range of analytics on both topics and individual accounts. This can include sentiment [positive, neutral, negative] and emotional [anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise] analysis of interactions, examining the demographics of accounts involved in a conversation, producing word clouds of related terms in posts, topic wheels showing the different sections of online discussion as well as the more common volume and timing statistics.<sup>67</sup>

This contract underlines the scale of the RRU’s capabilities to monitor social media and produce briefings for both the Cabinet Office and the rest of Whitehall about key online

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62 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2021/18934, 13th October 2021

63 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022\_11552, 9th August 2022

64 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2020/09079, 29th July 2020, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/a\\_list\\_of\\_names\\_who\\_currently\\_wo](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/a_list_of_names_who_currently_wo)

65 Social Listening Tool – Rapid Response Unit (RRU) Contract, Cabinet Office, 23rd February 2022, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/dcaceeea-6193-4982-8ec3-2ac267479068?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

66 Social Listening Tool – Rapid Response Unit (RRU) Contract, Cabinet Office, 23rd February 2022, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/dcaceeea-6193-4982-8ec3-2ac267479068?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

67 Cision Social Listening, accessed 23rd August 2022, <https://www.cision.com/monitoring-analytics/social/>

narratives that government may choose to respond to, whether an official rebuttal or something more subtle.

Some other contracts signed by the Cabinet Office can also be connected to the RRU, even if it is not mentioned explicitly in procurement documents. This is either due to the context of the work or because the purchased services will be of use to the unit even if the deal covers use across the department as a whole. Many of these are basic media monitoring contracts that have been put in place across the Cabinet Office over the past few years. Although not exclusively for the RRU, products that aid with press monitoring will be of use to the unit – although the 2020 deal for COVID-19 media monitoring may have been more directly for the RRU.<sup>68</sup>

In March 2021, two contracts collectively valued at more than £2.5 million were awarded to Engine Partners, a conglomerate of specialist marketing agencies, for work around vaccine hesitancy. With attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccines being a key area of work for the RRU, these contracts are likely to relate to the unit.<sup>69 70</sup> The larger of the two deals, worth £2,503,792 was to create a Vaccine Hesitancy Platform for the Cabinet Office while the smaller, worth £68,000 was for intelligence and media monitoring relating to the platform.

No documents were published by the Cabinet Office about the massive outlay but Engine Partners gave some detail of their work on their website. The company said it built a database bringing together population and socio-demographic data, vaccination rate data, survey data relating to vaccine hesitancy among social groups, as well as both news media and social media monitoring of vaccine coverage, sentiment and discussion trends across the world.<sup>71</sup> The goal of the work was to create tools to support communications campaigns to increase vaccine uptake globally – starting by splitting the world into four groups at a global, national and regional level: already vaccinated; vaccine acceptors; vaccine rejectors and the undecided. Messaging was then designed to target these groups to “to increase vaccine confidence and raise awareness of misinformation”, with the true source of the messaging obscured.<sup>72</sup>

The Cabinet Office’s work with Engine Partners goes beyond mere monitoring of online narratives and correcting the record, towards behavioural influence. The project aimed to “change behaviour” in the marketing consultancy’s own words.

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68 COVID-19 Media Monitoring Direct Award for the Cabinet Office Contract, Cabinet Office, 20th August 2020, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/1d4b6fa8-d5af-41ce-a402-99281f08f552?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

69 Media Monitoring and Intelligence for Vaccine Hesitancy Platform Contract, Cabinet Office, 25th February 2022, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/6bce8446-419c-4136-af44-f8ae4ad4d29e?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

70 Vaccine Hesitancy Platform Contract, Cabinet Office, 25th February 2022, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/1c39f2ab-33fe-4ef4-a57a-adc14b7f6463?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

71 Ending the Pandemic By Getting the World Vaccinated, Engine Group, accessed 23rd August 2022, <https://www.enginegroup.com/uk/work/cabinet-office/>

72 Ibid

At the start of the pandemic, the RRU also received support from the British Army's psychological operations division, the 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which is discussed later in this report.

## Functions of the RRU

### *Social media monitoring*

Social media monitoring makes up a significant part of the RRU's work, as shown by the contracts already outlined. Before the Counter Disinformation Unit at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport got off the ground it was also involved in flagging content for censorship by social media platforms – in April 2020, it flagged six posts to social networks that resulted in the content being removed.<sup>73</sup>

The Cabinet Office released one set of emails in response to an FOI relating to a content flag when asked for copies of all correspondence relating to the six posts taken down. The email chain was heavily redacted. Officials claimed exemptions relating to personal data, which is standard, and health and safety – arguing some of the hidden content would put both civil servants and members of the public in danger.<sup>74</sup> It is unclear whether these exemptions were the reason why other email chains relating to the five other content flags were not disclosed.

Through a Freedom of Information request, we also obtained an internal RRU spreadsheet of major social networks' terms of use that is framed in the context of COVID-19.<sup>75</sup> Covering Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, the RRU categorised platform policies across different pandemic-related areas, with headings including:

- Contradicting official guidance
- Vaccines
- Prevention, cures and treatments
- Fake Accounts
- Exploitation of COVID-19 for financial gain

The creation of a comprehensive master document of platforms' COVID-19 content policies underlines the importance the government's counter-disinformation units placed on social media monitoring and content control.

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73 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2021/03168, 5th March 2021

74 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2021/05695, 5th May 2021

75 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/07670, 26th May 2022

### ***Press monitoring***

The RRU conducts traditional media monitoring, as well as social media monitoring. This includes an analysis of how articles on key topics perform online. The consequences of this have included official rebuttals of some claims made on social media and asking journalists to include government lines in their articles.

### ***Supporting Whitehall departments with communications and propaganda***

The RRU offers guidance to the whole government on responding to misinformation and disinformation and produced a handout that features advice on how to respond to it, depending on a team's capabilities, using a four-stage process:<sup>76</sup>

- Find - misinformation or disinformation through continuous media monitoring
- Assess - the risk posed by the identified narrative
- Create - content to counter this risk
- Track - to evaluate long-term online narratives and historical perspectives and adjust strategies

Communications teams are split into three categories, based on their abilities:

- Essential [basic] teams who share existing government content, check Google trends and identify misleading posts
- Intermediate teams actively search for "misleading posts", use tools to analyse engagement and may produce videos, images and animations that are "more engaging"
- Advanced teams examine long-term online narratives using specific tools, analyse long-term risk and activate multi-channel content including op-eds, and conduct long-term campaigns or collaboration with influencers

The idea of working with influencers suggests that the Cabinet Office encourages more advanced communication teams to disseminate information more subtly or in ways that are not obviously connected to the government. However, when Big Brother Watch asked for copies of any payments made to influencers the Cabinet Office refused to tell us, claiming these would be managed by the companies contracted to deal with social media outreach, so it would be too expensive to find out which influencers are paid.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/07670, 26th May 2022

<sup>77</sup> Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/010056, 5th July 2022

One influencer who we know has worked with the government is Jake Sweet, who has 11 million TikTok followers, as he admitted to a Channel 4 documentary that he had worked with the government but did not specify the department or topic.<sup>78</sup>

An example of the RRU's deployment of social media content, pre-pandemic, centred on the 2018 reporting that London's murder rate exceeded that of New York.<sup>79</sup> Government Communications executive director Alex Aiken said that the RRU deployed social media content to "rebut and rebalance" the narrative.<sup>80</sup>

Some of the Rapid Response Unit's older work has also involved more clandestine tactics and has gone beyond issuing rebuttals. When the RRU supported government communications around the 2018 air strikes on Syria, the unit identified what it called "alt-news sources". Alex Aiken said these outlets used sensationalism rather than facts for clicks – but the distinction between "alt-news" and other bold outlets such as tabloids was not given.<sup>81</sup> In response, the RRU deployed its skills to push up "factual information on the UK's response" and amplify government-approved sources of information.<sup>82</sup> It is not clear precisely what methods this involved or whether this response also resulted in the articles' positioning in search services being down-ranked.

### ***Summary of functions***

Although we have been able to obtain slightly more information about the Rapid Response Unit than the Counter Disinformation Unit, the information available about the extent of the Cabinet Office unit's activities is still highly limited. From Freedom of Information requests submitted by Big Brother Watch and others published online, procurement contracts and long-archived government blogs, this investigation has managed to construct an outline of the RRU but it is not complete. From Big Brother Watch's work, we have established that the RRU's work includes:

- Detailed monitoring and recording of critical social media posts across a range of Government policy areas, assessing online sentiment, narratives and engagement – on a story-by-story basis, via weekly reports, and possibly by monitoring selected individuals

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78 Meet The People Making A Fortune On TikTok | How To Get Rich, Channel 4, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UjOB1wvYBs&t=8s++>

79 Reality Check: Has London's murder rate overtaken New York's? - BBC News, 4 April 2018: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43628494>

80 Alex Aiken Introduces the Rapid Response Unit, 19th July 2018. Government Communication Service, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20200203104056/https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/alex-aiken-introduces-the-rapid-response-unit/>

81 Alex Aiken Introduces the Rapid Response Unit, 19th July 2018. Government Communication Service, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20200203104056/https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/alex-aiken-introduces-the-rapid-response-unit/>

82 Alex Aiken Introduces the Rapid Response Unit, 19th July 2018. Government Communication Service, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20200203104056/https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/alex-aiken-introduces-the-rapid-response-unit/>

- Recommending content for review and removal by platforms
- Actively pushing overtly official social media content to rebut claims or re-frame the debate
- Issuing guidance to Departmental press teams on when and how to respond to online debates, including dealing with articles from mainstream news outlets
- Engaging with less overt social media campaigns and influencers to push government messaging
- Using SEO to influence search engine results to promote government-approved news sources over news outlets deemed "alt-news" by the government
- Creating guidance for the whole of Whitehall on tackling "misinformation"

The capabilities of the Rapid Response Unit are broad and span everything from search engine optimisation to social media monitoring and narrative analysis. What these tools have in common is their ability to influence the public mood and discourse and shape what people discuss online. These are abilities that Whitehall officials should not be able to use in the shadows, yet the public know little about what the Rapid Response Unit does.

In the era of the social-media-led news cycle, it is normal for governments to have teams plugged into the online debate, and for governments to communicate via social media. However, it is only recently that monitoring and silencing critics online has become part of the government's communications methodology, and it has been made possible by invoking the greater purpose of countering online "misinformation". For the state to identify lawful speech for potential censorship, even within the framework of the platforms' terms of service, poses serious risks to freedom of speech, as does the manipulation of search results or government-sanctioned efforts to shift the framing of online discussions. Such acts do not contribute to the debate, but instead, seek to control it in favour of the government.

The examples of the RRU's activities during the pandemic outlined in the next section show the threat the unit poses to dissent, debate and freedom of speech.

## EXAMPLES OF THE RRU’S ACTIVITIES

This analysis is based on examining Subject Access Requests (SARs) submitted by individuals who we thought may have been affected by the RRU’s activities, and who agreed both to participate in this research and share their responses with us; and Freedom of Information requests. The following information was obtained from SARs made to the Cabinet Office, requesting information held or generated by the RRU in particular.

### *Targeting criticism of lockdown modelling*

Peter Hitchens, a journalist at the Mail on Sunday, featured in an RRU flag from early November 2020 when officials took umbrage with him sharing a Daily Mail article based on leaked NHS documents – which claimed that the data given to publicly justify the November lockdown that year was incomplete. In an internal email, RRU staff accused Mr Hitchens of using the article to “further their anti-lockdown agenda and influence the Commons vote [to approve the lockdown] tomorrow”.

Simon Dolan #KBF leaked NHS docs: RRU flag	3/11/2020	Hi all, Flagging <a href="#">several high growth tweets</a> posted this morning..  He's also amplifying a <a href="#">Daily Mail</a> story published 12 hours ago claiming that No10 has manipulated data to justify a new lockdown in England, and has no government lines. The article has very low engagement (1.2k interactions) but it looks like [redacted] and <a href="#">Peter Hitchens</a> are using it	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
Cross-White hall Weekly Counter Disinformation report (not for further circulation)	5/6/2020	The Spiked article was shared on Twitter by journalist Peter Hitchens, which led to renewed engagement with the article on that specific platform. Hitchens suggested the government was not listening to genuine scientific advice, with some highly engaged comments echoing the same opinion. Other comments were critical of the credentials of the Spiked media outlet, accusing it of 'anti-science' and 'contrarian'.	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring

Peter Hitchens Cabinet Office SAR Extracts

However, Mr Hitchens’s tweet simply shared an article from his employer’s sister paper, without offering comment on the contents. It is worrying that a journalist’s post, which had fairly low engagement, was monitored by the RRU simply because it linked to an article that criticised government policy. It is even more concerning that the monitoring appeared to take issue with information being shared that might influence a vote in parliament. The very purpose of journalism is to inform the population and, as such, benefit democracy.



Mr Hitchens also featured in a weekly counter disinformation report from early June 2020, after sharing a Spiked article in which an epidemiologist criticised the government's approach to the virus. The RRU commented that his sharing of the article had increased engagement and that he suggested government was not listening to scientific advice. A call to listen to scientific advice is not pushing fake news – it is a call to engage in informed debate. The inclusion of this tweet in a disinformation update implies that some dissenting viewpoints were treated in the same way as disinformation.

A November 2020 article by Ross Clark published in print by the Daily Mail and online on MailOnline, which questioned some of the modelling used by the government when formulating coronavirus policy, also came to the attention of the RRU.<sup>83 84</sup> Published on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020, the piece was flagged by the RRU the next morning. Emails disclosed by the Department of Health and Social Care [DHSC] under the Freedom of Information Act show how officials discussed first the flagging of the story, related to its social media traction, and how government should respond.

One set of emails between the Cabinet Office and DHSC, with the subject line "COVID-19 stats claims: RRU flag and recommendation", initially flags "not very high" social media engagement with the piece.<sup>85</sup> The initial message, sent at around 10am on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, appears to come from the Cabinet Office, but redacted sign-offs mean it is unclear if it came from the RRU. Staff highlighted the 6,600 social media engagements with the article and added that it had been picked up by "several high-profile lockdown sceptics", specifically naming publican Adam Brooks. It should be noted that Mr Brooks is now a TV political commentator, but was a vocal critic on Twitter, not a media personality, at the time of RRU's monitoring. The email ends by encouraging DHSC press officers to contact the Daily Mail to "make them aware of the public health impact" and ask them to put a government line in the piece. This is justified by a Cabinet Office official claiming that the article could undermine compliance with coronavirus restrictions. No inaccuracies or "disinformation" are identified in the article.

DHSC staff then agreed to look at putting together some government lines to respond to the piece, denying the claims that the pandemic modelling was flawed to encourage people to obey the restrictions. Four hours later, another email in the chain identified rapid growth in social media engagement with the article, including tweets from other "lockdown sceptics" that were performing well on Twitter. Further emails in the chain discussed the process of getting rebuttal lines approved by ministers' special advisers. Officials also decided to respond publicly on Twitter, but argued that it would be better to

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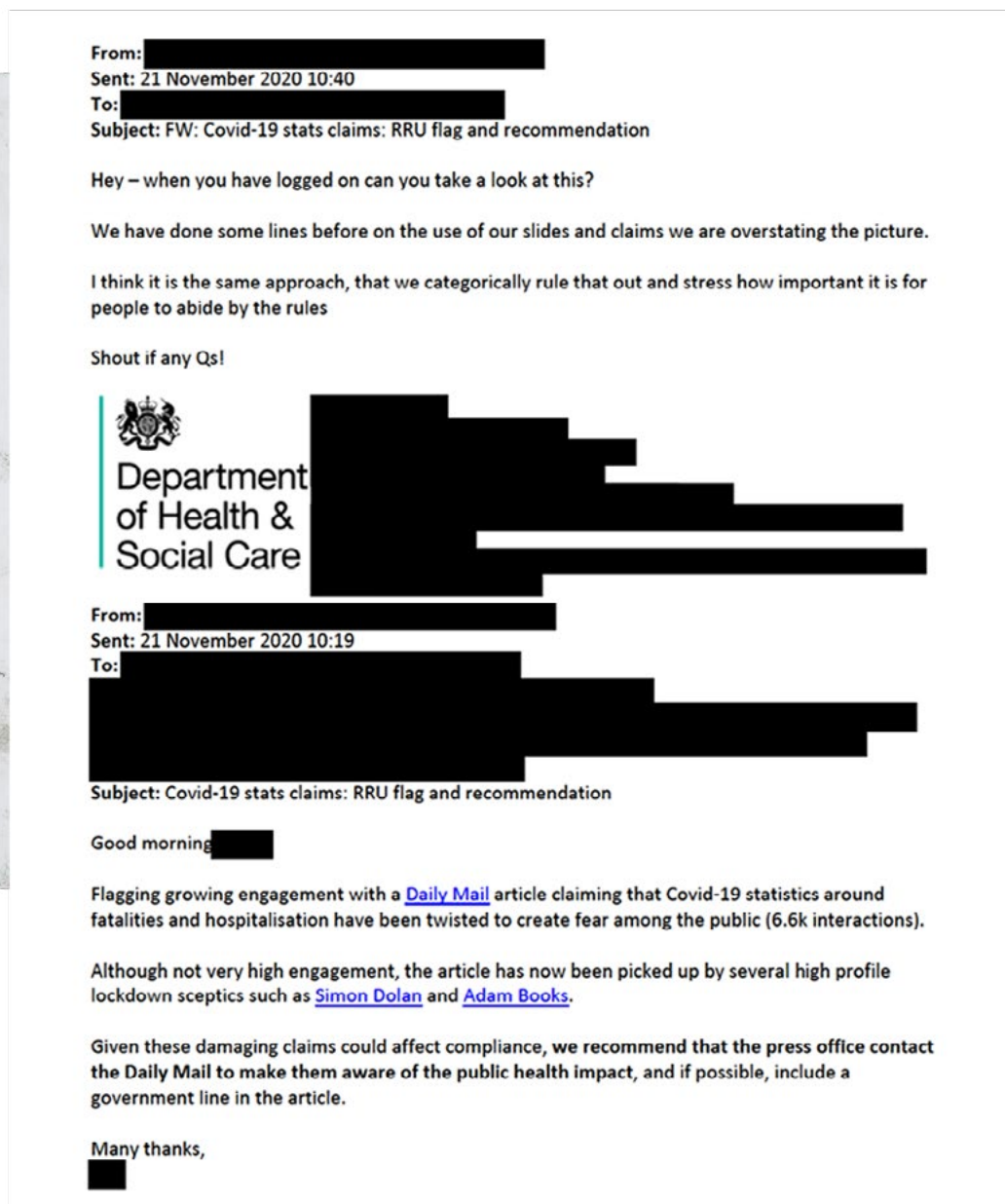
83 COVID-19: What They Don't Tell You, Daily Mail, 20th November 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8971669/What-DONT-tell-COVID-19-facts-twisted-strike-fear-hearts.html>

84 Freedom of Information Request to the Department of Health and Social Care, FOI1281591,, 6th January 2021 2021, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/daily\\_mail\\_article\\_on\\_COVID-19\\_20\\_n#incoming-1700398](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/daily_mail_article_on_COVID-19_20_n#incoming-1700398)

85 Cabinet Office Emails, Freedom of Information Request to the Department of Health and Social Care, FOI1281591, 6th January 2021 2021, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/daily\\_mail\\_article\\_on\\_COVID-19\\_20\\_n#incoming-1700398](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/daily_mail_article_on_COVID-19_20_n#incoming-1700398)

reply to the Daily Mail's tweet about the article rather than engage with the "lockdown sceptics". The email chain closed on the morning of November 22<sup>nd</sup> with confirmation of the rebuttal tweet shared by the Department of Health.

