

Army spied on lockdown critics: Sceptics, including Peter Hitchens, suspected they being watched

Military operatives in the UK's 'information warfare' brigade were part of a operation that targeted politicians and high-profile journalists who raised doubts about the official pandemic response.

By Glen Owen

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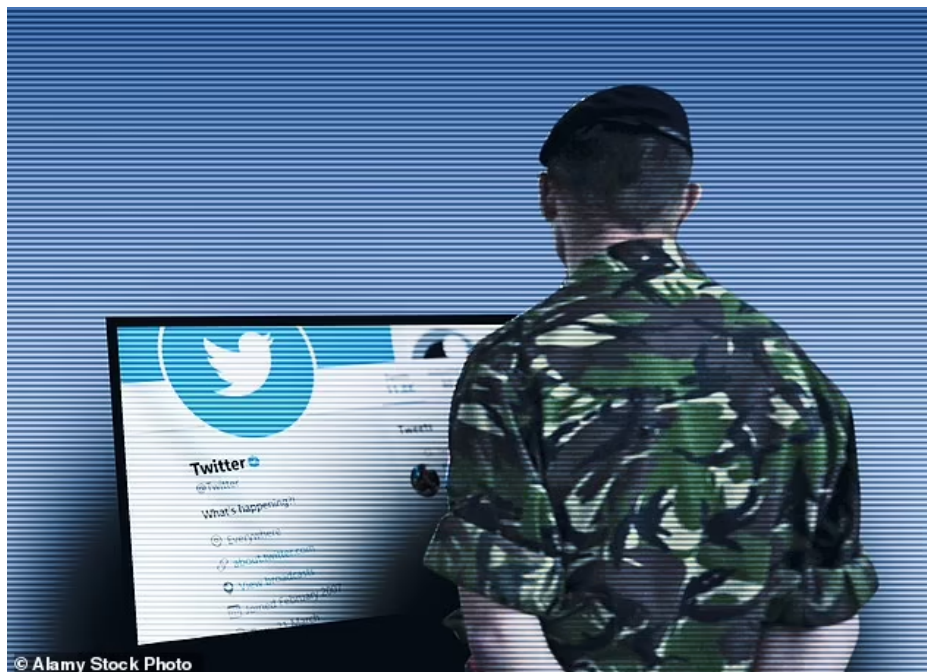
A shadowy Army unit secretly spied on British citizens who criticised the Government's Covid [lockdown](#) policies, The Mail on Sunday can reveal.

Military operatives in the UK's 'information warfare' brigade were part of a sinister operation that targeted politicians and high-profile journalists who raised doubts about the official pandemic response.

They compiled dossiers on public figures such as ex-Minister David Davis, who questioned the modelling behind alarming death toll predictions, as well as journalists such as Peter Hitchens and Toby Young. Their dissenting views were then reported back to No 10.

Documents obtained by the civil liberties group Big Brother Watch, and shared exclusively with this newspaper, exposed the work of Government cells such as the Counter Disinformation Unit, based in the

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Rapid Response Unit in the Cabinet Office.



Military operatives in the UK's 'information warfare' brigade were part of a sinister operation that targeted politicians and high-profile journalists

But the most secretive is the MoD's 77th Brigade, which deploys 'non-lethal engagement and legitimate non-military levers as a means to adapt behaviours of adversaries'.

According to a whistleblower who worked for the brigade during the lockdowns, the unit strayed far beyond its remit of targeting foreign powers.

They said that British citizens' social media accounts were scrutinised – a sinister activity that the Ministry of Defence, in public, repeatedly denied doing.

Papers show the outfits were tasked with countering 'disinformation' and 'harmful narratives... from purported experts', with civil servants and artificial intelligence deployed to 'scrape' social media for

keywords such as 'ventilators' that would have been of interest.

The information was then used to orchestrate Government responses to criticisms of policies such as the stay-at-home order, when police were given power to issue fines and break up gatherings.

It also allowed Ministers to push social media platforms to remove posts and promote Government-approved lines.



Former Cabinet Minister David Davis, a member of the Privy Council, said: 'It's outrageous that people questioning the Government's policies were subject to covert surveillance'

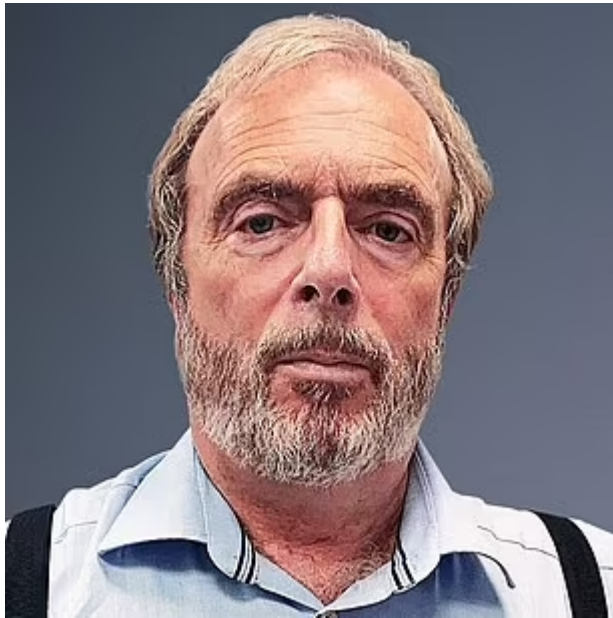
The Army whistleblower said: 'It is quite obvious that our activities resulted in the monitoring of the UK population... monitoring the social media posts of ordinary, scared people. These posts did not contain information that was untrue or co-ordinated – it was simply fear.'

