



# Government action on social media during the pandemic – evidence review



**Malcolm Huffy**

Director of Legal & Policy

Friday, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2023

LINX 120



# Controversy around social media monitoring and censorship

## Rapid Response Unit moves in

**Watchdog to probe secretive unit which monitored social media posts criticising Covid-19 policies**

**Army spied on lockdown critics:**

**Sceptics, including our own Peter**

**Hitchens, long suspected to be**

**under surveillance. Now we**

**obtained official records that prove**

**they were right all along**

• Military operatives were part of an operation that targeted politicians and

**Oliver Dowden led secret unit to stamp out lockdown dissent during pandemic**

**David Davis says secret unit that targeted lockdown dissent should be shut down**

Politics  
**Army 'monitoring of UK citizens' social media posts' to be investigated, Ben Wallace says**

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**Cabinet Office is forced to apologise to Julia Hartley-Brewer after government documents unlawfully described the TalkTV presenter as a 'known vaccine sceptic'**

• The Cabinet Office has admitted the report was shared with 64 British officials  
JMAIL JAFFER POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT



## Three UK bodies

- Rapid Reaction Unit
  - 2018-2022
  - Communications monitoring
- Counter Disinformation Unit
  - 2019-present
  - To “understand scope” of mis-information and “take appropriate action”
- 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade
  - Military unit for information warfare
  - Deploys 'non-lethal engagement and legitimate non-military levers as a means to adapt behaviours of adversaries'





## Rapid Reaction Unit

- Based in Cabinet Office
- Part of Communications Unit
- Established 2018, disbanded 2022
- Remit: monitoring and information sharing within government
- No known records of direct contact with social media companies...
- ...closely linked with official government communications output
- Known to make referrals to US State Department unit “Global Engagement Centre”





## Counter Disinformation Unit

- Established in 2019 within DCMS
  - Now part of DSIT
  - Activities “can include”
    - “Postings on social media” rebutting misinformation
    - “Awareness raising campaigns to promote the facts”, and
    - “working with social media companies to encourage them to promote authoritative sources of information and consistently **enforce their terms of service**”
- Source: Factsheet, [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)
- Focus on public health, public safety and national security
  - Examples:
    - Covid-19
    - Ukraine

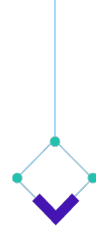




## 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade

- 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade is a curious mix of different elements:
  - 6<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence Battalion includes 3 MI companies that, from the web site, appear to be traditional MI.
  - Honourable Artillery Company is a mix of forward support reconnaissance and ceremonial roles
  - 5<sup>th</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Information Operations Taskforce.
  - 101<sup>st</sup> IOTF includes Strategic Communications planning, Narrative Assessment and Industry Standard Broadcast, Print and Social Media, with artist and graphic design specialists.
  - 101<sup>st</sup> recruitment target skillsets include journalism, marketing and communications, social media and digital influence, IT & AI, and academic research into information and misinformation.





## 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade – recently unpublished

- Organised into four Groups:
  - Task Group, Information Activities Group, Outreach Group and The Staff Corps
- Task Group provides the deployable framework to deliver Information Activity and Outreach (IA&O) either independently, or in support of a composite force package. It is formed predominantly of regulars and is ready to deploy at short-notice.
- Primarily made up of Army Reservists and Specialists, Information Activities Group (IAG) collects, analyses and produces media content across a broad range of channels. IAG challenges conventional thinking and offers novel and contemporary perspectives to the Information Environment. They understand advise on and shape narratives. They also offer support to Defence Strategic Communications in media, cultural and narrative understanding.





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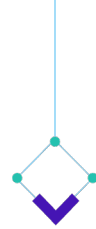




## 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade – recently unpublished

- **Web Ops Team.** The Web Ops Team collects information and understands audience sentiment in the virtual domain. Within the extant OSINT policy framework, they may engage with audiences in order to influence perceptions to support operational outcomes.
- **Production Team.** The Production Team design and create video, audio, print and digital products that aim to influence behaviours for both the Army and external audience. Additionally, they advise on campaign strategy and propose innovative behavioural change methods.