Parallel emails within DHSC illustrate the process of determining what lines to take and how to communicate them. Most of the discussion related to sign-off for on-the-record and background statements. Likewise, in the DHSC summary of the issue, the justification for action is based on the potential impact of the article on compliance with COVID-19 restrictions, rather than the piece being incorrect.



Extract from RRU emails to the Department of Health, disclosed under FOI

Publicly, the DHSC's rebuttal tweet claimed that the article was inaccurate, with the official Department of Health Twitter account responding: "This article is misleading. This

is a global pandemic – national restrictions have been introduced to keep people safe and save lives”. The tweet triggered a significant backlash from the newspaper, which accused DHSC of censoring the press in an article on November 23<sup>rd</sup>. The Daily Mail’s article also contained comments from two university professors supporting the paper’s attempts to interpret difficult data.<sup>86</sup> Further emails disclosed to us by DHSC show that the newspaper took umbrage with the rebuttal tweet and asked for it to be removed for “relationship management” reasons, a request the Department agreed to.<sup>87</sup> The article and DHSC’s response was the centre of debate in some sections of the press and social media about the role of government in responding to news articles it disagreed with. However, this was tinged with partisanship over attitudes to COVID-19 restrictions and some debate over the the Daily Mail’s use of figures, rather than addressing the role of a secretive unit in responding to articles in mainstream news outlets.<sup>88</sup>

The RRU and DHSC appeared to be more concerned with the impact of the story on compliance with coronavirus restrictions, rather than the dissemination of information deemed to be inaccurate. It is alarming to read a government unit attempting to stop the public from questioning the reasoning behind what were major restrictions on their lives. Even in a public health emergency – particularly in a public health emergency - people must be free to question those in power.

### ***Targeting criticism of tiered regulations and local lockdowns***

One email chain obtained under FOI covered the RRU’s analysis of the announcement of regional tiers for coronavirus restrictions in late November 2020.<sup>89</sup> The thread contained the unit’s analysis of the reaction to the announcement both from public figures and from people on social media, but focused almost exclusively on criticism of the government and recommended actions for government comms teams to take.

A FOI response we received from the Cabinet Office revealed that the RRU judged tweets from Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer MP and the Labour Mayor of Manchester Andy Burnham to have “amplified” people taking issue with the lack of business support funding for Liverpool and Manchester.<sup>90</sup> It is not clear why leading Opposition politicians would be included in an analysis produced by a team with the RRU’s publicly acknowledged “misinformation” remit – as their comments were legitimate criticisms of government policy. These mentions suggest that by November 2020, the RRU was engaging in image

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86 Experts Back Mail After Twitter Slur, The Daily Mail, 23rd November 2020

87 Freedom of Information Request to the Department of Health and Social Care, FOI1281591, 6th January 2021, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/daily\\_mail\\_article\\_on\\_covid\\_20\\_n#incoming-1700398](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/daily_mail_article_on_covid_20_n#incoming-1700398)

88 The Daily Mail’s Chart Of COVID-19 Death Figures Doesn’t Use The Real Numbers, Full Fact, 23rd November 2020, <https://fullfact.org/health/mail-deaths-chart/>

89 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/15292, 21st November 2022

90 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/15292, 21st November 2022

management and narrative control for the government, given the emphasis its analysis placed on criticism of policy and how to react to this.

It was not only politicians who featured - ordinary people also had their Tweets looked at by the unit. A number of posts from unnamed accounts, dubbed "non-influencers", that had only a few hundred retweets, were included in the tier announcement analysis. These exclusively focused on the perceived disparity in treatment between London, which was placed into tier 2, and northern cities put into tier 3 despite having lower virus R rates. As with the politicians, this was a valid question to ask and critique to make, yet Twitter accounts belonging to ordinary members of the public [albeit with names removed for smaller accounts] were circulated in Whitehall by the Cabinet Office's "fake news unit". Although the names were removed, with the text of the tweets and interaction numbers, Big Brother Watch was able to identify at least one of the likely sources of the posts in the analysis - an account with fewer than 700 followers that predominantly posts about sport.

Twitter:

Top tweets:

London Tier 2 decision

GAZ (2.2M followers) - "Funny how London is never tier 3" 246 retweets, 3.7k likes

Non-influencer- "Manchester R rate - 0.8-1 - Tier 3 London R rate - 1.2-4 - Tier 2 No bias there then 😊😊😊... " 443 retweets, 1.3k likes

Non-influencer: "The North East and Manchester have the lowest R rates in the country, but London get Tier 2 and the Northerners get Tier 3. Typical Tories. They don't want rid of lockdown, just want London out of it." 570 retweets, 2k likes

Non-influencer - "Stockport has 220 cases per 100k - and falling. The London borough of Redbridge has 300 cases per 100k and rising. Yet we are stuck in tier 3 (after 4 months of lockdown) and the capital gets tier 2. Harumpf." 236 retweets, 803 likes

Extract from November 2020 RRU analysis of social media reaction to regional tiers announcement, obtained under FOI

In May 2021, comments from both Labour and Conservative politicians were picked up when the RRU monitored the backlash to potential local lockdowns in Bolton and Blackburn. Chris Green, the Conservative MP for Bolton West and Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham both expressed strong opposition to the spectre of localised restrictions.

The two politicians had quotes picked up in an RRU update from May 2021, titled “COVID-19 Variant First Detected In India Online Reaction”, which appears to have partially monitored the reaction to the government refusing to rule out local lockdowns in Greater Manchester, where the variant was prevalent. This came just a week before lockdown measures were due to be eased.

Covid-19	4/05/2021	Criticism of a potential local lockdown in Blackburn and Bolton.	CO/Internal	Media
variant first detected in India' online reaction – RRU 1500 update		Concerns from Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham and local MP Chris Green are covered in articles ( <a href="#">Bolton News</a> , 57 interactions) and tweets ( <a href="#">TalkRadio</a> , 96 retweets). Facebook <a href="#">comments</a> on posts from local media dispute the effectiveness of local lockdown.		Monitoring

Chris Green MP SAR to Cabinet Office Extract

Mr Green expressed his opposition to further restrictions, telling TalkRadio: “In Bolton businesses are preparing for next week, if we have a lockdown all of the work they’ve put into it, all the staff, all the new produce they’ve brought in – that’s all going to have to be dumped, and that’s a huge problem.”<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile Mr Burnham said “My heart sank yesterday when I heard the Prime Minister reintroduce the possibility of local lockdowns; they really didn’t work”.<sup>92</sup>

Both men, who are elected representatives of the area, were expressing opposition to threatened government policy that would have had a massive impact on their constituents, as per their duty, given their roles are required to advocate for their constituencies. However the Cabinet Office’s “fact based debate” unit circulated their comments as government criticism, suggesting that it was the negative stance they had taken that led to their opinions being monitored. This extract provides more evidence that instead of dealing with truth and facts, the RRU spent significant amounts of time monitoring dissenting political views from politicians.

It is alarming that monitoring this kind of content was a key part of the RRU’s work – criticism of policy should be able to happen freely in the press and the public forum. A political party may want to analyse social media to gauge reactions and influence debates, but this is not the same as the state “combatting misinformation”. The conflation of political critiques with falsehoods signals a level of political control that is dangerous for freedom of speech. The evidence we have uncovered of RRU’s political narrative monitoring suggests that the

91 TalkRadio Interview With Chris Green MP, 14th May 2021, <https://twitter.com/TalkTV/status/1393115811263488000?s=20&t=DAX6awvBkP-uyuY7GkMITQ>

92 Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, Says No To Local Lockdowns, The Bolton News, 14th May 20

unit has engaged in activities that are harmful to democratic discourse.

### ***Protest during lockdown***

Protest was another form of dissent that came to the RRU's attention. Big Brother Watch obtained evidence of an internal RRU flag of a piece of media - a photo shared by Julia Hartley-Brewer, that had significant engagement online in November 2020. This was described as an image of a man at an anti-lockdown protest.<sup>93</sup> In the email thread we obtained via a FOI request, there was no explanation for the monitoring of the photo, bar it gaining traction on Twitter. Engagement was described as "mainly confined to lockdown sceptics" with the RRU official adding it was retweeted by "critic" (journalist) Julia Hartley-Brewer.

In addition to the unit's worrying interest in protest, this suggests that the government was monitoring not only narratives but individuals, describing journalists as "critics". This would appear to diminish, not protect, the "fact-based debate" the RRU claimed to defend.

### ***Targeting Covid pass dissent among the public, journalists and MPs***

The RRU produced weekly analysis reports on some topics, including a weekly "Vaccine Hesitancy Report" in 2021. In excerpts seen by Big Brother Watch, RRU staff noted the engagement of tweets from figures described as "vaccine and lockdown sceptics". This suggests that Cabinet Office officials are engaged in the systemic monitoring of individuals who are critical of government policies in what was a controversial policy area.<sup>94</sup> Time and time again opposition to vaccine passports, a controversial scheme opposed by a huge section of society including more than 90 parliamentarians of all political stripes, was discussed in the context of "vaccine hesitancy". Many of the tweets recorded in the vaccine hesitancy reports made no mention of vaccine safety and only criticised vaccine passports for their lack of effectiveness and the authoritarian nature of the policy. As with other elements of the unit's activities, the definitions and remits it was working to expanded dramatically, underlining the risks to free speech posed by the Whitehall unit, which is allowed to operate without proper oversight.

The RRU mostly focused on social media engagement with the stories that were critical of the government, or policies it supported. In one Vaccine Hesitancy Report from October 2021, the RRU looked at "key findings" on social media engagement, with the topics including (then) Health Secretary Matt Hancock telling unvaccinated carers to get another job and a French study that found COVID-19 vaccines had up to 90% efficacy in preventing hospitalisation from the disease.<sup>95</sup> In the analysis of the Matt Hancock story,

93 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/15292, 21st November 2022

94 Subject Access Request to the Cabinet Office, Adam Brooks, 15th August 2020

95 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/15292, 21st November 2022

the RRU did not analyse opposition to the vaccine but rather opposition to mandatory vaccination policies, which suggests that the unit conflated opposition to coercion with vaccine hesitancy.

Elsewhere in the report, TalkTV journalist Julia Hartley-Brewer and Reform UK leader Richard Tice were branded “vaccine sceptics” when tweeting a Telegraph article, reporting on a joint letter from then Health and Education Secretaries, Sajid Javid and Nadhim Zahawi, headlined “Pupils could lose out on face-to-face lessons if they don’t get vaccinated, warn ministers”.<sup>96</sup> It is worrying that RRU officials were using pejorative labels, with little evidence base, to refer to critical journalists. Neither Mr Tice nor Ms Hartley-Brewer’s tweets took issue with the vaccine, but the pair both took aim at the coercive message from ministers.<sup>97 98</sup> Further, Ms Hartley-Brewer repeatedly stated on her radio show and her Twitter account that she had received two doses of a coronavirus vaccine.<sup>99</sup> However, tweeting newspaper articles appears to have been enough for the RRU to brand them both vaccine sceptics, a potentially damaging label, which shows how the RRU took license to monitor, record and report within government on journalists and politicians who criticised government policies, under the banner of countering “misinformation”. Ms Hartley-Brewer in particular was mentioned many times as opposing Covid passes in both RRU documents and general Cabinet Office media monitoring.

RRU Analysis: Weekly vaccine hesitancy report - online narratives & actors	Wed, 13 Oct 2021, 15:23	Top tweets are from known vaccine sceptics (e.g. Julia Hartley-Brewer, 7k interactions; [redacted], 4k interactions) and express opposition to the news.	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
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Julia Hartley-Brewer Cabinet Office SAR Extract

The content targeted shows that the RRU was monitoring various narratives around the vaccine as part of its work, even those not related to the efficacy of the jab itself. This was a long way removed from the role ministers publicly claimed the RRU would play in countering “hesitancy” and further underlines the fact that the RRU was active in monitoring a much broader range of speech than alleged misinformation, including political dissent.<sup>100</sup>



96 Pupils Could Lose Out On Face-To-Face Lessons If They Don’t Get Vaccinated, Warn Ministers, The Daily Telegraph, 11th October 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/10/11/pupils-could-lose-face-to-face-lessons-dont-get-vaccinated-warn/>

97 Tweet from Richard Tice, Twitter, 11th October 2021, <https://twitter.com/TiceRichard/status/1447587806025486336>

98 Tweet from Julia Hartley-Brewer, Twitter, 11th October 2021, <https://twitter.com/JuliaHB1/status/1447645328241577993>

99 Tweet from Julia Hartley-Brewer, 22nd July 2021, <https://twitter.com/JuliaHB1/status/1418209483860242433>



100 Written Parliamentary Question on COVID-19:Vaccination UIN 145791, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-29/145791>

Adam Brooks    
@EssexPR

Publicans that push Vaccine passports have their reasons and are entitled to their opinion.

I think its the most horrific thing that could happen to pubs & everyday life.  
I think it's divisive, intrusive, will cause aggression against staff and a slippery slope of state control.

3:40 PM · Feb 24, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

Adam Brooks    
@EssexPR

On the Governments public consultation for Vaccine Passports, it gives no choice to oppose ,you have to write in the comments section.  
This could so easily be spun, just like a typical YOUNGOV poll is.  
This is very sinister @GOVUK @sajidjavid @michaelgove  
gov.uk/governme

Adam Brooks    
@EssexPR

YOU'RE A DISGRACE @NicolaSturgeon 



**BBC NEWS**

bbc.co.uk  
Scots to need vaccine passports for large events  
People who have not been fully vaccinated will not be able to attend many sporting events, concerts or nightclubs.

Adam Brooks    
@EssexPR

Blimey, even The Guardian are reporting the truth now..



from 2021 **The Guardian**

Vaccine passports will make hesitant people 'even more reluctant to get jabbed'  
Data comes as No 10 vows to press on with plan to make vaccination a condition

<p>Vaccine hesitancy reports</p>	<p>Tweets quoted/ reported in Vaccine Hesitancy Reports from between 30 December 2020 – 06 November 2021</p>	<p>Adam Brooks (pub landlord influencer) - 'You just know they are going to release the Oxford vaccine approval news before Friday, so everyone is cheery before they can't see their family and still mad about Tier 4 / mutant strain handling etc..Emotional rollercoaster inflicted on the population is painful' - 127 retweets, 989 likes (published 22 Dec)</p> <p>Adam Brooks (162k followers): "Publicans that push Vaccine passports have their reasons and are entitled to their opinion. I think its the most horrific thing that could happen to pubs &amp; everyday life. I think it's divisive, intrusive, will cause aggression against staff and a slippery slope of state control." 1.1k retweets, 7.4k likes (published 24 Feb)</p> <p>Adam Brooks (186.3k followers) ""Previous studies showed that vaccinated people who contracted the alpha variant had far lower viral loads than the unvaccinated, while [redacted] backed vaccine passports in the hope they would lower transmission in hotspot venues such as nightclubs" <a href="https://t.co/JyxFSjXeGv">https://t.co/JyxFSjXeGv</a>" 510 interactions, 113 retweets, 14 quote tweets, 353 likes, 30 replies (posted 19 August)</p>	<p>CO/Internal</p>	<p>Covid-19 related Media Monitoring</p>
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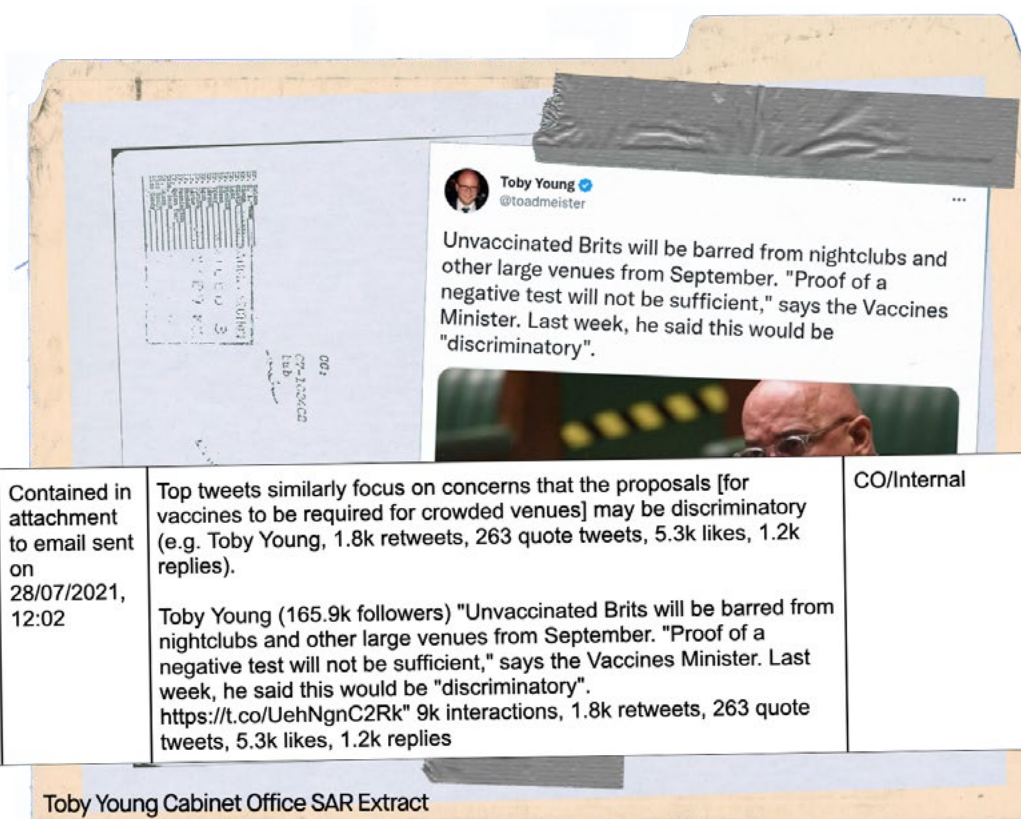
Adam Brooks Cabinet Office SAR Extract

Several tweets on vaccine passports by a publican, Adam Brooks, who was critical of a number of the non-pharmaceutical interventions implemented by the government, were



among those featured in the vaccine hesitancy reports. However, none of his tweets in the reports made any mention of the merits of the vaccine itself. Mr Brooks called Covid passes “divisive and intrusive” and shared a Guardian article reporting on a study that vaccine certificates increased vaccine hesitancy. His other recorded tweets condemned Nicola Sturgeon for introducing Covid passes in Scotland and questioned the apparent bias of a government consultation on the issue.

Journalist Toby Young also featured in several of the vaccine hesitancy reports and, as with Mr Brooks, some of the tweets included suggest that expressing opposition to government policy as a whole merited inclusion in a report, rather than specific posts.