Last night, former Cabinet Minister Mr Davis, a member of the Privy Council, said: 'It's outrageous

that people questioning the Government's policies were subject to covert surveillance' – and questioned the waste of public money.

Mail on Sunday journalist Mr Hitchens was monitored after sharing an article, based on leaked NHS papers, which claimed data used to publicly justify lockdown was incomplete. An internal Rapid Response Unit email said Mr Hitchens wanted to 'further [an] anti-lockdown agenda and influence the Commons vote'.

Writing today, Mr Hitchens questions if he was 'shadow-banned' over his criticisms, with his views effectively censored by being downgraded in search results.



Military operatives compiled dossiers on journalists including the Mail's Peter Hitchens

He says: 'The most astonishing thing about the great Covid panic was how many attacks the state managed to make on basic freedoms without anyone much even caring, let alone protesting.

Now is the time to demand a full and powerful investigation into the dark material Big Brother Watch

has bravely uncovered.'

The whistleblower from 77 Brigade, which uses both regular and reserve troops, said: 'I developed the impression the Government were more interested in protecting the success of their policies than uncovering any potential foreign interference, and I regret that I was a part of it. Frankly, the work I was doing should never have happened.'

The source also suggested that the Government was so focused on monitoring critics it may have missed genuine Chinese-led prolockdown campaigns.

Silkie Carlo, of Big Brother Watch, said: 'This is an alarming case of mission creep, where public money and military power have been misused to monitor academics, journalists, campaigners and MPs who criticised the Government, particularly during the pandemic.'

'The fact that this political monitoring happened under the guise of 'countering misinformation' highlights how, without serious safeguards, the concept of 'wrong information' is open to abuse and has become a blank cheque the Government uses in an attempt to control narratives online.'

'Contrary to their stated aims, these Government truth units are secretive and harmful to our democracy. The Counter Disinformation Unit should be suspended immediately and subject to a full investigation.'

A Downing Street source last night said the units had scaled back their work significantly since the end of the lockdowns.

This snooping was wrong, it hangs over my proud Army career like a black cloud

By Anonymous (Ex-77th brigade officer)

I was serving in the British Army in March 2020 when I was seconded to 77th Brigade, on the basis I would be helping root out foreign state misinformation on social media.

We were told what was legally allowed – such as 'scraping' online platforms for keywords – and what was illegal. This included repeatedly looking at a named UK individual's account without authorisation, although some people would do that from their own accounts after their shift.

We would take screenshots of tweets from people expressing dissatisfaction with the UK Government's action against Covid. The project leader would then gather these screenshots and send them to the Cabinet Office. Feedback from the Cabinet Office would direct us over what to look for the next day.

To skirt the legal difficulties of a military unit monitoring domestic dissent, the view was that unless a profile explicitly stated their real name and nationality they could be a foreign agent and were fair game. But it is quite obvious that our activities resulted in the monitoring of the UK population... the social media posts of ordinary, scared people. These posts did not contain information that was untrue or co-ordinated – it was simply fear.

We learned from the feedback that the Government were very keen on hearing what the public thought of their Covid response.

I entered this role believing I would be uncovering foreign information warfare. 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. There may have actually been social media campaigns from China to promote lockdown policies but because we were directed to monitor sentiment towards the success of lockdown, we would have completely missed them. I had the impression the Government were more interested in protecting the success of their policies than uncovering foreign interference, and I regret that I was a part of it.

Recently, I looked over my medals and thought of all 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 77, which hangs over my career like a black cloud.

It was about domestic perception, not national security. Frankly, the work I was doing should never have happened. This domestic monitoring of citizens seemed not to be driven by a desire to address the public's concerns, but to identify levers for compliance with controversial Government policies.

I do not doubt that the activities I participated in were conceived for good reasons, but they were undemocratic, wrong, and should not be allowed to happen again.

PETER HITCHENS: How shadowy censors tried to remove my 'unhelpful' Covid views from YouTube

I have been annoying people for decades. It is my job as a journalist to do so. And when I look back on my career, I only regret that I did not annoy more of them. News is what powerful people want to keep out of the

media. Interesting commentary strays outside the mainstream and challenges conventional wisdom. That is why it so often wears better, over time, than the standard official opinion.

