

UK Government Denies Targeting COVID-19 Policy Critics on Social Media

By [Li Zhou](#)

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The UK government is facing renewed pressure to shut its Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU) after the unit was accused of tracking the activities of vocal critics of COVID-19 policies when flagging so-called disinformation.

The government has denied targeting individuals, saying the unit was banned from flagging journalists and MPs to social media platforms.

The CDU, which was set up on March 5, 2020, [monitors](#) online narratives and trends, and has [worked "closely with social media platforms"](#) to quickly identify and help them respond to potentially harmful content on their platforms," including "removing harmful content in line with their terms and conditions, and promoting authoritative sources of information," according to government ministers.

[The Telegraph](#) on June 2 accused the unit of secretly monitoring the activities of critics of the government's COVID-19 policies such as lockdowns, school closures, mask mandate, and the proposed vaccine passport.

According to the report, documents released through Freedom of Information and data protection requests showed the CDU had flagged 24 social media comments by Molly Kingsley, who founded the children's welfare campaign group UsForThem in response to school closures, and one post on Twitter by Dr. Alexandre De Figueiredo, a research fellow at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who opposed the mass COVID-19 vaccination of children.

The report said De Figueiredo's tweet was first flagged by Logically, an artificial intelligence firm the CDU used to trawl the internet. Another government unit, the now-defunct Rapid Response Unit (RRU), was said to have "logged" articles written by Carl Heneghan, director

of Oxford University's Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine.

The report also said the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, in which the CDU was embedded at the time, had a "trusted flagger" status on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, meaning the companies would fast-track their requests for content moderation.

The RRU, which also was set up in March 2020, was closed last year, while the CDU operates now within the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology.

A government spokesperson denied that individuals had been targeted.

"The unit's purpose is to track narratives and trends using publicly available information online to protect public health and national security," the person said in a statement emailed to The Epoch Times.

"It has never tracked the activity of individuals and has a blanket ban on referring journalists and MPs to social media platforms. None of the people named in this report were ever referred to social media platforms by the government and any claim otherwise is objectively false," they added.

Meta, which owns Facebook, hasn't responded to an Epoch Times request for comment. The same request emailed to Twitter was returned with an automated response consisting of a poop emoji. Elon Musk, CEO of Twitter, announced [on the platform](#) in March that the emoji would be sent automatically when journalists sent requests for comment.

Civil Liberty group Big Brother Watch, which dubbed the government's counter-disinformation units the "Ministry of Truth" after the propaganda department in George Orwell's dystopian novel "1984," renewed its call for the CDU to be "suspended immediately [and] investigated."

Former minister Jacob Rees-Mogg called on the continuing COVID-19 Inquiry to investigate "the oppressive methods used to override dissent."

"It is clear from [Former Health Secretary Matt] Hancock's messages that steps were taken to manipulate public opinion and now it appears underhand[ed] methods may have been employed to stop free speech," he told The Telegraph.

Rees-Mogg was referring to Hancock's WhatsApp communications with officials during the COVID-19 pandemic, which [were published in March](#). One of the messages on how to communicate with the public about the emergence of the Alpha variant of the virus reads, "We [frighten the pants off everyone](#) with the new strain."

The call to investigate the CDU comes after Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson [agreed to hand over](#) "all unredacted WhatsApp" messages to the COVID-19 inquiry.

Lady Hallett, chair of the official inquiry, requested the messages last month, saying they were significant for their insight into core political and administrative decision-making by the UK government during the pandemic.

The Cabinet Office has argued that the messages are unambiguously irrelevant to the inquiry, although Hallett dismissed the argument.

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