2021-07-28 Vaccine hesitancy report	Contained in attachment to email sent on 28/07/2021, 12:02	Top tweets similarly focus on concerns that the proposals [for vaccines to be required for crowded venues] may be discriminatory (e.g. Toby Young, 1.8k retweets, 263 quote tweets, 5.3k likes, 1.2k replies).  Toby Young (165.9k followers) "Unvaccinated Brits will be barred from nightclubs and other large venues from September. "Proof of a negative test will not be sufficient," says the Vaccines Minister. Last week, he said this would be "discriminatory". <a href="https://t.co/UehNgnC2Rk">https://t.co/UehNgnC2Rk</a> 9k interactions, 1.8k retweets, 263 quote tweets, 5.3k likes, 1.2k replies	CO/Internal	Covid-19 Media Monitoring
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Toby Young Cabinet Office SAR Extract

A July report included the Toby Young tweet which also did not comment on the vaccine itself [neither did the article linked]. In the tweet, Mr Young pointed out the swift U-turn from the then-Vaccines Minister Nadhim Zahawi who went from condemning vaccine-only Covid passes as “discriminatory” to advocating for them in just four days.

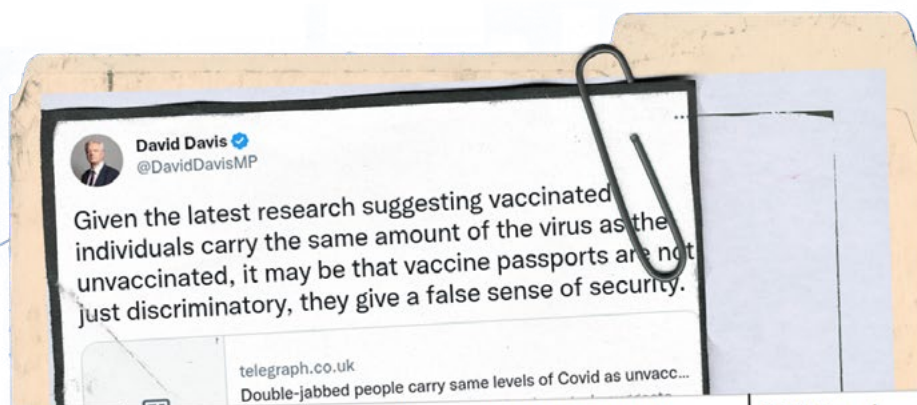
There is no reasonable reading of any of these tweets that could be perceived as contributing to “vaccine hesitancy”, as implied by the RRU’s reports. Making critical comments about a controversial scheme, which was widely condemned by MPs and civil society, cannot be construed as encouraging of vaccine hesitancy.

Perhaps the most shocking examples of the disinformation units monitoring political dissent is the RRU’s monitoring of MPs against Covid passes.

David Davis, the senior Conservative backbench MP and former Brexit Secretary, was mentioned in RRU analyses on multiple occasions, providing further evidence that even elected MPs were not outside the scope of the unit’s monitoring.

A weekly vaccine hesitancy report from July 2021 featured a tweet from Mr Davis from June 30<sup>th</sup> of the same year which celebrated the government’s decision to scrap mandatory COVID-19 certificates for large events. The MP argued that the passports were aimed at solving a “a non-existent problem of poor vaccine take-up”. It was still circulated in a “vaccine hesitancy report”, although Mr Davis made no reference to the vaccine’s efficacy.

Mr Davis also appeared in a second report from 25<sup>th</sup> August 2021 after he tweeted a Daily Telegraph article covering findings suggesting that although COVID-19 vaccination had been very successful in cutting hospitalisation and death, it may have had little impact on transmission of the Delta variant of the virus.<sup>101</sup> The article was based on a study from the University of Oxford finding that double jabbed people who contracted the Delta variant had similar viral loads to unvaccinated people, meaning they had a significant chance of passing it on. Due to this, Mr Davis suggested that vaccine passports could give people a false sense of security as well as being discriminatory – a view that had already been expressed months before by Professor Robert West, a UCL expert in health psychology who has participated in SAGE’s behavioural sub-committee SPI-B,<sup>102</sup> among many others.



RRU analysis: Weekly vaccine hesitancy report - online narratives & actors	25/08/2021	Twitter volumes were also low, with approximately 3k tweets on vaccine efficacy. While several top tweets question the efficacy of the vaccine with regards to preventing transmission (e.g. <a href="#">David Davis MP</a> ) and express opposition to vaccine passports, many <a href="#">tweet replies</a> on the Telegraph story suggest the story is misleading.	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
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David Davis Cabinet Office SAR Extract

101 Double-jabbed People Carry Same Levels of COVID-19 As Unvaccinated, The Daily Telegraph, 19th August 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/08/19/double-jabbed-people-carry-levels-COVID-19-unvaccinated/>

102 Sunset Clause Planned To Head Off Vaccine Passport Revolt, The Sunday Times, 3rd April 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sunset-clause-planned-to-head-off-vaccine-certificate-revolt-8008kf298>

There is no reasonable reading of either of Mr Davis’s tweets that could be interpreted as undermining the vaccine, misinformation or disinformation. However, this political disagreement with the government meant that his comments were picked up by the RRU, suggesting that even intra-party criticism by fellow MPs was monitored by the unit.

Mr Davis’s opposition to vaccine passports also led to him being featured on a general RRU analysis document dated 26<sup>th</sup> October 2021, alongside fellow Conservative MP Marcus Fysh. Both politicians had tweeted in response to news coverage of the leaked DCMS economic and social impact analysis of vaccine passports which found they could displace people into venues not requiring certification, which could in fact fuel the virus, and have a negative economic impact on sectors of the economy where vaccine passports were required.

Even the RRU analysis extract acknowledges that the two MPs were opposed to vaccine passports, partly due to their economic impact, yet the Cabinet Office’s misinformation unit picked up and circulated the tweets as part of their work. This is yet more evidence that tracking political dissent was a key part of the RRU’s remit.



Covid narratives 26.10.21 – RRU analysis	26/10/2021	Leaked DCMS documents. Most top tweets are from vaccine passport opponents (e.g. <a href="#">Dr Anthony Hinton</a> , 2k interactions; and conspiracy theorist <a href="#">Paul Joseph Watson</a> , 1k interactions) and MPs who also oppose certification (e.g. <a href="#">Marcus Fysh MP</a> , 830 interactions; and <a href="#">David Davis MP</a> , 713 interactions), arguing against the policy and criticising its potential economic impact	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
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David Davis Cabinet Office SAR Extract

Another senior MP discovered through their SAR that they were included in a RRU report on “narratives and actors” about vaccine hesitancy when they were criticising policy plans to mandate vaccine passports for hospitality. At the time, this was a live and vital policy debate.

Politicians opposing a government policy is not fake news or misinformation. Monitoring and treating the discourse of a democratically elected Member of Parliament in this manner is dangerous for democracy.

It is clear that the RRU viewed any opposition to any element of the government’s job policy as worthy of monitoring, showing an alarming disregard for public debate over contested issues. It implies that the unit sought to surveil and undermine criticism rather than engage with supposed “harmful narratives” or promote a “fact based debate” online.

***Surveilling dissenting academics***

Even contributions from eminent academics to the public debate were flagged to Whitehall officials by the RRU.

Carl Heneghan, Professor of Evidence-Based Medicine at the University of Oxford, co-wrote an article for the Spectator with Professor Tom Jefferson in September 2020 questioning the scientific basis for the “Rule of 6” and whether there was an evidence base that it was the optimal group size to balance harms from COVID-19 against the harms of social distancing.<sup>103</sup> Broadly, Professor Heneghan called for coronavirus measures to be evidence based with the goal of reducing overall harm. Yet the RRU noticed that some critics of lockdown were sharing the piece on social media and deemed the article worthy of a flag to officials.

Re: Rule of six Carl Heneghan article - RRU flag	14/9/2020	<p>Just wanted to flag that a Spectator article by Carl Heneghan and [redacted] from Oxford University's Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine is being shared in anti-lockdown circles, including by some of the main influencers in that space. They argue that there is no scientific basis for the 'rule of six' and that it is an overreaction.</p> <p>Thanks,</p>	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
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Professor Heneghan Cabinet Office SAR Extract

In another example, a report from the Rapid Response Unit, disclosed in Professor Heneghan’s SAR to DCMS, picked up newspaper coverage of Professor Heneghan’s comments to the BBC’s Radio 4Today programme arguing that the death rate models used to justify the November 2020 lockdown had been proven wrong.

103 Boris Johnson Needs To Bin The Rule Of Six, The Spectator, 13th September 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/boris-johnson-needs-to-bin-the-rule-of-six/>

15	Report from Rapid Response Unit	04/11/2020	Data used to justify England's second national lockdown is 'proven' to be false, Prof Carl Heneghan claims The Telegraph, 12k interactions.
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Professor Heneghan Cabinet Office SAR Extract

The SAR response to Professor Heneghan reveals that the RRU picked up a tweet sharing the Daily Telegraph’s report on the comments, which had garnered 12,000 interactions online.<sup>104</sup> In its coverage, the newspaper contrasted graphs containing models presented at the press conference announcing the lockdown with the real figures. Professor Heneghan had told the BBC that the models presented at the announcement were outdated and should not have been used to justify the lockdown, and he urged the government’s scientific advisor to be “really clear” on the justifications for the decision when giving evidence to MPs.

The RRU’s monitoring of Professor Heneghan’s expert contributions to public policy discussions show that the unit focused on dissenting narratives rather than “harmful” ones or falsehoods, as politicians claim it does. A top academic, specialising in evidence-based medicine, at one of the world’s most prestigious universities should be able to offer his view on the scientific underpinnings of the coronavirus mitigation measures and restrictions implemented by the government without his comments being monitored by a unit tasked to counter misinformation – disagreeing is not disinformation by any definition.

As with the Spectator article, Professor Heneghan was speaking on an area where he has significant expertise and was calling for a facts-first discussion on the reasoning behind interventions with huge implications for society. As little context has been given by DCMS on what the RRU’s report covered, it is unclear why the unit picked up coverage of Professor Heneghan’s comments. Nonetheless, it is alarming that debate among scientists about the evidence for a major policy decision is seen to be within the RRU’s remit. Professor Heneghan’s credentials alone should be a reason to view this as an example of a fact-based debate, not an attempt to subvert one. The RRU’s monitoring of these comments suggests that going against the government is enough for them to be watching.

University of Birmingham biostatistician Professor Jon Deeks is another academic who was monitored by the RRU. His views on the Liverpool mass lateral flow testing trial, which used Innova-made kits, featured heavily in an RRU “analysis & recommendation document” examining discussion around the high false negative rates found in the trial. Professor Deeks pointed out in a Twitter thread that the Department of Health and Social Care’s own data found that 3 in 10 people with COVID-19 who had “higher viral loads” tested negative, and he called for DHSC to halt the use of Innova lateral flow tests as a

<sup>104</sup> Coronavirus Press Conference, 10 Downing Street YouTube Channel, 31st October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7B1sBUdQeio>

determiner for infectiousness.<sup>105</sup>

Professor Deeks, who is the Chief Statistical Advisor to the British Medical Journal, had his Twitter thread written up into articles by a number of major news outlets including the Daily Telegraph, which the RRU complained did not include a line from a government spokesperson.<sup>106</sup> Two days after the article was published, on December 5<sup>th</sup> 2020, the article was updated without comment to include a line from DHSC officials.<sup>107</sup> Although the RRU's recommendation was excluded from the extracts of the emails seen by Big Brother Watch, it is fair to assume that it included a suggestion to pressure the Daily Telegraph to include a government line after publication.

The image shows a folder with a tweet and a SAR extract table. The tweet is from Jon Deeks (@deeksj) and discusses mass testing in Liverpool. The SAR extract table has four columns: 'False negative rates in community testing - RRU analysis & recommendation', '3/12/2020', 'Biostatistician Jon Deeks (4k followers) has tweeted an extract from the paper on 'false negatives'...', and 'CO/Internal Media Monitoring'.

False negative rates in community testing - RRU analysis & recommendation	3/12/2020	Biostatistician <u>Jon Deeks</u> (4k followers) has tweeted an extract from the paper on 'false negatives' arguing that infections in Liverpool have been missed and calling on DHSC to halt its programme - this thread has been shared by <u>Good Law Project's Director Jo Maughan</u> (258k followers).  <u>Telegraph</u> has also published an article on Jon Deeks' comments in the last half hour which does not include a Government spokesperson line, but does quote extracts from the policy paper around 'false negatives'.	CO/Internal Media Monitoring
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Professor Deeks Cabinet Office SAR Extract

As with Professor Heneghan, Professor Deeks's credentials and reputation in the very field he was commenting on, that is, evaluating the performance of medical tests, should have been sufficient evidence to show that he was a valuable voice in the debate on mass testing with Innova LFTs. Despite his track-record and reasonable criticism, Professor Deeks told us that the government never sought to engage with him on the issues he

105 Community Testing: A Guide For Local Delivery, Department For Health And Social Care, 30th November 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201203091727/https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-testing-explainer/community-testing-a-guide-for-local-delivery>

106 Mass Coronavirus Testing In Liverpool Has Missed Half Of Positive Cases, Government Figures Show, The Daily Telegraph, 3rd December 2020, archived 3rd December 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201203153213/https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/03/mass-coronavirus-testing-liverpool-has-missed-half-positive/>

107 Mass Coronavirus Testing In Liverpool Has Missed Half Of Positive Cases, Government Figures Show, The Daily Telegraph, 3rd December 2020, archived 5th December 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201205062752/https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/03/mass-coronavirus-testing-liverpool-has-missed-half-positive/>

had with the LFT programme. A government scientific adviser had even contacted senior members of the University of Birmingham asking for Professor Deeks to stop publicly commenting on the Innova tests, he told us, with the adviser telling the University that his “comments were thought of as being unhelpful by the Cabinet Office”. Fortunately, Professor Deeks’s university, unlike the Cabinet Office, encouraged scientific debate and stood by him. Meanwhile the RRU secretly surveilled his dissent and tracked its online traction, making sure that the government was defended in news coverage.

The RRU also offered advice to government comms staff regarding the Great Barrington Declaration.<sup>108</sup> The Declaration, authored by three epidemiologists, called for a policy of “focused protection” rather than lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and received over 250,000 signatures from scientists, politicians and concerned citizens. The RRU analysed social media engagement around the Declaration and identified tweets from an MP (who wishes to remain anonymous) who criticised the civil liberties impacts of some coronavirus restrictions, and the group Keep Britain Free, which campaigned against lockdowns. In the days after publication, it was noted that the Declaration was widely covered but the engagement was said to be minimal – leading the RRU to recommend no online government response. However, Big Brother Watch and other freedom of expression groups noted that the Google results for the Declaration changed rapidly, with the Declaration website no longer appearing in the first pages of search results.<sup>109</sup> In a meeting with us, Google refused to confirm or deny whether they had taken action that affected the visibility of the Declaration or whether Google staff had discussed the matter with government representatives.

One striking piece of RRU analysis from November 2020 we uncovered through a FOI request saw the unit share its work with Oxford University when some doubts were expressed by respected, mainstream scientists over the data coming out of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine trial.<sup>110</sup> Consumer health activist Dr Hilda Bastain wrote a piece in Wired praising the rigour of the Pfizer trials while being more cautious about the Oxford/AstraZeneca results due to the latter’s trials as it involved two smaller trials with different designers in the UK and Brazil – unlike Pfizer’s single standardised large scale trial.<sup>111</sup> Other well-respected medical experts shared Dr Bastain’s concerns, including Anthony Costello who worked on Independent Sage and is a former World Health Organisation director and University College London professor.<sup>112</sup> Dr Costello had previously criticised the government for not locking down fast enough.<sup>113</sup>

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108 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/12184, 24th August 2022

109 Big Brother Watch and Article 19 ask Google about search results – Big Brother Watch, October 2020: <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2020/10/big-brother-watch-and-article-19-ask-google-about-search-results/>

110 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/15292, 21st November 2022

111 The AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine Data Isn’t Up to Snuff, Hilda Bastain, Wired, 25th November 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-astrazeneca-covid-19-vaccine-data-isnt-up-to-snuff/>

112 Tweet from Anthony Costello, Twitter, 25th November 2020, <https://twitter.com/globalhlthtwit/status/1331666179946115074>

113 Uk Faces Eight To 10 Waves Of Coronavirus Before Population Achieves Herd Immunity,

Dr Bastain and Dr Costello did not cast doubts on the potential of the vaccine, and Dr Bastain lauded Pfizer’s efforts. But both called for the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca to mimic their rival’s rigour in their trials to ensure that there was the best possible evidence base for the Oxford jab to be approved. Given the credentials and expertise of both of these people, their contributions can only be seen as adding to the fact-based public debate. The RRU had no justifiable reason to monitor this kind of academic debate on social media, or to share it with third parties – and this appears to be another example of the RRU monitoring speech, however well-informed, that the government may not like.

**Monitoring criticism of care home policy**

On November 4<sup>th</sup> 2020, the RRU flagged a “high growth” video of a retired nurse being arrested after trying to remove her mother from a nursing home so she could care for her at home ahead of the month-long lockdown.<sup>114</sup> At the time, many people had not been able to have close contact with relatives living in care homes for months and the November lockdown would further reduce already limited visitation. The video went viral on social media, driven by a sense of outrage at the situation.

Journalist Julia Hartley-Brewer was one of the people who shared the video, initially posted by RightsForResidents which campaigns for the rights of those living in care homes.

<p>Re: High growth video of police enforcement: RRU flag</p>	<p>Wed, 4 Nov 2020, 21:32</p>	<p>Thanks, [redacted].</p> <p>Sharing an update, as online engagement with the video has grown significantly (983k views in 5 hrs). Twitter engagement has mainly been driven by Rights for Residents and talkRadio presenter, Julia Hartley-Brewer.</p> <p>[redacted]</p> <p>Julia Hartley-Brewer just posted that she'll be interviewing [redacted] tomorrow morning, and we expect this to grow.</p> <p>We can continue to monitor and will update on this chain.</p> <p>Best, [redacted]</p>	<p>CO/Internal</p>	<p>Media Monitoring</p>
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Extract from Julia Hartley-Brewer's SAR to Cabinet Office

The Daily Telegraph, 16th April 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/04/16/uk-faces-eight-ten-waves-coronavirus-population-achieves-herd/>

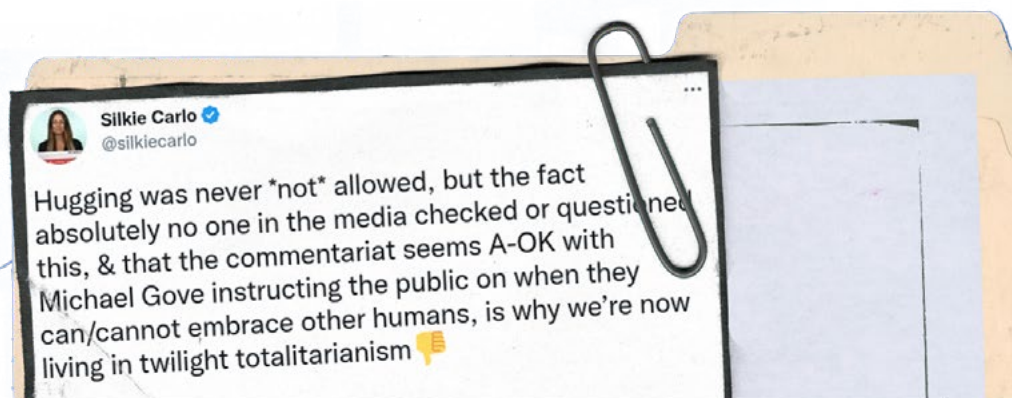
114 Family Plead For Change To Care Home Rules After Daughter’s Arrest, The Guardian, 5th November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/05/family-plead-for-change-to-care-home-rules-after-daughters-arrest>



Neither the video nor Ms Hartley-Brewer’s tweet could be perceived in any way to make a claim that could be considered false. They offer a critique of the impacts of lockdown on care home residents – something that was a controversial and emotive issue throughout the pandemic.<sup>115</sup> The RRU’s monitoring of public engagement around this incident suggests that the unit was concerned with narratives critical of the government’s policies.