We'll have to wait and see how the Ukraine war goes, which almost everyone currently thinks is a good thing. But the near-unanimous view of the Covid crisis back in 2020 is now beginning to look a bit threadbare.

Did we really do the right thing, squandering all that money we didn't have on making people stay at home? Now we're deep underwater in unpayable debt, the currency is shrivelling, multitudes have given up regular work patterns and a terrifying number of businesses are in permanent trouble because their customers have melted away. And we absolutely did not save the NHS. In fact, we made it much, much worse.



A terrifying number of businesses are in permanent trouble because their customers have melted away

I was almost alone in criticising these measures when they began. In fact, for the first few days I was totally

alone – except that The Mail on Sunday, upholding the proper tradition of a free press – allowed me to dissent and gave me generous space to do so. That was absolutely proper. I was responsible for what I said. The newspaper did not have to agree with me, but it took the civilised view that open debate favours the truth, or as Milton put it in his great defence of free speech, Areopagitica: 'Who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?'

Someone had fiddled with the algorithms which guide web searches

After a few weeks, it became clear that not everyone was as enlightened as The Mail on Sunday.

Invitations from broadcasters, who had previously been friendly and reasonably generous with their time, stopped arriving, with a few heroic exceptions such as Mike Graham on Talk Radio.

Various people went on to Twitter and elsewhere to ludicrously accuse me of 'denying' Covid or of having caused the deaths of people by expressing doubts about the restrictions, a very nasty slander.

Despite having been vaccinated myself, I was simultaneously denounced as an 'anti-vaxxer' by Covid zealots, and became the object of fury from genuine anti-vaxxers who decided madly that I was a traitor even though I had never adopted their cause (one of these pursued me on to a train to shout at me, only the other day).



We absolutely did not save the NHS. In fact, we made it much, much worse

But the deeper effect was harder to pin down. For it was on the internet, the most vital forum of all. Here, you can never be sure.

I use Twitter a lot, but are others seeing my tweets? I have no idea, and will never know whether I was 'shadow-banned' – a form of censorship in which your impact is reduced but not actually obliterated, so hard to measure or spot.

But at two points it was clear beyond doubt that something very creepy was going on. I give quite a few interviews which appear later on YouTube, sometimes getting more than 100,000 viewers.

In June 2020, I gave an interview about the virus farce to two clever young men, Konstantin Kisin and Francis Foster, who run a popular web broadcast called TRIGGERnometry. I said what I have been saying here – that the crashing of the economy and the stifling of personal liberty were utterly out of proportion to the danger from Covid-19. I gave evidence for my view and quoted eminent experts. I do not think I said

anything that was false or abusive. But, within a couple of hours of launching the interview, Konstantin and Francis noticed a very strange thing. It was almost impossible to find, even if you knew where to look. Usually, their programme quickly garners large numbers of viewers, and it had done so on a previous occasion when I'd been interviewed by them on another matter.

I am pretty sure (but cannot prove) I was the victim of shadow-banning. Someone had fiddled with the computer algorithms, which guide the searches everyone makes on the World Wide Web. A lot of people kindly protested. And as mysteriously as it had been applied, the ban evaporated, albeit too late. The audience for the interview was irretrievably reduced. That's not all – on January 25, 2021, YouTube posted a version of a conversation I had had with Mike Graham on Talk Radio. But 75 seconds of the original broadcast were missing.

A few weeks before, YouTube had suspended the entire Talk Radio station from its output. The ban was ended after a major public fuss. I have never really got to the bottom of what happened to my censored words, but I think I can say that someone deliberately cut them because they did not like the opinions I was expressing.

I mention these things because we now have an even more worrying connection. The report from Big Brother Watch probably only touches the surface of what Government agencies were up to during the closedown of the country. We know they were at one stage interested in what I was up to, but I suspect there was a lot more than this that we will never find.

Suppression can flourish like bindweed if it is not cut back

But the key is Whitehall's special access to the giant internet companies, which, of course, include YouTube and Twitter. These shadowy monitors clearly had hotlines to the web monsters, which allowed them to 'flag' things they did not like. Did someone whose salary was paid by you and me, with the special powers given to government, dislike what I said? Was someone else afraid that the popularity of TRIGGERnometry would give me and my unwelcome views a new, wider audience? I can only guess, and so can you.

But the circumstantial evidence is strong. And I believe that this is the way censorship will reappear among us, as governments grow less tolerant of opposition.

To me, the most astonishing thing about the great Covid panic was how many attacks the state managed to make on basic freedoms without anyone much even caring. This was partly because of the fear the Government had deliberately spread (as SAGE minutes reveal).

So now is the time to demand a full and powerful investigation into the dark material which Big Brother Watch has bravely uncovered – and to stand against the tendency towards censorship and suppression which flourishes like bindweed if it is not ruthlessly cut back.

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