



Exclusive: Ministers had ‘chilling’ secret unit to curb lockdown dissent

Description

Molly Kingsley, who set up a campaign to keep schools open during the pandemic, also had her social activity monitored.

As well as the CDU, the Government operated a Rapid Response Unit (RRU) in the Cabinet Office that hunted online for content it considered disinformation.

The CDU, which is still operating, was embedded in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

The department has “trusted flagger” status at social media companies including Facebook and Twitter, which means that requests for content to be removed are fast-tracked for consideration.

In some cases, individuals whose social media posts were recorded by the units have subsequently faced sanctions by Twitter and Facebook. Ministers denied asking for posts by Prof Heneghan, Dr de Figueiredo or Ms Kingsley to be removed.

The Government has said that the CDU “is focused on helping the Government understand online disinformation narratives and understand attempts to artificially manipulate the information environment”.

The Government also ran a Counter-Disinformation Policy Forum, which brought together civil servants from the DCMS and technology giants – including Facebook and Google – as well as the BBC to discuss how to limit the spread of what was considered Covid-19 disinformation.

This forum and the two units were not the only way the Government tried to apply pressure on social media companies during the pandemic.

The Lockdown Files, published by The Telegraph earlier this year, revealed that Matt Hancock, the former health secretary, repeatedly lobbied Sir Nick Clegg, the former deputy prime minister and now a Facebook executive, about vaccine misinformation.

Facebook has been open about its efforts to tackle misinformation about Covid. During the pandemic, it removed posts and in April 2020 alone put warning labels on about 50 million pieces of content.

The CDU was established in 2019 and was focused on the European elections before turning to focus on the pandemic.

During Covid, the unit worked closely with the Cabinet Office's now defunct RRU, whose responsibilities included tackling "purported 'experts' issuing dangerous misinformation".

The RRU has admitted in an FoI obtained by Big Brother Watch and passed to The Telegraph that it made requests for social media posts to be taken down.

As part of its work, the Cabinet Office also passed the CDU "media monitoring" reports.

Documents revealed that the material flagged to the CDU included articles published by The Telegraph.

One of these was a piece by Ms Kingsley published in February 2022, arguing that it was "indefensible" that children's lives were still not back to normal when the rest of society was. She urged ministers to make a clear statement that children's extracurricular activities should not be subject to additional curbs.

One of Ms Kingsley's tweets from December 2020, in which she said it would be "unforgivable to close schools", was also passed to the CDU.

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