**Monitoring criticism of Government conflation of law and guidance**

On some occasions, the RRU monitored criticism of its own misleading information. In May 2021, as the government prepared to ease legal lockdown restrictions, senior ministers including Michael Gove and even the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson claimed that hugging or “friendly contact” between people would be allowed again.<sup>116</sup> Many newspapers put the lifting of the so-called “hugging ban” on their front pages.<sup>117</sup> None of the front pages mentioned that the hugging ban was fiction. Although social distancing guidelines advised people to remain 2 metres apart, hugging was never “banned” or unlawful.<sup>118</sup>



Pre-press conference update on online narratives - RRU analysis	10/05/2021 14:59	<p>[REDACTED]</p> <p><u>Key insights</u></p> <p>Lockdown easements speculation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hugging people from other households. Narratives relating to hugging have the most traction, however there is low engagement (top article <a href="#">ITV News</a> 5k interactions). Top tweets from the Director of Big Brother Watch <a href="#">Silkie Carlo</a> (2k likes, 600 retweets) and TalkRadio host [redacted] (8k likes, 1k retweets) criticise restrictions on hugging as infringing human rights. Popular Facebook <a href="#">comments</a> share personal experiences of continuing to hug throughout the pandemic.</li> </ul>	CO Internal	Media Monitoring
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Extract from Silkie Carlo's SAR to Cabinet Office

115 Care Home Residents Are Still 'dying Of Loneliness' Says West End Star Ruthie Henshall, MailOnline, 16th September 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9997925/West-End-star-calls-action-care-home-residents-dying-loneliness.html>

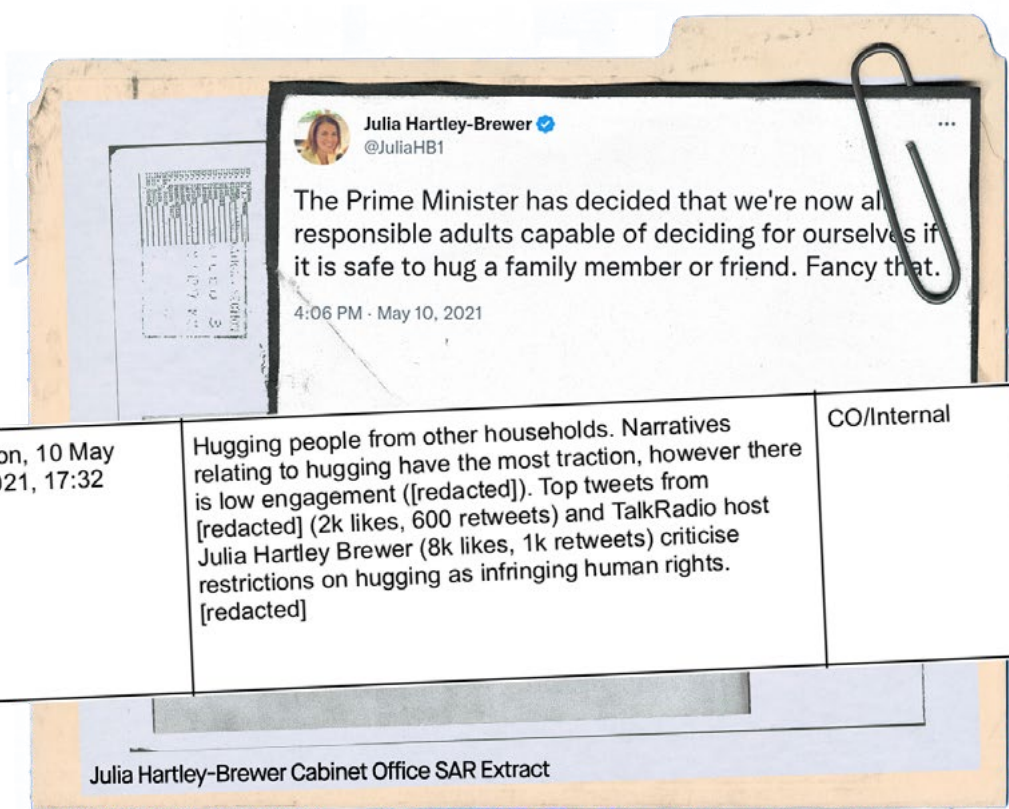
116 Michael Gove Interview on the Andrew Marr Show, BBC News, 9th May 2021, <https://twitter.com/bbcpolitics/status/1391329107531771904>

117 Tweet from Silkie Carlo of Newspaper Front Pages, 10th May 2021, <https://twitter.com/silkiecarlo/status/1391636622899302402/photo/1>

118 End Of England's Hug 'ban' Highlights Confusion Over Law And Guidance, The Guardian, 10th May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/10/end-of-englands-hug-ban-highlights-confusion-over-law-and-guidance>

Our director Silkie Carlo shared a thread on Twitter pointing out the fact that the so-called hugging ban was never "not allowed", criticising the widespread conflation of advice with legal restrictions.<sup>119</sup> The tweet was monitored and recorded by the RRU which included it in a pre-press conference briefing on online narratives dated March 10<sup>th</sup> claiming that the tweet "criticised restrictions on hugging as infringing human rights".

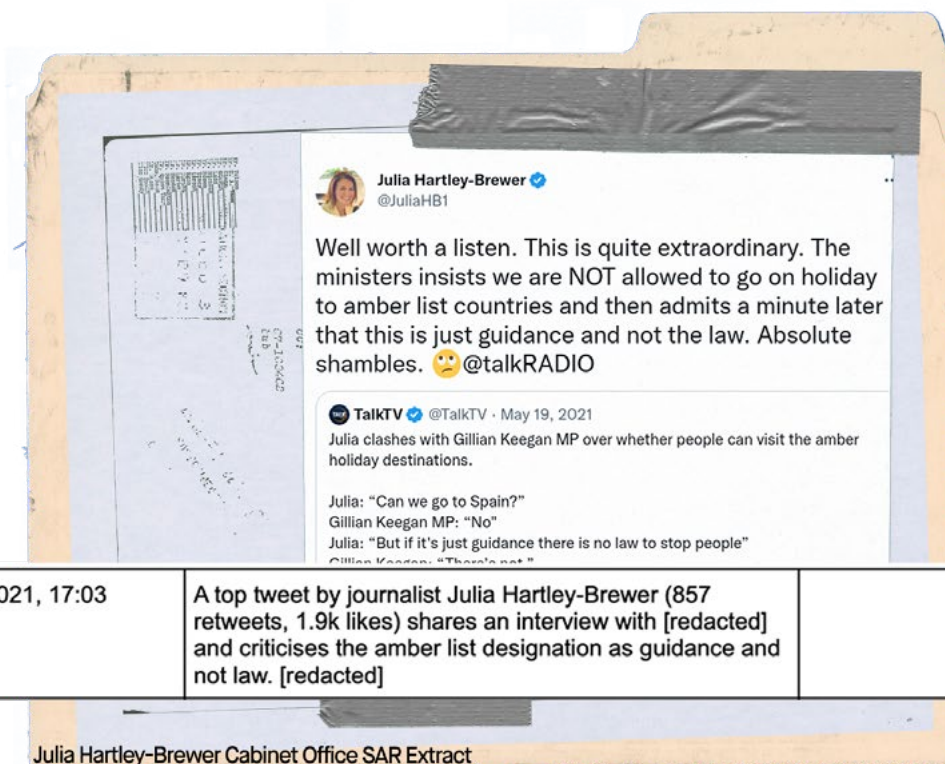
A tweet from Julia Hartley-Brewer also featured in the RRU analysis of the narratives around the "hugging ban". Ms Hartley-Brewer condemned the idea that human interaction had to be managed in such a controlling way as to remove the ability of an adult to decide for themselves. No factual claim about the value of the so-called ban in terms of transmission reduction was made – rather she made a sarcastic comment about the micromanagement of behaviour. There is no reasonable interpretation of the definitions fake news, misinformation or harmful narrative that could include this joke.



Fwd: Pre-press conference update on online narratives - RRU analysis	Mon, 10 May 2021, 17:32	Hugging people from other households. Narratives relating to hugging have the most traction, however there is low engagement ([redacted]). Top tweets from [redacted] (2k likes, 600 retweets) and TalkRadio host Julia Hartley Brewer (8k likes, 1k retweets) criticise restrictions on hugging as infringing human rights. [redacted]	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
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119 Tweet thread from Silkie Carlo on the 'Hugging Ban', 10th May 2021, <https://twitter.com/silkiecarlo/status/1391378523881885696>

If the RRU was focused on promoting a “fact-based public debate”, officials would have sought to correct where guidance was wrongly represented as law. It is an important distinction to make in a democracy underpinned by the rule of law.



travel advice and border policy – RRU analysis	2021, 17:03	A top tweet by journalist Julia Hartley-Brewer (857 retweets, 1.9k likes) shares an interview with [redacted] and criticises the amber list designation as guidance and not law. [redacted]		
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Julia Hartley-Brewer Cabinet Office SAR Extract

A May 2021 Julia Hartley-Brewer interview with Gillian Keegan, who was a health minister at the time, was picked up by the RRU in its analysis around advice on international travel. In the interview, Mrs Keegan pushed misleading lines, insisting repeatedly that people were not allowed to travel to countries such as France and Spain for a holiday [then on the amber list – which required testing and home isolation on return].<sup>120</sup> As with the so-called hugging ban, the restrictions on travelling to amber list countries for pleasure rather than business was guidance and not the law. However, it was only under persistent questioning from Ms Hartley-Brewer that the minister conceded that there was a difference between the guidance and law and that holidays in France and Spain were allowed.

Yet when the tweet featuring the interview was featured in the RRU analysis it was described as Julia Hartley-Brewer criticising the “amber list designation as guidance, not law”. This misrepresented the tweet which took issue with the minister’s lack of clear distinction between guidance and law applying to the amber list, rather than the amber list designation not being law. Ms Hartley-Brewer’s post exposed misleading information propagated by a government minister which could undermine a “fact-based” debate, yet the RRU did not comment on Ms Keegan’s obfuscation of the law. The inclusion of this tweet shows the RRU spent significant resource monitoring criticism of the government, even where the criticism was verifiably true, rather than dealing with supposed misinformation

120 Tweet from Julia Hartley-Brewer of an Interview with Gillian Keegan MP, 19th May 2021, <https://twitter.com/JuliaHB1/status/1394931102737915905>

or falsehoods in the public debate.

Three weeks later, further RRU analysis on travel restrictions confirms that criticism of the government was a key focus. As Portugal was being moved from the green [minimal restrictions] to the amber [10 days self-isolation] list in early June, the (then) Cabinet Office Minister Michael Gove took advantage of a pilot scheme offered only to ministers and officials to test daily rather than isolate at home after being exposed to coronavirus on his flight home from the Champions League final in Porto.<sup>121</sup>

Mr Gove’s ability to take part in the pilot was controversial with Labour MP Lucy Powell tweeting: “How come Michael Gove gets to be part of a ‘pilot scheme’ to avoid self-isolation in place of testing? I know many businesses in Manchester have had to close due to high numbers of staff being ‘pinged’ who have subsequently tested negative. Can they join pilot?”

Travel returning from Portugal ahead of amber list deadline – RRU analysis	Mon, 7 Jun 2021, 16:00	A minority of tweets reference CDL’s visit to Portugal, criticising his taking part in a daily testing pilot instead of self-isolating after being alerted by the NHS contact tracing app (Julia Hartley-Brewer, 82 retweets; [redacted]).  Thanks, [redacted]	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
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Julia Hartley-Brewer Cabinet Office SAR Extract

The criticism of Mr Gove came to the attention of the RRU - which of course sits within the department he ran at the time. The analysis related to the amber list changes also contained a tweet from Ms Hartley-Brewer who shared a Spectator article, without comment, about Gove’s use of the pilot scheme to avoid self-isolation.

The inclusion of a fact-based discussion of Mr Gove’s position exempting him from isolation rules shows that the RRU’s work regularly included narrative monitoring on topics that could damage the government’s reputation. The inclusion of Ms Hartley-Brewer’s tweet in particular indicates that the unit was not only interested in government criticism but

<sup>121</sup> COVID-19: Michael Gove receives coronavirus app alert following Portugal visit for Champions League final, Sky News, 4th June 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/COVID-19-michael-gove-receives-coronavirus-app-alert-following-portugal-visit-for-champions-league-final-12324383>

government critics, and those with a high reach.

Some time later, Ms Hartley-Brewer tweeted a joke about how complex the travel restrictions were.



Covid narratives today - NHS app and travel guidance – RRU analysis	Tue, 3 Aug 2021, 11:22	Most top tweets criticise the government over the complexity of the travel guidance (e.g. Julia Hartley-Brewer, 5k interactions; [redacted], 1k interactions)	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
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Julia Hartley-Brewer Cabinet Office SAR Extract

Surprisingly, the RRU monitored and recorded this tweet in its analysis of online COVID-19 narratives. A document named “COVID-19 narratives today - NHS app and travel guidance – RRU analysis” by the Cabinet Office noted criticism over the complexity of the travel rules, which even travel bosses had blasted as “complicated”.<sup>122</sup> This tweet cannot be seen as anything other than satire aimed at a Byzantine set of rules, yet the RRU deemed it important enough to be circulated throughout Whitehall as part of its analysis of narratives on travel restrictions.

### ***Monitoring the reaction to Dominic Cummings at the Select Committee***

The RRU also engaged in the surveillance of content outside the bounds of supporting a fact-based debate by providing live analysis for the Cabinet Office when Dominic Cummings, Boris Johnson’s ex-Chief of Staff, gave evidence to a House of Commons select committee. Our FOI request revealed that the RRU had collated media reports, lines from commentators and tweets from journalists about the event – suggesting that the political reaction to Mr Cummings’s comments was of great interest to the supposedly

<sup>122</sup> Heathrow Tells Uk To Change Travel Rules As Passenger Slump Continues, Reuters, 13th September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/heathrow-tells-uk-change-travel-rules-passenger-slump-continues-2021-09-13/>

counter-misinformation unit.<sup>123</sup> One section of the RRU's analysis referred to Mr Cummings suggesting that locking down earlier in the pandemic would have saved lives, which was featured alongside a tweet from Julia Hartley-Brewer who disagreed with the comment citing Sweden's no-lockdown strategy as evidence – with the country having fewer COVID-19 deaths per capita than the UK.<sup>124</sup> Regardless of the merits of arguments on whether the UK should have locked down earlier or later, the rolling analysis of Mr Cummings's appearance and the inclusion of this tweet further underline the RRU's work in monitoring political dissent and disagreement with government policy.

By the time of his appearance at the committee, Mr Cummings had left government and had become a significant critic of Boris Johnson – one with huge quantities of inside knowledge. Throughout this investigation, the only example Big Brother Watch has uncovered of a select committee appearance being given detailed live monitoring is Mr Cummings' evidence session – someone who was expected to criticise the government and someone whose position allowed him to back up the claims. It would appear that the monitoring of this evidence session with a disgruntled former government insider, as well as the reaction of political journalists to it, was not motivated by a counter-misinformation purpose but reputation management.

### ***Monitoring test logistics***

In emails we obtained through FOI requests, a member of the RRU contacted Facebook staff, copying officials from the Department of Health and Social Care on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020. The content flagged was a post written by a courier who was delivering batches of Randox COVID-19 tests to test centres and shared details of his route. The RRU staff member expressed concern that this was a breach of GDPR, claimed it could put testing centres at risk, and asked for it to be removed “urgently”.

The post was restricted to be seen by “Friends Only”, meaning that only the courier's Facebook friends could see it. Questions remain over how RRU staff found the post given the privacy settings, and why they felt generic information about test deliveries posed a risk. A member of Facebook's staff passed the post onto the review team but the social media company told the Cabinet Office hours later that the account had been disabled by the courier himself, with no reason why given.

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123 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/15292, 21st November 2022

124 Incidence of coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths in Europe as of October 17, 2022, by country, Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1111779/coronavirus-death-rate-europe-by-country/>

Emails from Cabinet Office to Facebook asking for a post to be taken down, obtained under FOI

**From:** [redacted] <[redacted]@cabinetoffice.gov.uk>  
**Sent:** 10 April 2020 10:40 AM  
**To:** [redacted] <[redacted]@fb.com>; [redacted] <[redacted]@fb.com>; [redacted] <[redacted]@dhsc.gov.uk>; [redacted] <[redacted]@cabinetoffice.gov.uk>; [redacted] <[redacted]@cabinetoffice.gov.uk>; [redacted] <[redacted]@cui>

**Subject:** Testing kits confidentiality/GDPR breach post on Facebook

Morning [redacted] and other Facebook colleagues,

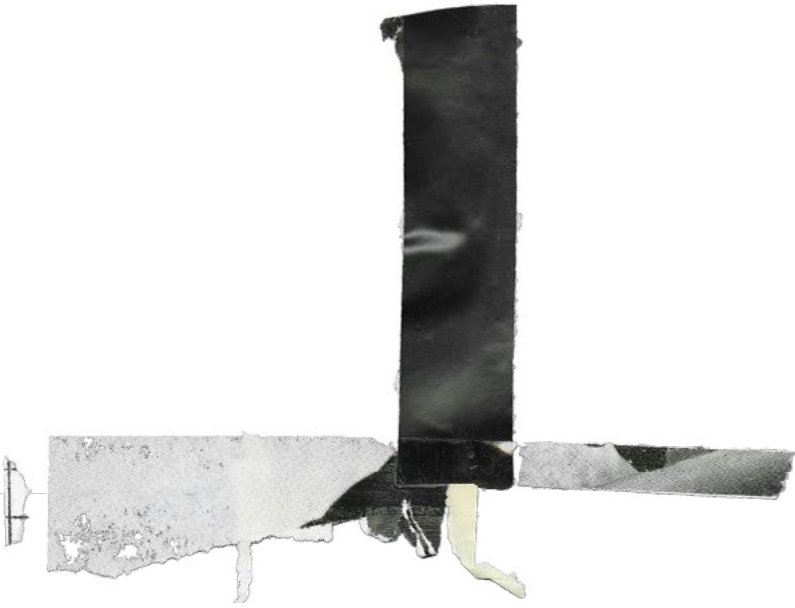
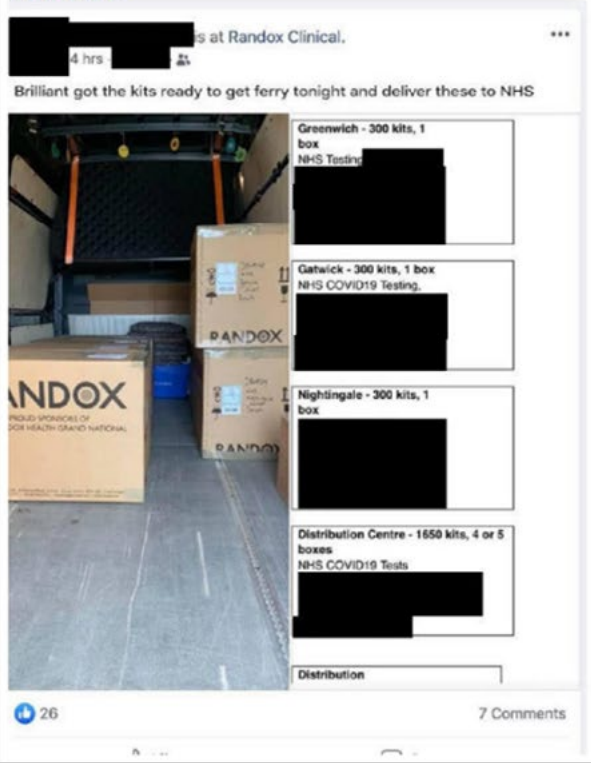
We have a slightly urgent issue come up and was hoping you can help.