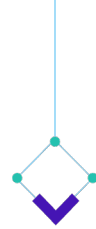




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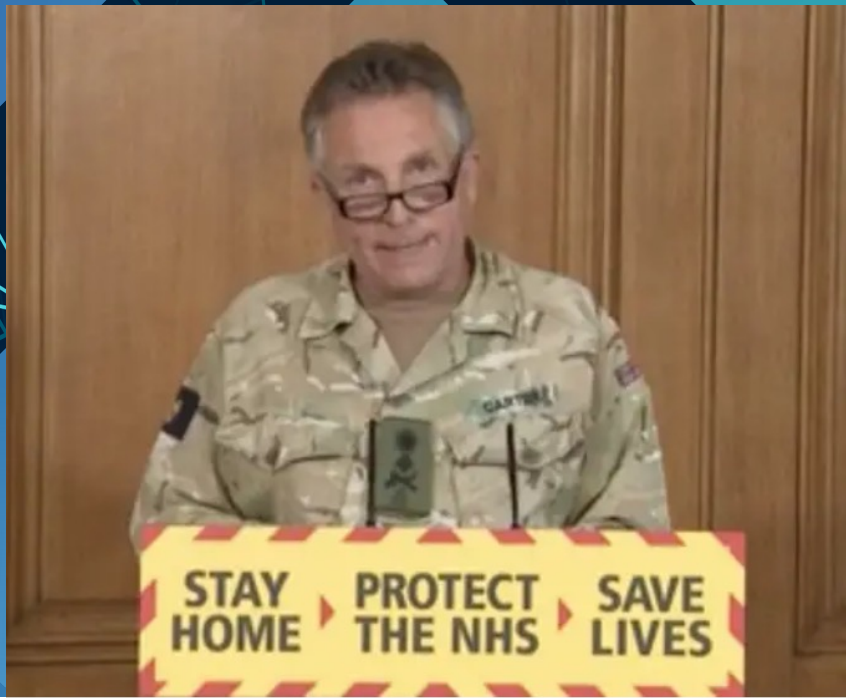




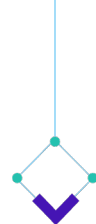
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On 22 April, the Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Nick Carter, took part in the daily Downing Street Press Conference for updates on the United Kingdom's response to COVID-19. In doing so, he confirmed that 77th Brigade was supporting the Cabinet Office Rapid Response Unit to 'quash rumours from misinformation but also to counter disinformation' about the pandemic. Given the reports on previous 77th Brigade activities, this could involve their own social media accounts disseminating facts and known truths about the virus, as well as identifying the social media accounts to report to the social media companies, presumably via the Cabinet Office's network and relationships.



## 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade – recently unpublished

### The Staff Corps

The Staff Corps (ELSC) consists of around 120 ‘Group B Reserve’ officers who operate at predominantly chief executive, director, and senior technical or operation manager level in large commercial enterprises or organisations in the private and public sectors.

A ‘Group B’ Officer organisation, the ELSC was originally formed following the Napoleonic wars. Charles Manby, Hon Sec of the Institution of Civil Engineers, proposed the formation of a “Volunteer Engineering Staff Corps for the Arrangement of Transport of Troops and Stores, the Construction of defensive works and the destruction of other works in case of Invasion”. Thus, on 4th January 1865, the Queen accepted the services of the Engineer and Railway Staff Corps.

In 2015, the ELSC was attached to 77th Brigade for administrative, logistical and co-ordination purposes; although it answers only to the Queen. Since then it has changed its name to the Staff Corps to reflect its widening areas of specialty and expertise. The cohort has grown considerably and now boasts not only specialists in Engineering and Logistics, but also in the following areas: Technical Communications, Corporate, Stratcoms, Advertising, Marketing, Digital Commerce, Banking and Academia among others. These officers provide strategic level consultancy to a variety of areas within Defence and Government and were heavily involved in supporting OP RESCRIPT, the Govt’s response to Covid.





## Excerpt

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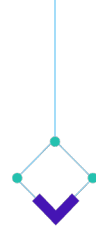




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## What did they do, and is it a matter of concern?

- Limited verifiable information or credible reports.
  - One major investigation by the Daily Telegraph, using FoI
  - Julia Hartley Brewer followed up when a Big Brother Watch investigation found she was a target, and obtained an apology from Cabinet Office.
- RRU
  - monitored Hartley-Brewer's social media accounts, flagged her as an anti-vaxer, and reported her account to US Global Engagement Centre (anti-terror social media monitoring, based in US State Department).







# Sarah Connolly

Director - Security and Online Harms at Department for  
Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)





## CDU

In remarks to MPs, unearthed by the Telegraph, Ms Connolly laid bare the extent of the Government's influence over social media.

Ms Connolly told MPs that the CDU was in contact with “almost all” social media platforms, and that discussions were “daily, sometimes hourly”.

When asked about the CDU's process for having posts removed, Ms Connolly said: “If somebody from the cell says: ‘We are worried about this,’ that goes immediately to the top of the pile. Whoever it is in whatever company.”



Her testimony suggests that the CDU takes a broad view of what qualifies as disinformation.

Addressing MPs, she said that the most concerning types of anti-vaccine material included discussions about side-effects and the speed with which it was produced.

“‘The vaccine was done too quickly’, ‘it is not safe’, those kind of narratives,” she said.



## 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade

- Then Secretary of State Ben Wallace has said 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade “is on the lookout for ... lies from abroad”

**Mr Wallace** >

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One part of the 77th Brigade’s role is to challenge disinformation, not opinion—its role is not to monitor or counter opinion, as that is about the freedom we all enjoy in our society. The 77th Brigade is on the lookout for media manipulation of misinformation or lies from abroad, and where that is found, it is flagged to the appropriate authorities. I am happy to write to the right hon. Gentleman with fuller details about what legal

- Source: Hansard