Someone seemingly from the courier company delivering test kits has posted details of where they would be delivered exposing details of distribution centres which is a breach of GDPR as well as puts those centres at risk.

We would like this removed urgently please.

The post is set to 'friends only' so we can't see it on his profile.

**Screenshot**



The chain of emails raises questions about how Cabinet Office officials can see ostensibly private posts, and about the justification for the demand for removal when the location of testing centres was in the public domain. It also shows how the hotline between Whitehall and major social platforms works, and the cordial relationship between individuals with emails being sent on first-name terms.

## Monitoring the Afghanistan evacuation



Afghanistan crisis online narratives 24.08.2021 – RRU analysis	Tue, 24 Aug 2021, 13:03	Other top tweets are factual in nature and report the news ([redacted], Julia Hartley-Brewer, [redacted]). [redacted] [redacted]	CO/Internal	Media Monitoring
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Julia Hartley-Brewer Cabinet Office SAR Extract

It is not only on coronavirus that Ms Hartley-Brewer was monitored. Her simple re-share of a news article was picked up in an RRU analysis.

Following the fall of Kabul in August 2021, there was significant media coverage of the aftermath including the mass evacuation of people from the country, both British and Afghan. One incident saw a person supposedly on a no-fly list brought to the UK during the evacuation.<sup>125</sup> A RRU analysis of the Afghanistan crisis dated 24<sup>th</sup> August 2021 included mentions of tweets that were described as “factual in nature and report the news”, such as one where Ms Hartley-Brewer shared a Sky News article about the no-fly incident without comment. The Subject Access Request where this mention was obtained provided minimal context. It is alarming that a team with the RRU’s remit used resources to monitor and record journalists sharing factual reports of the news.

The information we have garnered on the monitoring of high-profile figures by the CDU and the RRU give us a snapshot of the types of information and opinions the secretive units are concerned about. Given what we know about these units’ powers as Trusted Flaggers, who push for the censorship of speech online, the fact that in many cases targeted speech included comment and opinion on matters of public policy, is deeply concerning.

<sup>125</sup> Afghanistan: Person On No-Fly List Flown Into Uk During Evacuation Operation, MPs told, Sky News, 24th August 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/afghanistan-person-on-no-fly-watchlist-flown-into-uk-during-evacuation-operation-12389001>





Ministry  
of Truth

# 77th Brigade

# 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade

*British Army, Ministry of Defence*

*Purpose: Information Warfare*

## What is the 77th Brigade?

The 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade is part of the British Army and exists to conduct information operations within the military, with its work spanning from audience analysis to disseminating counter-propaganda. The Brigade has conducted operations against both the Taliban and al-Qaeda.<sup>126</sup> Its members include Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood, Chair of the Defence Select Committee and former army captain, who is a reservist.<sup>127</sup>

## 77x and COVID-19

General Sir Nick Carter, the UK chief of defence staff, announced that the Brigade was working to counter COVID-19 related misinformation online.<sup>128</sup> It was subsequently revealed in November 2020 by The Times newspaper that the 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade [77x] was supporting the Cabinet Office's Rapid Response Unit's counter-disinformation work around vaccinations - however, it is understood that this ended by late 2021.<sup>129,130</sup>

After 77x's involvement was revealed, the Ministry of Defence explained that soldiers were not deployed against UK citizens: "Defence are supporting the Cabinet Office to tackle disinformation and hostile state narratives which seek to undermine the UK's reputation. All work is internationally focused, and the military do not and have never conducted any kind of action against British citizens."<sup>131</sup> When Big Brother Watch asked the Ministry of Defence for a copy of any legal justifications or data protection impact assessments produced to facilitate 77x's co-operation with the RRU, the MOD claimed that no information was held.<sup>132</sup>

77x's work with the Cabinet Office was said to be monitoring the web to analyse how UK residents were being targeted online by anti-vaccine propaganda from hostile foreign

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126 77th Brigade Influence and Outreach, British Army, accessed 14th December 2022, <https://www.army.mod.uk/who-we-are/formations-divisions-brigades/6th-united-kingdom-division/77-brigade/>

127 Tweet from Tobias Ellwood, Twitter, 30th September 2018, [https://twitter.com/Tobias\\_Ellwood/status/1046379902122029056](https://twitter.com/Tobias_Ellwood/status/1046379902122029056)

128 Defence Chief Says 77th Brigade Is Countering COVID-19 Misinformation, The National Scotland, 22nd April 2020, <https://www.thenational.scot/news/18398012.defence-chief-says-77th-brigade-countering-COVID-19-misinformation/>

129 Army Spies To Take On Antivax Militants, The Times, 29th November 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/army-spies-to-take-on-antivax-militants-mfzsj66w2>

130 Document 20210422, Freedom of Information Request to the Ministry of Defence, FOI2021\_03178, 1st June 2021, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/COVID-19\\_support\\_force\\_govuk\\_guidan#incoming-1802544](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/COVID-19_support_force_govuk_guidan#incoming-1802544)

131 Ibid

132 Freedom of Information Request to the Ministry of Defence, FOI2022\_10494, 4th October 2022,

powers.<sup>133</sup> Some of the work conducted included detecting alleged mis/disinformation and passing it onto the Cabinet Office.<sup>134</sup> Target Audience Analysis (TAA), one of the sub-units involved, is claimed to help understand the “cognitive behaviours of audiences, actors and adversaries.”<sup>135</sup>

Although little has been said publicly about how 77x supported the Cabinet Office, Big Brother Watch has obtained a limited set of tweets identified by 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade soldiers and passed to the department.

The list of posts were formed as part of the “Disinformation Daily” report dated 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020, from 77x to the Cabinet Office, which was disclosed through a Freedom of Information Act request asking for copies of communications between 77x and the Cabinet Office from early June 2020.<sup>136</sup> It featured three “key headlines”, with accompanying tweets; one on reports that COVID-19 may be a vascular disease, a second on an “anti-authority conspiracy video” making “untrue and misinformed claims regarding UK laws” and a third on another video claiming the “UK government has threatened, manipulated and deliberately terrified” citizens during the pandemic, with the first making up the majority of the tweets in the report.

The first headline centred on an article covering a piece in the Lancet examining the impact of the virus on blood vessels.<sup>137</sup> Similar conclusions, that COVID-19 can have severe effects on the vascular system, were reached in a January 2021 paper from Harvard Medical School, underlining the point that this was a serious point for discussion.<sup>138</sup> In the briefing accompanying the list of tweets, 77x expressed concern about people concluding that the impact of COVID-19 on the vascular system meant that it was solely a cardiovascular disease and advocating unapproved treatments. It added “*The broad conversation has approx 20k engagements, with fringe comments making up a small proportion of that.*”

All bar one of the accounts whose tweets on this topic were picked up by 77x were clearly identifiable as being UK-based. They include two people who claim to be current or former NHS nursing staff among a number of accounts who are clearly based in the UK, with their Twitter bios featuring locations either set as “UK” or specific locations such as Brighton and the Isle of Wight, or in one case identifying the account as belonging to a

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133 UK On High Alert For Anti-Vaccine Disinformation From Hostile States, Financial Times, 11th December 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7502f1f1-e104-403d-975f-bedc6e518fe2>

134 Document 20201127, Freedom of Information Request to the Ministry of Defence, FOI2021\_03178, 1st June 2021, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/739164/response/1802544/attach/9/20210422%20FOI%2003178%20Caldwell%20Enc%2002%2077X%20email%20Redacted.pdf?cookie\\_passthrough=1](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/739164/response/1802544/attach/9/20210422%20FOI%2003178%20Caldwell%20Enc%2002%2077X%20email%20Redacted.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1)

135 Ibid

136 Freedom of Information Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2022/16907, 22nd December 2021

137 Endothelial cell infection and endotheliitis in COVID-19, Zsuzanna Varga et al, The Lancet 395, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30937-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30937-5/fulltext)

138 COVID-19 – A Vascular Disease, Hasan K. Siddiqi, Peter Libby & Paul M Ridker, Trends in Cardiovascular Medicine 31(1), January 2021, DOI:10.1016/j.tcm.2020.10.005

physics student at the University of Warwick. Notwithstanding the fact that hostile actors could set up sock puppets purporting to be British citizens, the balance of probabilities overwhelmingly points to these accounts being genuine people based in the UK.

Tweets flagged by the 77th Brigade to the Cabinet Office, obtained under FOI



These screenshots are some of the Tweets identified by 77x soldiers and passed onto the Cabinet Office as part of the Disinformation Daily. Some of the posts made unevidenced claims. Others expressed concerns about their own medical conditions after having the virus in light of the evidence linking the disease to cardiovascular effects, or questioned the blood clot risk of the contraceptive pill combined with a bout of COVID-19. Spring 2020 was a time of confusion and fear, when much was still to be learned about the virus's potential impact on those infected.

Since the revelations of military support for a civil service "disinformation" unit came to light, a whistleblower from 77x spoke exclusively to Big Brother Watch to shed some more light on the Brigade's capabilities and scope.

These FOI disclosures back up our whistleblower's ['AB'] evidence that in Spring 2020, 77x troops were directly involved in information operations and surveillance that caught up people living in the UK time and time again. It is alarming that in a democracy the government deployed soldiers to monitor its own people, even if that was not the direct brief. As AB writes in his contribution to this report, he and his colleagues were not told to target British people online, but the lack of safeguards to stop the monitoring of people in the UK made it inevitable.

In an exclusive interview with Big Brother Watch, AB told us that his work with 77x was mostly "monitoring the sentiment of the British public and how they perceived the Conservative administration doing a COVID-19 response". He said that although there were not explicit instructions to monitor UK sentiment or British people, soldiers in the unit received positive feedback when they passed tweets along those lines up the chain. AB said that it was effectively left up to individual consciences whether their reports included British citizens, something he said he did not do.<sup>139</sup>

There were minimal safeguards in place to ensure that British people were not caught up in their "sifts" of Twitter and AB said that the reality was that "it would be impossible not to also pick up British citizens at the same time" as 77x monitored Twitter.

General Sir Nick Carter claimed in 2020 that "*The 77th Brigade are not currently supporting in the Cabinet Office with any projects that would involve interactions with British Citizens who might be posting disinformation nor misinformation and any capabilities are not being directed at the UK population. 77th Brigade do not, and have never, conducted any kind of action against British citizens.*" (Emphasis added).

At the same time, documents obtained in another FOI revealed that government press officers were instructed to tell the media that 77x's work with the

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139 Big Brother Watch Interview with AB, 77th Brigade Whistleblower, 30th January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/c/BigBrotherWatchHQ>

RRU focused on understanding “narratives about vaccinations overseas”.<sup>140</sup>

However, these examples completely contradict the military’s claim that they were not directing their capabilities against British citizens, and instead focussing on foreign vaccine narratives. All four of the tweets above, which were included in the Disinformation Daily report, clearly put their location in the UK and some identify specific cities. Clicking on the accounts makes it obvious that the individuals are UK based, meaning that 77x soldiers either did not have adequate checks to protect British people from their surveillance or the Chief of Defence Staff misled the public about the military involvement. Either way the government effectively deployed the British Army against its own people, whether by accident or on purpose.

The whistleblower wrote the following extraordinary testimony for this report, which reveals the highly limited capabilities of 77x and that that they relied on rudimentary social media searches to identify content on topics they were tasked to monitor. Most concerning of all, 77x social media monitoring and reporting to government captured UK citizens who expressed concern about government pandemic policies – not only foreign purveyors of disinformation.

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140 Document 20210422, Freedom of Information Request to the Ministry of Defence, FOI2021\_03178, 1st June 2021, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/COVID-19\\_support\\_force\\_govuk\\_guidan#incoming-1802544](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/COVID-19_support_force_govuk_guidan#incoming-1802544) ([https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/739164/response/1802544/attach/9/20210422%20FOI%2003178%20Caldwell%20Enc%2002%2077X%20email%20Redacted.pdf?cookie\\_passthrough=1](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/739164/response/1802544/attach/9/20210422%20FOI%2003178%20Caldwell%20Enc%2002%2077X%20email%20Redacted.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1))

## **ANONYMOUS: A whistleblower reveals what the 77th Brigade's 'disinformation' operation during COVID-19 was really like**

"In March 2020, I was serving in the British Army when COVID-19 became a focus for the UK government. I was seconded to 77th Brigade ('77x'), on the basis that I would be helping to find foreign state misinformation on social media.

"I had a few friends in 77x, and I was aware that they had provided manpower to the Cabinet Office under Military Aid to the Civil Authority ('MACA'), a military function which allowed governments to reach in to the military - beloved by brigadiers who wanted to gain access to politicians through the efforts of their troops.

"I was sold on the idea of countering misinformation emanating from Russia or China, and I was looking forward to seeing the capability 77x held. In common with many of my team members, I had an intelligence background, but little experience of cyber.

"We were sent on basic training including the use of anonymised laptops and many legal briefs to ensure we knew how to remain legal. We got started and helped out with the existing team of around 8 counter misinformation/disinformation/malinformation ('mis/dis/mal') operators. I found it remarkable that this team existed, as I thought I was well-informed about our intelligence activities, but I also found it astonishing how little experience they had in cyber, being a team sourced from across all areas of defence. We were asked about our experience in cyber and it seemed to me that they were looking for help in setting up the capability and that they were not really skilled in identifying misinformation or disinformation. They had been told what was legally allowed, such as a 'scrape' whereby we searched online platforms for keywords; and what was illegal, such as repeatedly looking at a named UK individual's account without authorisation, although some people would do that from their own accounts after their shift.

"After this training, we worked in shifts running searches of Twitter by keywords that were often dictated by the central team leader in 77x - usually in the morning, leaving me with the impression that the search terms were directed by that day's newspapers. An early and popular keyword was 'ventilator', relevant to the time, and quickly this directed us down a route which I believe had us monitoring the social media posts of ordinary, scared people communicating government-inspired fear to their friends. We would send screenshots of Tweets from people who appeared to be British expressing dissatisfaction with the UK Government's action against COVID-19, such as Labour activists concerned about inadequate supplies of ventilators, to our team leader who would gather them together and send them to the project lead. To skirt the clear legal issues with a military unit monitoring domestic dissent, the leading view was that unless a profile explicitly stated their real name and nationality, which is of course vanishingly rare, they could be a foreign agent and were fair game to flag up. The project lead would then gather these

screenshots into a slide pack and send them to the Cabinet Office. Feedback from the Cabinet Office, via the project lead, would direct us what to look for the next day, and we would also find our own threads to pull at which would be passed on to the next shift. We learned from the feedback that the government were very keen on hearing what the public thought about their COVID-19 response and how scared people were. However, these posts did not contain information that was untrue or co-ordinated – it was simply fear and domestic dissent.

"I later read the Ministry of Defence claimed to a newspaper that our activities were 'not being directed at the UK population' and that '77th Brigade do not, and have never, conducted any kind of action against British citizens'. It is true that our counter-disinformation activities were not directed at the UK population, but given that we were conducting very rudimentary scrapes of the English-speaking Twittersphere with no measures in place at all to exclude the UK's 19 million Twitter users, it is quite obvious that our activities resulted in the monitoring of the UK population.

"As someone who has dedicated my career to serving and defending my country, I entered this role believing I would be surfacing foreign information warfare against our country. Instead, I found the banner of disinformation was a guise under which the British military was being deployed to monitor and flag our own concerned citizens to the government.

"Since my deployment in this unit, I have become aware of evidence that there may have in fact been real social media campaigns from China, involving copy and paste pro-lockdown propaganda from newly created sock-puppet accounts, to promote lockdown policies to Europe and the world. However, because we were directed to monitor public sentiment towards government policies, such as the success of the lockdown policy, the unit supposedly formed to discover such foreign interference would have completely missed it if it were there. In fact, I developed the impression that the government were more interested in protecting the success of their COVID-19 policies than uncovering any potential foreign interference that might have influenced what those policies were in the first place. Our occasional successes in tracking down potential foreign narratives were hampered by the fact we were tasked to monitor specific search terms and warned against searching for complete sentences, which we were told would be illegal. During COVID-19, the role of the 77th Brigade was not to work for the country discovering foreign disinformation, but to work for the Conservative government monitoring the British public's opinion of their controversial COVID-19 response.

"I am concerned that the government was so interested in individual Twitter posts that they devoted an entire unit to monitoring what scared and otherwise powerless people had to say, and I regret that I was a part of it. Recently, I opened a drawer containing my medals and thought of all the things I have done in my career – things I am proud of, in the defence of the people of this country – except my work on 'disinformation' in 77x,



which hangs over my career like a black cloud. It was about domestic perception, not national security. By being so fixed on the wrong targets, 77x became more akin to a tool for bad information than an antidote to it. That is why I am telling my story via Big Brother Watch now, and urging politicians to demand more transparency around the activities of so-called disinformation units. Frankly, the work I was doing should never have happened.

"It seemed to me that the government geared the counter-disinformation operation not to serving and protecting citizens, but to serving their own careers and influence. Worse, this domestic monitoring of citizens online seemed not to be driven by a desire to address the public's fears and concerns, but to identify levers for compliance with controversial government policies. I do not doubt that the activities I participated in were conceived of for good, but they were undemocratic, wrong, and should not be allowed to happen again."

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# Government Information Cell

# Government Information Cell

*Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office*

*Purpose: Foreign propaganda*

## What is the Government Information Cell

The youngest of the four information units, the Government Information Cell [GIC] was set up in February 2022 with a specific remit to focus on online narratives concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is tasked with countering lines pushed by the Kremlin and its digital cheerleaders, with an official government announcement stating the unit had been “set up to identify and counter Russian disinformation targeted at UK and international audiences”.<sup>141</sup>

In response to a written parliamentary question from Alicia Kearns MP, a Foreign Office minister confirmed that the GIC does work with other counter-disinformation teams across Whitehall, including the Counter Disinformation Unit at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.<sup>142</sup> The minister also said that the GIC was set up as a “surge team” specifically in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but its work will integrate into the government’s longer-term disinformation strategy. Another comment in Parliament suggested that the GIC could be dubbed an “information warfare” unit when a minister from the Cabinet Office gave a description of the GIC in response to a question asking about the government setting up an information warfare team.<sup>143</sup>

News reports suggest that around 35 staff members working for the GIC were pulled from across Whitehall, spanning the Cabinet Office, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Foreign Office.<sup>144</sup> However, when asked about staffing levels or budgets in a Freedom of Information Act Request, the Foreign Office refused to give any details citing exemptions relating to national security.<sup>145</sup>

Staff in the cell are tasked with monitoring and responding to purported propaganda and disinformation relating to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in both English and Russian. The cell monitors platforms around the clock and facilitates responses and rebuttals, including the creation of social media content. The FCDO describes it as “a leaflet drop operation for

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141 Responding to Russia’s Invasion, Government Communications Service, 24th March 2022 <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/responding-to-russias-invasion/>

142 Written Parliamentary Question on the GIC, UIN 145048, 22nd March 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-03-22/145048>

143 Written Parliamentary Question on Information Warfare, UIN 126836, 21st February 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-02-21/126836>

144 Inside the Secret Government Unit Returning Fire on Vladimir Putin’s ‘Weaponised Lies’, The Sunday Telegraph, 19th March 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/03/19/inside-secret-government-unit-returning-fire-vladimir-putins/>

145 Freedom of Information Act Request to the Foreign Office, FOI2022/19588, 10th August 2022

the social media age” with the motto “*the truth, well told*”.<sup>146</sup> Officials working in the cell have a remit to work alongside social media platforms to get disinformation, inauthentic activity and manipulated behaviour that violates platforms’ terms removed.

This suggests there is a strong working relationship between staff in the Cell and social media companies, which may grant officials in Whitehall significant influence over content takedowns. However, the relationship does not go as far as the Foreign Office holding formal “Trusted Flagger” status as other public bodies do. The FCDO claimed to not hold information about any formal relationship between its Cell and the social media companies in a Freedom of Information Act response.<sup>147</sup> Given the invocation of a national security exemption from transparency in response to FOI requests, it is possible that the Cell does have a trusted relationship with the platforms but seeks to do this in a way more covert than the “Trusted Flagger” scheme.

As the British government has taken a side, perhaps rightly, in the conflict there will be lines and angles that Foreign Office officials will look to push and there is a risk that the definite interest in promoting particular angles could undermine free discussion online if the definition of “disinformation” is overly wide.

The brief of the GIC appears to go beyond monitoring and the occasional rebuttal. Experts in “assessment and analysis, disinformation, and behaviour and attitudinal change” (emphasis added) work alongside the Cell, which suggests some of its output may be designed to influence views and behaviours beyond correcting disinformation.<sup>148</sup>

The proactive element of the GIC pushes messages approved by the UK government in support of Ukraine on Russia-facing social networks, such as VK, after the Kremlin restricted access to Twitter, Facebook and Western media outlets such as the BBC in Russia.<sup>149</sup> Unfortunately, the nature of the content created by the Cell remains a closely guarded secret and Foreign Office officials claimed that national security concerns meant that they could not disclose any examples of posts shared on their behalf on Russian social networks.<sup>150</sup> In the same FOI response, the Foreign Office refused to provide us with any information about the guidelines surrounding the content created by the Cell’s staff.

Efforts by the Foreign Office to conduct front-foot operations to advance UK government lines abroad are nothing new, but the establishment of a cell to support a particular

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146 Responding To Russia’s Invasion, Government Communications Service Blog, 24th March 2022, <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/responding-to-russias-invasion/>

147 Freedom of Information Act Request to the Foreign Office, FOI2022/19588, 10th August 2022

148 Written Parliamentary Question on Russian Disinformation, UIN 132252, 1st March 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-03-01/132252>

149 Foreign Office Launches Crack Unit To Counter Kremlin Misinformation on Social Media, CityAM, 20th March 2022, <https://www.cityam.com/foreign-office-launches-crack-unit-to-counter-kremlin-misinformation-on-social-media/>

150 Freedom of Information Act Request to the Foreign Office, FOI2022/19588, 10th August 2022

information operation is novel. Over the last three years, around £10 million has been given to Zinc Network, a media company that has also been linked to Home Office front organisations, for activities abroad.<sup>151</sup> In the Western Balkans Zinc was tasked with “countering disinformation”, empowering voices deemed to “counter mistruths” and helping the Foreign Office better understand the region’s media landscape.<sup>152</sup>

FCDO support has also been given, through the Zinc Network, to support Russian-language news outlets in the formerly Soviet-controlled Baltic region of Northern Europe.<sup>153</sup> This included supporting outlets to create content in the Russian language, translating content into Russian or journalistic training.<sup>154</sup>

Although separate from the GIC’s work countering Russian propaganda in the specific instance of the war in Ukraine, the FCDO’s funding for media outlets that “counter disinformation” provides insight into the kind of activities the FCDO is engaged in around disinformation abroad.

The context of the government working to counteract the impact of a hostile, foreign state’s propaganda abroad is very different from efforts to monitor and influence people domestically. However, the cooperation across government risks a cross-pollination of tactics and techniques between domestic and overseas units.

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151 Data extracted from Spend Network Insights accessed 16th August 2022

152 Western Balkans Media, Cyber And Defence (MCD) Cssf Programmeme, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, retrieved 16th August 2022, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/842432/Western\\_Balkans\\_Media\\_Cyber\\_and\\_Defence\\_Programmeme.odt](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/842432/Western_Balkans_Media_Cyber_and_Defence_Programmeme.odt)

153 Supporting Independent Media in the Baltics, Zinc Network, accessed 16th August 2022, <https://zincnetwork.com/blog/supporting-independent-media-in-the-baltic-states/>

154 Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, accessed 16th August 2022, <https://bcme.eu/en/our-work/media-innovations/grant-programme>



Ministry  
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# Research, Information and Communications Unit

# Research, Information and Communications Unit

*Home Office*

*Purpose: Domestic propaganda*

## What is RICU?

Created in 2006 as part of the Home Office's Office for Security and Counter Terrorism, the Research Intelligence and Communications Unit [RICU] is the oldest of the four Whitehall teams covered in this report.<sup>155</sup> RICU is described as a strategic communications team designed to counteract extremism, primarily Islamic fundamentalism. When it was launched 16 years ago the primary task was to analyse how "key audiences" [Muslims] in the UK and overseas react to official messaging around anti-extremism, but this role has expanded into commissioning content to advance those messages directly.<sup>156</sup>

The remit allows RICU to create and commission content, ostensibly branded as independent. This marks it as an outlier across the four disinformation units as its work is more public-facing yet clear about the government links, and places question marks over whether its activities could be described as those of a domestic propaganda unit. By 2016 it was reported that RICU had run 13 national campaigns and produced 950 digital or physical products, from paid-for Google ads to leaflets.<sup>157</sup>

RICU is part of the controversial PREVENT programme, a government initiative aimed at stopping people from turning to extremism which has been mired in allegations of inefficacy and discrimination.<sup>158</sup> In recent years, PREVENT has broadened its focus on extremism and RICU's work now covers other perceived violent threats including the anti-vax movement and the far-right.

The Extremism Analysis Unit and Counter-Extremism Analysis and Insight Units also operate within the Home Office but RICU appears to be the team involved in public-facing messaging, with the other teams being focused on monitoring and detection.

Successive governments have spent large sums of taxpayer money on RICU over the

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155 Don't Look Now, Britain's Real Spooks Are Right Behind You, The Sunday Times, 2nd December 2007, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dont-look-now-britains-real-spooks-are-right-behind-you-jybchtqzhh3>

156 We are Completely Independent report, CAGE, 2016, <https://www.cage.ngo/we-are-completely-independent>

157 Inside RICU, The Shadowy Propaganda Unit Inspired By The Cold War, The Guardian, 2nd May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/02/inside-ricu-the-shadowy-propaganda-unit-inspired-by-the-cold-war>

158 Concern for UK Security as Anti-Vaxxer Groups Evolve Towards US-Style Militias, The Observer, 15th January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jan/15/concern-for-uk-security-as-anti-vaxxer-groups-evolve-towards-us-style-militias>

years. In the financial year 2008/9, the unit's budget was £4.6 million, rising to around £12 million by 2014/5 and £21 million by 2016/7.<sup>159</sup><sup>160</sup> Recently, the budget appears to have fallen back to £18 million in 2020/1, £10 million in 2021/2 and £6 million in 2022/3 – although these are still large amounts.<sup>161</sup>

The unit has also had significant staffing levels with 31 full-time staff members in 2008, rising to 36 in 2017.<sup>162</sup><sup>163</sup> However, by 2022 the Home Office became more opaque and officials refused to disclose staffing levels citing a national security exemption and claiming that revealing staffing numbers would “weaken” the UK's security.<sup>164</sup>

## How does RICU operate?

Due to RICU's links to counter-terrorism the nature of its work is often secretive, and little is publicly acknowledged about its activities by officials. Public sector procurement data provides some insight into the services purchased by the unit, giving small clues about its inner workings. These deals included:

- £4.9 million for social media analysis from tech start-up Moonshot between 2019 and 2022<sup>165</sup>
- £1.65 million for a propaganda tracker and dashboard to Ripjar from 2016 to 2019<sup>166</sup>
- £4.2 million for PR and capacity-building support for RICU-backed community organisations from Four Communications Group between 2018 and 2020<sup>167</sup>
- £50 million to PR giant M&C Saatchi for communications services over three years from 2019<sup>168</sup>

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159 Freedom of Information Request to the Home Office, 523033/8, 5th November 2008, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/3755/response/11561/attach/html/2/ResponseT26438%208.doc.html>

160 Written Parliamentary Question on Government Communications, UIN 2841, 4th July 2017, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2017-02-22/65065>

161 Freedom of Information Request to the Home Office, FOI70837, 13th July 2022

162 Freedom of Information Request to the Home Office, 523033/8, 5th November 2008, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/3755/response/11561/attach/html/2/ResponseT26438%208.doc.html>

163 Written Parliamentary Question on Home Office Information Officers, UIN 65065, 22nd February 2017, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2017-02-22/65065>

164 Freedom of Information Request to the Home Office, FOI70837, 13th July 2022

165 RICU Social Media Analysis Contract, 22nd February 2021, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/dac248c1-26df-4391-a855-53b23dfbc620>

166 RICU/GEU Tracker and Dashboard Analysis Contract, 6th June 2019, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/10c73a0a-3916-42f1-8002-f31e9f969c35>

167 RICU PR and CSO Capacity Building Contract, 6th June 2019, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/e00a1839-7ad5-4d0a-b437-f2152dd4fe45>

168 RICU Communications Contract, 6th June 2019, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/68627f72-6f77-4161-831a-47dde6e1857b>



- £1 million for two years of media monitoring services from Press Data in 2022<sup>169</sup>

Tens of millions of pounds worth of other contracts have also been signed over the past five years for vaguely defined research services, evaluation, and a “global delivery partner”.<sup>170</sup>

The contracts for social media analysis and a tool explicitly for tracking propaganda suggest that some of RICU’s work resembles the other units covered in this report, albeit covering different issues. This includes monitoring online narratives and social media trends, particularly around coordinated messaging from certain groups. However, the contracts offer little in the way of detail about the services bought with public money, which makes understanding the work related to the deals very difficult.

RICU’s partnership with Moonshot shows that the Home Office is applying subtler tactics to countering messaging it disapproves of online, either by opting for nudges or engaging in explicit censorship. Moonshot helps target counter-extremism messaging based on an individual’s online activity, rather than religious or other group affiliations.<sup>171</sup> The company’s mission is to “displace” people online who might be vulnerable to extremism and move them towards other content – for example, by using digital tools to target adverts for counter-extremism on Google searches for far-right groups.<sup>172</sup> Similar tactics to those used against far-right and jihad content have been deployed against other forms of content viewed as undesirable, such as anti-vaccine conspiracies.

A pilot programme in the UK even saw young people seen as potential far-right recruits on Facebook identified through their engagement with certain content on the platform and given gym vouchers for a place that works with at-risk youth.<sup>173</sup> It is not clear whether Moonshot’s relationship with the Home Office extends to outreach, rather than just social media analysis. However, these kinds of tactics, with intentional opacity around the organisations and motives behind the campaign, are a concern if they are used by public bodies to mask their activities.

Trust in government could be imperilled by officials operating clandestine campaigns pretending to be independent organisations rather than acknowledging government sponsorship. These tactics are a blow to transparency around how the state acts towards

169 Media Monitoring and Evaluation Services Contract, 13th April 2022, <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/1fce3866-7f24-4e87-ad68-7806a4dd3736?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

170 Home Office’s Secretive Anti-Extremism Comms Unit Signs £1m Media Monitoring Deal, Civil Service World, 3rd May 2022, <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/home-offices-secretive-antiextremism-comms-unit-signs-1m-media-monitoring-deal>

171 A Tech Startup Countering Extremism, The London Globalist, 2nd April 2018, <https://thelondonglobalist.org/a-tech-startup-countering-violent-extremism-meet-moonshot-cves-founder-vidhya-ramalingam-2/>

172 Google-Backed Startup Uses Internet Ads To Counter Online Extremism, NBC News, 18th August 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/google-backed-startup-uses-internet-ads-counter-online-extremism-n860961>

173 Anti-Extremism Software To Be Used To Tackle Anti-Vaccine Disinformation, The Guardian, 21st July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jul/21/software-used-against-online-extremists-to-tackle-anti-vaxxers>

its citizens, as they make it much more difficult to obtain accountability for the surveillance and monitoring involved. When it is all justified by an algorithm predicting a person is interested in extremism this accountability is lessened further and the potential for a faulty piece of code to hamper free speech is significant.

## **RICU and state-funded propaganda**

RICU and the Home Office have an extensive track record of using front organisations and social media accounts to push certain messages. The Four Communications contract, with the stated purpose of supporting community groups, is the latest example of the links between the secretive unit and what are ostensibly independent groups.

This cooperation between civil society groups and the Home Office, and its contractors, often takes the form of help with message creation and content production. These groups are described by the Home Office as willing to “confront and challenge the ideology of terrorism and extremism”.<sup>174</sup> RICU and its partners offer PR and social media expertise, production capabilities and creative advice to organisations. Known front organisations have included Help for Syria, which worked with freshers and distributed more than 750,000 leaflets without disclosing its connections to the government.<sup>175</sup>

Earlier in the 2010s, most of RICU’s activity appeared to go through groups that resembled community organisations and civil society. This approach was confirmed by a Minister who told Parliament: “RICU work with a range of civil society groups to counter extremist and terrorist ideologies and to equip people in communities with the ability to reject those narratives”.<sup>176</sup>

In 2016, the advocacy organisation CAGE claimed that several organisations were linked to RICU in an extensive report on the programme. These older organisations appeared to be more akin to community groups and campaigns, rather than social media outlets. Some of the other alleged front organisations and campaigns for RICU included:<sup>177</sup>

- Armed Forces Muslim Association
  
- Families Matter

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174 Radicalisation: The Counter Narrative and Identifying the Tipping Point, Government Response to the Home Affairs Select Committee, December 2017 <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/home-affairs/Correspondence-17-19/Radicalisation-the-counter-narrative-and-identifying-the-tipping-point-government-response-Eighth-Report-26-17-Cm-9555.pdf>

175 The British Government Has Already Forgotten The Great Dangers of Propaganda, The Guardian, 3rd May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/03/british-government-propaganda-counter-terrorism-muslim-communities>

176 Written Parliamentary Question on Radicalism, UIN 110378, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2017-10-30/110378>

177 We are Completely Independent report, CAGE, 2016, <https://www.cage.ngo/we-are-completely-independent>

- Help for Syria
- Faith Associates
- Imams Online

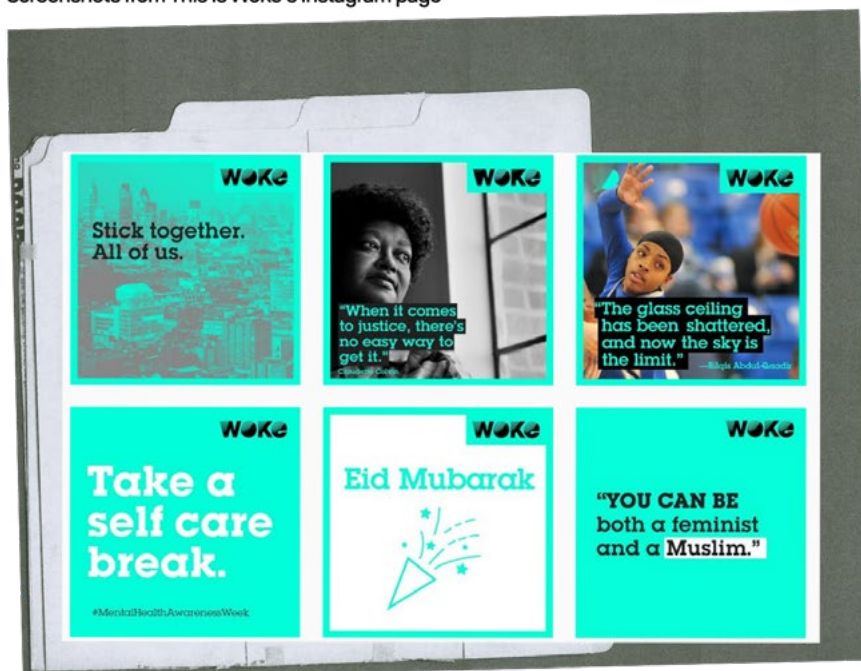
MESSAGES TO PROMOTE	MESSAGES TO COUNTER
Terrorism is a real and serious threat to us all.	Terrorism is not a real and serious threat to us all. The terrorist threat is exaggerated by the UK government.
Terrorists are criminals and murderers.	Terrorist attacks against the UK are legitimate.
Terrorists attack the values that we all share.	Terrorist attacks are justified by 'Muslim Values'.
We all need to work together to tackle the terrorist challenge.	The terrorist challenge is primarily a problem for Muslims or Muslim communities to address.

Extract from 2016 CAGE report, We Are Completely Independent

More recently, the organisations that have been publicly linked to the counter-extremism unit's efforts to push certain messaging online have resembled new media and social media pages.

"This is Woke" was one RICU front created by a media company contracted by the Home Office, posing as a media company that discussed issues around Islamic identity aimed at young people, which concealed its links to the government.<sup>178</sup> Content on the RICU front's social media accounts appears to have stopped suddenly around the time the Home Office links were made public; however, older posts are still visible.

Screenshots from This Is Woke's Instagram page



178 REVEALED: The 'woke' Media Outfit That's Actually A Uk Counterterror Programme, Middle East Eye, 15th August 2019 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-woke-media-outfit-thats-actually-uk-counterterror-programme>

The Instagram content was often vapid with little depth. It included unattributed quotes about Islam being compatible with feminism, in the context of the hijab, lists of Muslims named on the New Year's Honours list and inspirational lines from figures such as Malala Yousafzai and Nelson Mandela.<sup>179</sup> On Facebook, the page was given the tagline "WOKE is a diverse social news platform keeping you in the know about issues which matter the most".<sup>180</sup>

Communications and PR company Breakthrough Media, now renamed Zinc Network, were heavily involved in creating content for This is Woke. This company has also been linked to some of the civil society groups alleged by CAGE to be RICU-backed organisations.

Breakthrough Media, now named Zinc Network, has been accused of being a long-time partner of RICU producing content for the Unit.<sup>181</sup> The company has repeatedly worked with the UK government to support efforts to push its messages, working with both the Home Office and Foreign Office in the last decade. However, government links are often kept secret. One person who took part in a Facebook video made by This is Woke told Middle East Eye that he would not have taken part if he had been aware of the connections to the Home Office.<sup>182</sup>

Following the revelations that This Is Woke was ultimately backed by the Home Office, via Breakthrough Media, a whistleblower from the communications company came forward. Amina Aweis told Muslim news outlet 5Pillars that staff were forced to sign the Official Secrets Act when working on certain projects, but new hires were not made aware of the links between much of the company's work and the Home Office.<sup>183</sup> She also claimed that the true nature of the work was often kept secret and that non-Muslims were creating content that came with the implication it was an authentic Muslim voice.

In 2020, the writer Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan revealed she was approached by This Is Woke in 2017 after a poem she wrote went viral, with the site claiming to be a Facebook channel catering to young British Muslims – with no mention of its links to the Home Office.<sup>184</sup>

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179 This Is Woke Instagram Page, <https://www.instagram.com/thisiswoke/?hl=en>

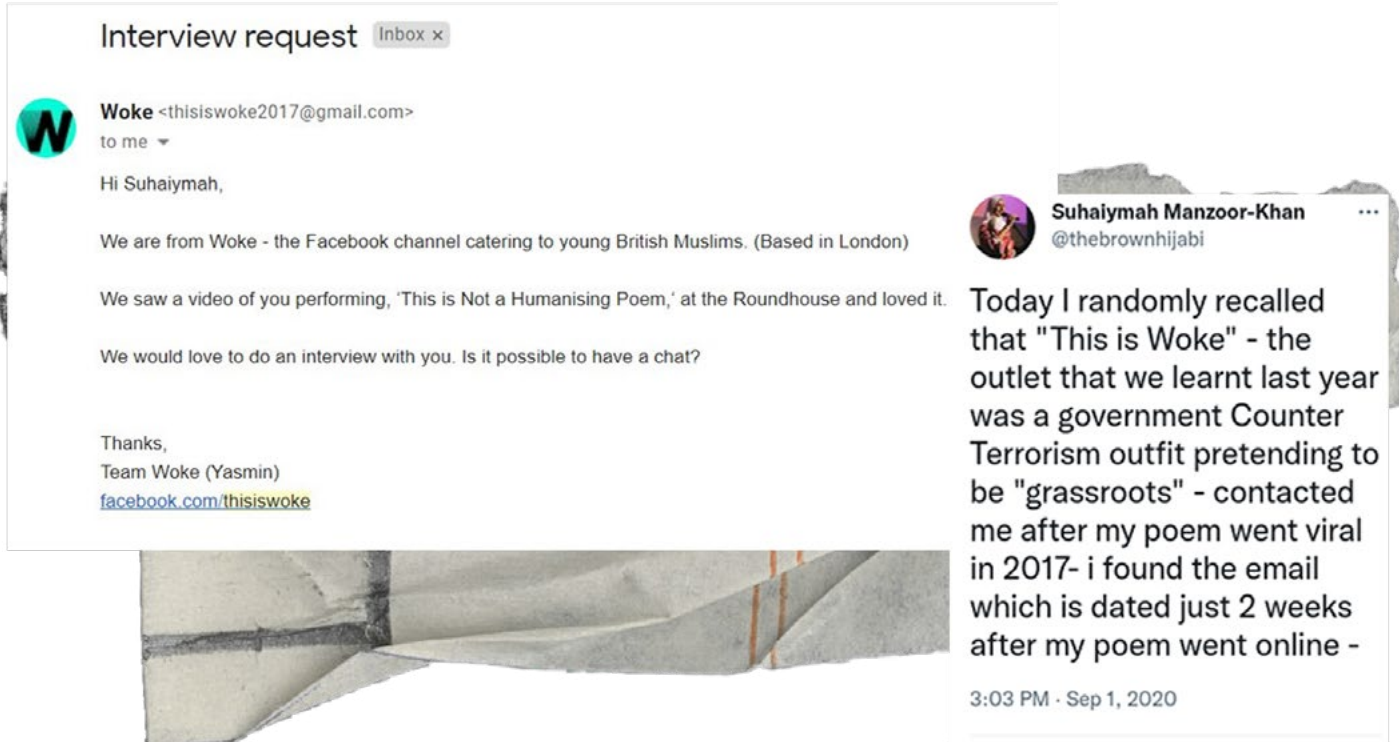
180 This Is Woke Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/thisiswoke/>

181 We are Completely Independent report, CAGE, 2016, <https://www.cage.ngo/we-are-completely-independent>

182 REVEALED: The 'woke' Media Outfit That's Actually A Uk Counterterror Programmeme, Middle East Eye, 15th August 2019 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-woke-media-outfit-thats-actually-uk-counterterror-programme>

183 Exclusive: Why I Left Breakthrough Media, The Home Office's Secretive Propaganda Agency, 5Pillars, 21st August 2019. <https://5pillarsuk.com/2019/08/21/exclusive-why-i-left-breakthrough-media-the-home-offices-secretive-pr-agency/>

184 Tweet from Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, 1st September 2020, <https://twitter.com/thebrownhijabi/status/1300811530729066496>



Tweet from the poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan showing how This Is Woke contacted her

Another social media outlet created by Breakthrough Media was uncovered in 2020. Stoosh was a page that targeted young women with uplifting and inspirational content. It used the strap line "Real Women. Empowered" and most of its content focused on young women of colour.<sup>185</sup> This page was active for barely a year but illustrates a pattern of Home Office-backed media companies targeting minority communities.

RICU has also partnered with Horizon PR, a public relations firm created as a joint venture between M&C Saatchi and Breakthrough Media, both existing Home Office contractors.<sup>186</sup> A Saatchi spokesperson told the Guardian that the venture had been set up to provide PR help to civil society organisations that want to "drive positive social change". However, journalists contacting the PR firm about its civil society clients were not told of the Home Office connections. Breakthrough Media also acknowledged that making these links explicit would undermine the credibility of groups they work with and undermine the Home Office's reputation.

Little is known about which Horizon PR clients were linked to PREVENT or RICU. One poorly redacted FOI response gave some insight into the relationships. A request for communications between RICU and Horizon returned an email from the PR agency to Home Office staff about press work some third-party organisations were doing.

The founder of Odara, a women's support group in Birmingham, took part in the filming of a 2017 BBC current affairs programme. This fact was reported to both the local PREVENT PR teams and Home Office officials, as was the participation of the Spearhead Trust – a community group described internally as a PREVENT group "countering far-right

<sup>185</sup> Uk Counter-Terror Programmeme Targeted Bame Women Using Instagram Influencers, Middle East Eye, 9th June 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uk-prevent-stoosh-bame-women-instagram-influencers>

<sup>186</sup> Inside RICU, The Shadowy Propaganda Unit Inspired By The Cold War, The Guardian, 2nd May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/02/inside-ricu-the-shadowy-propaganda-unit-inspired-by-the-cold-war>

activity”.<sup>187</sup>

Although this email represents only a snapshot of the links between officials and RICU’s contractors, it underlines the Home Office’s close supervision of groups that appear to be independent. The impact of this is that people will lose faith in community groups if they suspect government interference in their messaging and supposedly independent organisations will be seen as little more than fronts for the government of the day.

Subtly funding or providing operation support to organisations pushing government-approved messages is a common Home Office tactic, even outside of RICU. Muslim online lifestyle platform SuperSisters was also found in 2019 to be accepting Home Office funding from a different pot of counter-extremism cash. Described as a “global platform for young Muslimahs in east London to share and create inspiring and empowering content”, the platform quietly took money from the Building a Stronger Britain Together programme.<sup>188</sup> Although not under PREVENT and strictly not part of RICU, the goals and tactics are similar and are indicative of a pattern of secretive funding of groups catering to minorities.

Even with RICU’s declining budget, the existence of a shadowy team in the Home Office that exists to push government messaging by providing support to ostensibly independent organisations or setting up flash social media pages with a pretence of authenticity poses a threat to free speech and democracy. Though more proactive than the other disinformation units, RICU operates on the same spectrum, existing to shape the debate and artificially elevate certain narratives. Despite attempting to justify this kind of activity by pointing to the threat of terrorism, it appears that RICU has repeatedly targeted minority communities to push an approved worldview. In a democracy, this is alarming and underlines both the threat to freedom from these opaque units and a serious disregard for genuine diversity in the UK.

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187 Freedom of Information Request to the Home Office, FOI56495, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/horizon\\_may\\_2017](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/horizon_may_2017)

188 “We Acknowledge We Went Wrong”: Lifestyle Website For Muslim Teens Admits It Should Have Been Clearer About Home Office Funding, The Guardian, 15th September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/sep/15/lifestyle-website-for-muslim-teens-is-covertly-funded-by-the-home-office>



Ministry  
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# Policy analysis

# Policy analysis – Counter disinformation units

As has been examined in this report, the government’s three domestic counter-disinformation units are tasked with monitoring the timelines of social media users here in the UK, flagging “misleading” content<sup>189</sup> to tech platforms and requesting enforcement action. These units are the Counter-Disinformation Unit (CDU) in DCMS, Research, the Intelligence and Communications Unit (RICU) in the Home Office and the Cabinet Office’s Rapid Response Unit (RRU), The Foreign Office also runs the Government Intelligence Cell [GIC] which looks abroad at content around the war in Ukraine. Between them these units violate the right to free expression and undermine due process. Limitations on speech should be defined in law, and what speech is permissible should not be at the whim of secretive Whitehall units. There remains little clarity or transparency around the work of these teams. The British public have a right to know who is responsible for any Government interference with speech online.

The immense power of the internet has made the world a smaller place. Instantaneous global communication helps keep us connected and means that information and speech are more democratised than ever before. Yet around the world, governments are realising that centralised systems of social media offer the ability to control speech in an equally unprecedented way. Whether through legislation or more direct means, such as those discussed in this report, governments of all stripes are turning to compliant corporations to act as extensions of the state and are harnessing their immense power over human interconnectedness to shape narratives and control our conversations.

In 2021 the Indian government, led by Narendra Modi, leant on Twitter to take down tweets which were critical of its pandemic response. Then in a brazen act of censorship, the same administration later demanded the platform suspend hundreds of accounts which had posted content about the country’s farming protests, even threatening Twitter executives with jail sentences unless they complied.<sup>190</sup> The move rightly prompted condemnation around world.

In the US a “Disinformation Governance Board” set up by the Biden Administration and based in the Department for Homeland Security was “paused” after its establishment prompted a backlash amidst concerns that it would encourage censorship online<sup>191</sup>.

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189 Patel, P.HC, Home Office Questions, Hansard, vol. 689, col. 6, 8 February 2021, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-02-08/debates/5F2F0112-3889-4D9A-85E5-019CA14CBD>

190 Dixit, P. Twitter Unblocked Accounts That Criticized India’s Government. Now, Its Employees Are Being Threatened With Jail Time Unless It Blocks Them Again, BuzzFeed, 3 February 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/pranavdixit/india-threatens-twitter-jail>

191 US homeland security pauses new disinformation board amid criticism, The Guardian, 19 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/19/homeland-security-disinformation-board-nina-jankowicz-resigns>



Yet here in the UK, with little Parliamentary questioning and no civil society resistance, teams of unaccountable civil servants facilitate acts of censorship online every day. This cannot stand.

Below is an analysis of the rights considerations around the activities of the CDU, the Government Information Cell (GIC), RRU and RICU - in particular where the rights to freedom of speech and privacy are under attack as a consequence of work that they do.

## **A note on the meaning of “disinformation”**

The term disinformation has grown to become a prominent part of the political lexicon in modern times. According to a dictionary definition, disinformation is “false information spread in order to deceive people.”<sup>192</sup> Meanwhile misinformation is defined as “wrong information, or the fact that people are misinformed.”<sup>193</sup> Neither telling falsehoods, nor being objectively incorrect are new concepts, yet these particular terms grew in prominence in the 2010s amidst growing concerns that state actors had begun using large social media platforms to press certain narratives and even influence elections in liberal democracies.

The term “disinformation” evokes the idea of powerful malign actors running deceitful propaganda campaigns. However, the word often featured prominently during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as a catch-all label for the emergence of verifiable falsehoods and un-evidenced theories about, amongst other things, the virus itself.

As the term disinformation has featured more prominently in the media, so the malleability of the word has increased. In recent years the BBC has established a team of journalists looking at so-called “disinformation” and created the new role of “Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent”<sup>194</sup> focusing predominantly on what were previously known as conspiracy theories.

Political parties have accused their opponents of spreading “disinformation” in order to discredit their opponents’ arguments.<sup>195</sup> Meanwhile certain ideas branded as “misinformation” have become recognised as legitimate lines of inquiry by the authorities. One prominent example of this came from the White House opening an investigation into the possibility that the COVID-19 virus originated in a lab,<sup>196</sup> a concept which had previously

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192 Definition of “disinformation”, Cambridge Dictionary Online, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/disinformation>

193 Definition of “misinformation”, Cambridge Dictionary Online, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/misinformation>

194 Marianna Spring, Twitter, 9 August 2022, <https://twitter.com/mariannaspring/status/1556911930090180608>

195 Allegretti, A. Labour calls for UK crackdown on tech firms over anti-vax content, 29 December 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/29/labour-calls-for-uk-crackdown-on-tech-firms-over-anti-vax-content>

196 Senior Biden officials finding that COVID-19 lab leak theory as credible as natural origins explanation, CNN, 16 July 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/16/politics/biden-intel-review-COVID-19->

been labelled as a conspiracy theory and was actively suppressed on Facebook<sup>197</sup>.

As the term disinformation is re-purposed, the more it drifts from its original meaning of wilfully spreading a known falsehood. The danger is that it increasingly becomes a weapon in febrile political debates to discredit rhetoric, delegitimise opponents or even attempt to suppress and censor their arguments.

Any actor that is successfully able to brand information as false has real power over their political opponents. It is noteworthy that the term disinformation and concerns about the veracity of information in the public domain have risen to prominence in a period where speech is more democratised than ever and people are interconnected through online intermediaries making communication, publicly and privately, easier. This is despite it being widely recognised that in recent decades state actors have initiated wars of aggression based on falsehoods and major media outlets have published known mistruths in order to sell their product.

While certain truths are evergreen, few actors can reasonably claim to act as an absolute arbiter of truth, and expression should not be limited based on its veracity alone. Moreover, where citizens do not incite violence, defame others or infringe upon other rights, the right to speak freely has never been a right conditional on being aligned to proclamations of truth or the consensus of authorities. One of the many reasons that freedom of speech is vital to the continuation of a free society is that it allows ideas to be developed through discussion and debate. Censorship on the basis of accuracy alone threatens to stymie the epistemic process, which allows knowledge to develop and sees it put to the test in a marketplace of ideas.

It is with the evolving definition of disinformation in mind, as an increasingly politically charged concept, that we should examine the extra-judicial activities of secretive government units (in particular, the Counter-Disinformation Unit) which are tasked with poring over our digital expression and pressing for the censorship of speech deemed “misleading”<sup>198</sup> or “inappropriate”.<sup>199</sup>

## Violations of the right to freedom of expression

The right to freedom of speech is protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The European Convention on Human Rights is clear that interferences with these rights are only lawful where they are provided by law, necessary

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[origins/index.html](#)

197 Lima, C. Facebook no longer treating 'man-made' COVID-19 as a crackpot idea, Politico, 26 May 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/26/facebook-ban-COVID-19-man-made-491053>

198 HC, Home Office Questions, Hansard, vol. 689, col. 6, 8 February 2021, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-02-08/debates/5F2F0112-3889-4D9A-85E5-019CA14CBD>

199 HC Deb. 14 June 2022, Col. 408

and proportionate.<sup>200</sup> The presumption must rest in favour of protecting these rights and interference with them should come as a last resort.

At least three of the previously discussed government units flag online material to social media companies for review and removal. According to ministers, the stated aim of the Counter Disinformation Unit is to “monitor social media firms and sites for disinformation and then to take action and work with social media firms to take it down”.<sup>201</sup>

It is important to note that this body has not been authorised by an act of parliament and has no formal judicial or law enforcement function. The material in question which is targeted for removal may be entirely lawful and is targeted at the discretion of unaccountable civil servants.

In private correspondence to MPs, seen by Big Brother Watch, ministers have confirmed that the flagging and requested removal of pieces of content is “in line with their (social media companies’) terms of services”.

This is deeply problematic given that the terms of service model is primarily intended for the economic benefit of the platforms themselves and their own legal protection, rather than to protect the interests and freedoms of their users. Many large online intermediaries set community guidelines, or rules that govern their sites, in ways which limit free expression significantly more than either domestic UK law or internationally recognised human rights standards.

To give just one example, video-sharing giant YouTube, owned by Google, recognise “veteran status” (i.e. former members of the armed forces) as a protected group under its “Hate speech policy.”<sup>202</sup> Not only is this out of step with UK law which recognises certain groups as having “protected characteristics”, but it creates human rights problems of its own. Given that the armed forces largely have a monopoly on lethal force, recognising veterans as a protected group threatens to give them immunity from criticism for past transgressions during their time in the military and could even result in the censorship of videos that document crimes on the part of the forces.

The Cabinet Office’s response to freedom of information requests submitted by Big Brother Watch regarding the work of its Rapid Response Unit indicated that the online expression being flagged for removal was not expression that raised any legal concerns, as it was not reported to law enforcement. The Cabinet Office said that:

*a) In April 2020, the Rapid Response Unit notified social media companies on 6 occasions*

200 The Human Rights Act, EHRC, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights/human-rights-act>

201 HC Deb. 21 June 2022, Col. 508

202 Hate speech policy, YouTube Community Guidelines, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2801939?hl=en-GB>

about content that potentially breached their Terms of Service and recommended their removal if so.

b) For all of these, content or accounts were subsequently removed, either by social media companies or by the users themselves.

c) The Rapid Response Unit did not share any content removal recommendations with law enforcement.<sup>203</sup>

It is not the role of the state to help social media companies uphold their terms of use. Nor should the state play a role in censoring of citizens' lawful speech.

Discussing the role of private intermediaries as censors in a report in 2016, the then UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression noted:

*"States bear a primary responsibility to protect and respect the right to exercise freedom of opinion and expression. In the information and communication technology context, this means that States must not require or otherwise pressure the private sector to take steps that unnecessarily or disproportionately interfere with freedom of expression, whether through laws, policies, or extralegal means."*<sup>204</sup>

That unaccountable government bodies are assisting with the censorship of expression that is not prescribed by law means these actions by the Counter Disinformation Unit, RICU and the Rapid Response Unit clearly interfere with the right to free expression protected by Article 10 of the ECHR.

## Extra-judicial censorship

None of the four bodies previously discussed in this report has a statutory basis. Nor do they have any formal law enforcement role. In fact, as previously discussed, Big Brother Watch research shows that the online expression being dealt with by bodies such as the Counter Disinformation and Rapid Response Units is predominantly lawful.

Article 10 of the ECHR sets out that member states' interferences with the right to freedom of expression should be provided by law, however with the Counter Disinformation, RICU and the Rapid Response Unit this is clearly not the case.

Through bodies such as the CDU, the government has created opaque agencies which increasingly use social media companies as an extension of the state, using these online intermediaries to police online speech on their behalf. Though the speech in question may

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203 Freedom of Information Act Request to the Cabinet Office, FOI2021/03168, 5 March 2021  
204 Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, 11 May 2016, A/HRC/32/38 p. 22, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/095/12/PDF/G1609512.pdf?OpenElement>

violate these online intermediaries' terms of use, this itself is not a legitimate cause for state interference with free expression. It is also concerning that decisions about which pieces of online speech are flagged to platforms are purely at the discretion of the civil servants operating the units. There are no publicly available parameters which set out which types of expression should be flagged to the platforms and an entirely unacceptable absence of clear due process.

Speaking about the censorship capacities of RICU, Secretary of State for Defence Ben Wallace said:

“If memory serves me right, it has taken down hundreds of thousands of pieces of material.”

Whilst the Minister also clarified that the unit in question was working closely with police and anti-terror teams, the proportion of these take-downs that were made up of lawful expression is not clear. Even if the material in question relates to groups or individuals who have committed terror-related offences or are under suspicion of doing so, it is vital that due process is followed in a clear and transparent manner.

This kind of unchallenged promotion of executive-led censorship, without due process, has become common from government ministers as they seek to laud their own records at tackling societal ills online. However, the fact that Ministers have been able to boast of this kind of censorship in plain sight in the House of Commons, without consequence, is a damning indictment on the state of freedom of speech in the UK.

This is extra-judicial state censorship and should not be tolerated in a liberal democracy like the UK.

## **Violations of the right to privacy**

The right to privacy is protected by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Interferences with this right must be in accordance with the law and should be necessary and proportionate. The presumption must rest in favour of protecting these rights and interference with them should come as a last resort.

The work of the CDU, RICU, the RRU and GIC involves facilitating the removal of so-called disinformation, shaping narratives, monitoring online trends, and, to an extent, promoting government propaganda online. In order to perform these activities, particularly where these bodies undertake extra-judicial censorship functions, these agencies will monitor the digital conversations of UK citizens. When bodies such as the CDU are instructed to (in the words of one minister) “identify misinformation and work with social media firms

to get it taken down”<sup>205</sup>, the surveillance of citizens’ online expression will be required on a significant scale. As Big Brother Watch research has found, that has included monitoring the expression of high-profile figures, including democratically elected politicians, journalists and human rights campaigners, on discussions regarding public policy.

Censorship and surveillance are inextricably linked. The democratisation of speech via large online intermediaries, which now act as our modern public squares, has made ever more human interaction and expression freely available for authorities to view. As Privacy International has noted:

*“Whereas surveillance was historically aimed at private conversations taking place on the telephone, in the modern era, a vast portion of the expressive power of citizens is channeled through surveilable channels, including not only private one-to-one conversations, but books, magazines, conversations between groups, outlines and finished works, family records, library searches, radio shows, live video and digitized historical cultural artefacts. Modern technology increases access to all of these items and more, at the risk of making all such access knowable by powerful state actors.”<sup>206</sup>*

In the absence of due process and transparency, it is not clear how much online expression is being identified by the CDU, RICU and the RRU for removal. Whilst the areas of interest may be self-evident in each case, for example RICU may take interest in expression designated as extremist, the scale of both surveillance and censorship is not known.

As research on the CDU by Big Brother Watch has shown, Ministers assert that online expression need only contravene social media companies’ terms of use to be flagged for removal. Whether bodies like the CDU use automated technology in an attempt to find all pieces of online expression that break disinformation rules on platforms’ sites or target specific posts that break such rules, remains to be seen. Both approaches would be deeply problematic, presenting either mass suspicionless surveillance or targeted political surveillance of individuals’ lawful activities.

The absence of information about the work of these government units can only lead us to speculate on the scale and nature of surveillance that is taking place. What is clear is that where this surveillance is not limited, proportionate or set out in law it is likely to constitute a significant interference with the right to privacy.

## **Lack of transparency**

Very little information has been voluntarily published by the Government about the bodies

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205 HC Deb. 14 June 2022, col 409

206 Two sides of the same coin – the right to privacy and freedom of expression, Privacy International, 2018, <https://privacyinternational.org/blog/1111/two-sides-same-coin-right-privacy-and-freedom-expression>

discussed in this report. As previously mentioned, none of the units is based on a statutory footing nor established through primary legislation. Given that the work of the CDU, GIC, RRU and RICU engage human rights that are protected in UK law, these opaque operating styles are likely to be deliberate.

In the case of RICU, in effect a Government propaganda unit set up to counteract extremism and primarily Islamist fundamentalism, the unit uses a suite of PR agencies as subsidiaries to spread its messages.<sup>207</sup> This means that the government officials driving RICU's public relation campaigns are hidden from sight.

This approach is only likely to perpetuate distrust in the state amongst the minority groups RICU intends to engage with. Although references to the existence of the unit can be found in Home Office material online, no singular web page sets out the work of the unit, despite it operating outside of the UK's security and law enforcement agencies.

This opaque approach is not unique to RICU. There is no central source of information about the Government's Rapid Response Unit, despite the recording of various ministerial boasts about its censorship capabilities in Hansard. However, officials have been willing to disclose budgets and staffing numbers to this particular unit when requested through freedom of information requests.

When the Counter Disinformation Unit was stood up to "crack down on [the] spread of false coronavirus information online,"<sup>208</sup> the Government published a single web page, setting out the functions of the body. However, the amount of information disclosed is limited and written in the style of a press release. A comprehensive overview of the interaction between the CDU and the RRU is not set out.

Despite these limitations, officials have continuously stonewalled Big Brother Watch's attempts to find out more information about the unit. This is entirely unacceptable given the fact that the work of the Counter Disinformation Unit has a direct bearing on the right to freedom of expression in the UK. Carrying out activity of this kind without any reasonable public transparency is entirely unacceptable.

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207 Cobain, I., Ross, A., Evans, R., and Mahmood, M. Inside Ricu, the shadowy propaganda unit inspired by the cold war, The Guardian, 2 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/02/inside-ricu-the-shadowy-propaganda-unit-inspired-by-the-cold-war>

208 Government cracks down on spread of false coronavirus information online, Government press release, 30 March 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-spread-of-false-coronavirus-information-online>



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# Recommendations



# Recommendations

During a debate on the Online Safety Bill in the House of Commons, the then Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy, Chris Philp said “as far as I am aware we intend to continue with the counter-disinformation unit over the current spending review period. Clearly, I cannot commit future Ministers in perpetuity, but my personal view—if I am allowed to express it—is that that unit performs a useful function and could valuably be continued into the future.”<sup>209</sup>

This path is irreconcilable with upholding the right to freedom of expression in the UK.

As this report has demonstrated, the growing existence of censorship and surveillance units should concern anyone who believes in the importance of rights, freedoms and also following due process, something that is integral to maintaining liberal democracy.

Through bodies such as the CDU, RICU and the RRU, the Government are using unaccountable teams of civil servants to extra-judicially censor lawful expression online. Not only is this a violation of the right to freedom of expression but as evidence in this report has shown, in order to perform these censorship functions, the units in question also have to engage in significant levels of surveillance.

in light of our findings, Big Brother Watch makes the following recommendations to protect the rights to freedom of speech and privacy in the UK:

- **The Counter-Disinformation Unit (CDU) and Rapid Response Unit (RRU) have over-extended their remits and secretly surveilled and suppressed domestic political dissent without justification. The CDU and RRU should be shut down immediately.**
- **The Cabinet Office, DCMS, Foreign Office and the Home Office should be open and transparent about the past work of bodies such as the CDU, GIC, RICU and the RRU. Continuous attempts to obstruct information about these units from becoming public must end. In particular, the Government must inform the public about the size and resourcing of these bodies and the amount of material they have flagged for removal since their inception.**
- **The Cabinet Office, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Home Office and Ministry of Defence should cease their warrantless domestic political surveillance and extra-judicial censorship activities.**

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209 HC Deb. 14 June 2022, col 409

- It is not the job of the Government to facilitate private companies upholding their terms of service. Any Government correspondence with an online intermediary regarding specific pieces of lawful content on their site should be made public.
- Any government body or agency which uses commercial advertising techniques for the purposes of initiating behavioural change amongst the UK population should publish an annual report which details these activities in full.



Ministry  
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# Legal commentary by Gavin Millar KC

# Ministry of Truth: a legal commentary by Gavin Millar KC

## *Introduction*

1. This Big Brother Watch report raises serious concerns about the rights to freedom of expression and privacy of internet users, and in particular elected politicians, journalists and academics.

2. In our democracy these rights are broadly defined. Freedom of expression, at common law and under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, is the right to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas, without interference by the state. The right to privacy can be engaged where the state systematically collects and stores information about a person. This can be so even where the information is, or contains, publicly available information.<sup>1</sup>

3. Each right is qualified, not absolute. This means that the state can justify interfering with it in certain, limited circumstances. For an interference with the right to be lawful, however, it must meet three requirements, namely: be prescribed by law, pursue a legally recognised legitimate aim and be necessary in a democratic society. These requirements are considered below in the context of the executive powers exercised by the units in the four government departments discussed in the report.

4. The principal concern in the case of each right is the lack of transparency about the activities of the units, and how they impact on the rights.

5. But some things are clear. The report indicates that the units:

- a. Are well resourced in terms of finance and personnel, including the use of paid contractors;
- b. Search for and monitor lawful speech online, and in particular domestic political speech that criticises and dissents from government policy. In some instances it appears that content that might embarrass the government or damage the political reputations of government ministers is identified by the units. Articles on the websites of mainstream media outlets appear to have been targeted as well as social media content of politicians, academics and commentators;
- c. Compile analysis of and reports about the same for consideration and action across government;

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<sup>1</sup> R (Gatt) v Association of Chief Police Officers [2015] AC 1065 [5]

- d. May act against the content by flagging it to tech platforms for review and enforcement action in the form of take-down or manipulation of search results to suppress the content. It appears that as government entities the units have either formal or informal “trusted flagger” status with service providers such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. This makes it more likely that enforcement action will be taken at the request of government. The lack of transparency surrounding the work of the units means that it is unclear what other measures may be pursued against identified content.

6. It is also unclear exactly how the online content is searched for and identified. But generally, this appears to be by reference to themes and/or words/phrases and/or the individual publisher, combined with the reach/popularity of the content. A high-profile dissenting politician or political commentator, especially if their publication has a wide reach, may be targeted. The tools used to identify content are not known. Nor are the total quantities or full range of information reviewed.

### ***Freedom of expression***

7. The concept of an interference with a person’s right to freedom of expression is flexible. A case-by-case examination of situations which may have a restrictive impact on the enjoyment of freedom of expression is required, to identify interferences. Has this person’s right been restricted as a result of this general or particular state practice or measure? This may happen because the measure tends to inhibit how people express themselves. They may tend to self-censor to avoid being affected by the measure. This is often referred to as the “chilling effect” of a state measure interfering with freedom of speech.

8. State action to block or restrict internet communication is capable of being an interference with free speech.<sup>2</sup> And general state measures that restrict freedom of expression on the internet should be subject to review by the courts for their legality, taking into account their effect on all internet users.<sup>3</sup>

9. The right is to receive information and ideas, as well as to disseminate them. So, when internet communication is restricted the rights of recipients of the content are interfered with as well as those of the publisher.

10. For an interference with freedom of speech to be lawful:

- a. A visible and clear legal basis is required: The law which allows the state to interfere must be accessible to the public and formulated in a way that enables a person to foresee what consequences their conduct (ie their expression) may have. This requirement seeks to prevent arbitrary executive action against expression. It is

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2 Ahmet Yildirim v Turkey 3111/10 18 December 2012 [55] and [67]

3 Kharitonov v Russia 10795/14 23 June 2020 [45]

a requirement under Article 10 of the Convention. But a similar principle applies to discretionary state powers in our domestic public law. Here, our courts impose what is known as a “duty of prescription” on government. This requires prescriptive policy guidance to be issued publicly to prevent inconsistent or arbitrary use of such powers.<sup>4</sup>

- b. A legally permissible aim is required: The only permissible (ie legitimate) aims of a measure interfering with freedom of expression are
- *the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety*
  - *the prevention of disorder or crime*
  - *the protection health or morals*
  - *the protection of the reputation or rights of others*
  - *preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence*
  - *maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.*

In each case where freedom of expression is interfered with the state should indicate which of these aims the measure is said to pursue, and establish that was indeed the aim as a matter of fact.

- c. The restriction must be necessary in a democratic society: For a restrictive measure to be necessary in democratic society it must meet a pressing social need and be proportionate in its adverse effect on free speech to the aim to be achieved. This means that it should not restrict the speech more than is necessary. Certain types of speech are strongly protected against interference, both at common law and under the Convention. These include speech on political matters and journalistic expression in the public interest.<sup>5</sup> Expression by academics publishing research and by bloggers is also strongly protected.<sup>6</sup> In these cases, cogent justification for any interference with the free speech right is required. State action amounting to a form of censorship intended to discourage the press from expressing criticism on a subject of public interest and concern is unlikely to be justifiable.<sup>7</sup>

11. It seems clear from the report that the activities of these units have caused interferences with the right to freedom of expression on the internet. Not least of all in cases where government flagging content to service providers has caused it to be taken down or suppressed. The secrecy surrounding the activities of units means that the precise nature and extent of these, and possibly other, interferences is not known. But the scale of the operations suggests that there will have been many such cases in which justification for the government’s action is required. It is regrettable that these matters have only come

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4 R (ZLL) v SoSHCLG [2022] EWHC 85 (Admin) [7]  
5 Stoll v Switzerland App No 69698/01 10 December 2007 [102]  
6 Magyar Helsinki v Hungary App No 18030/11 8 November 2016 [168].  
7 Bedat v Switzerland App No. [56925/08](#), 29 March 2016

to light, to the extent that they have through the work of Big Brother Watch, by individuals making Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Act 2018 (“DPA”/“SARs”) of government departments – to establish whether particular pieces of their online output has been targeted and to what effect.

12. In many of these cases the interference is likely to have been unlawful as failing to meet one or more of the three requirements discussed above. This is for the following reasons relating to each one.

- a. A legal basis?: The basis and scope of any legal powers being exercised is unstated. So that at present it is not possible for people to foresee what content may be targeted, reviewed and acted against, and in what way. Government departments have common law powers which they can use in support of their statutory functions. These might, in legal theory, allow them to act lawfully against particular pieces of online expression and/or those posting the content. But there is no case for shrouding the existence and use of such powers in secrecy, absent concerns about national security or criminality or the like, in respect of the speech in issue. And no such concerns appear to apply to most of the material considered in the report. There is a strong suspicion that the secrecy is because the powers are being used in an arbitrary way and the interferences with free speech take unknown forms, which the departments want to keep secret. A clear set of guiding principles and rules for the use of these powers should have been published indicating how citizens can expect them to be used. And those whose content is subject to any significant restrictions should have been notified so that they could challenge the exercise of the powers. They should not have to guess about what is happening and seek information under the DPA.
- b. Impermissible aims: It is difficult to see what legitimate aim could apply to the targeting of much of the content identified in the report. It seems likely that that in many cases the government would be unable to make out a legitimate aim for any interference with the right. Suppressing lawful political opinion, opposition or dissent is not a legitimate aim. Yet the cases discussed in the report suggests that this type of content has often been targeted by the units. Ostensibly the aim appears to be countering misinformation, ie harmful false narratives. But the evidence suggests dissenting narratives, rather than false or harmful ones are being targeted. Big Brother Watch and the subjects of the SARs have managed to identify examples of this. But these are likely only the tip of the iceberg. The scale of the units’ operations identified in the report suggests that there will have been many more cases of this sort.
- c. The action taken against the speech: In a case where there is a legitimate aim in the state acting against the content, the interference would still have to be necessary

and proportionate to the aim. This is again a case specific question – was there a pressing social need to take this action against this content to achieve that aim? Because of the secrecy surrounding the work of the units very few cases are known about, and the actions taken in those cases are unclear. But in the absence of any clear, published guidance about the use of state power by the units there is no reason to believe that they conducted their activities respecting this important principle. Now that the activities of the units are visible they have the potential to chill public interest speech online. This makes it even more important that the basis and scope of the powers being exercised is clearly set out in published documents. And that such published guidance and rules respect freedom of expression principles.

### **Privacy**

13. A person's right to privacy under Article 8 of the Convention may be engaged where the state collects, records and uses data about them. Where this is so the practice or measure has to be justified in order to be lawful. Essentially the same three requirements apply: the interference with the privacy right must have a clear and foreseeable legal basis, must pursue a legitimate aim and must be necessary in a democratic society. The legitimate aims for an interference with this right are:

- *the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country*
- *the prevention of disorder or crime*
- *the protection health or morals*
- *the protection of the reputation or rights of others.*

14. Public information, such as material the person has published, can fall within the scope of private life where it is systematically collected and stored in files held by the government in retrievable form, so that a record of it for that person comes into existence.<sup>8</sup> Though limited collection of a person's social media content, even content expressing their political opinions, may not engage the right to privacy.<sup>9</sup>

15. The secrecy surrounding the activities of the four units means that it is unclear to what extent they compile retrievable digital records on individuals and, if so, what they comprise.

16. But the issue of compliance with these aspects of our privacy law is an important one. It is of great concern that the position remains unclear. Particularly where substantial government resources are clear being used to monitor social media content of particular individuals, to the extent indicated by the report. This creates a suspicion that such records are being compiled. Therefore, transparency is need so that the legal issues

<sup>8</sup> Catt (above) [5] and [6]

<sup>9</sup> R (Butt) v Secretary of State [2019] 1 WLR 3873



can be addressed properly. As emphasised above there are no apparent concerns about national security or criminality or the like, in respect of most of the material considered in the report.

17. So, there is no case for continued secrecy and the departments should now make clear to Parliament and the public the full extent of the activities of these units. They should also address the obvious concerns that arise about the fairness and lawfulness of the processing of personal data that is involved. In particular, the report makes clear that “special category” personal data revealing political and/or philosophical beliefs is being processed.<sup>10</sup> For this to be lawful, it must be justified by reference to strict statutory conditions set out in sections 10 and 11 of the Data Protection Act 2018. Such justification does not appear to be present in a number of the cases discussed in the report. Data protection law requires data processors, like these government units, to produce a “Data Processing Impact Assessment” (“DPIA”) where there is potential or their processing to have a widespread or serious impact on individual data subjects. The processing by the units has this potential and the government departments concerned should be required to produce DPIAs for their activities.

#### **GAVIN MILLAR KC**

#### **Matrix**

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10 See Article 9.1 of the General Data Protection Regulation.



**BIG BROTHER WATCH**  
Defending Civil Liberties, Protecting Privacy