

Lockdown Dissenters Were Muzzled in the U.K. as Well as the U.S.

Thin-skinned authoritarians of the world, unite!

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When it comes to the political class, bad ideas can be contagious. That appears to be the case with censorship during the pandemic, which became a popular pastime among functionaries [convinced they are the embodiment of science](#)—or, at least, the arbiters of truth. As it turns out, that led to the collaboration between the state and social media companies to muzzle voices not just in the U.S., but also across the Atlantic in the U.K.

Muzzling Dissenting Voices

"A secretive government unit worked with social media companies in an attempt to curtail discussion of controversial lockdown policies during the pandemic," *The Telegraph* [reported](#) June 2. "The Counter-Disinformation Unit (CDU) was set up by ministers to tackle supposed domestic 'threats', and was used to target those critical of lockdown and questioning the mass vaccination of children."

The report added that "critics of lockdown had posts removed from social media. There is growing suspicion that social media firms used technology to stop the posts being promoted, circulated or widely shared after being flagged by the CDU or its counterpart in the Cabinet Office."

Among those monitored and penalized were prominent epidemiologists and medical researchers who challenged official data and restrictive policies. Activists who opposed lockdowns were also targeted. *The Telegraph*, a prominent newspaper which has run articles skeptical of pandemic authoritarianism, was itself singled out.

Implicated in monitoring content and penalizing dissent at the behest of government officials were companies including Facebook, Google, Twitter (under the old management),

and the BBC, the U.K.'s high-profile state broadcaster.

The story follows an earlier report (credited by *The Telegraph*) published in January 2023 by civil liberties group Big Brother Watch. That report, [Ministry of Truth: the secretive government units spying on your speech](#), called out the Cabinet Office's Rapid Response Unit, the Counter Disinformation Unit, the Foreign Office's Government Information Cell, the Home Office's Research, Intelligence and Communications Unit, and the British Army's 77th Brigade. Together, they targeted what officials considered "disinformation" during the pandemic and then following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"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," the report says. "Though the speech in question may violate these online intermediaries' terms of use, this itself is not a legitimate cause for state interference with free expression."

Where Have I Heard That Before?

If that sounds familiar to you, it should. It's essentially identical to what we've seen revealed in the United States. The *Telegraph* makes that point in its story, noting that "In America, [Twitter has released similar information](#) showing how the US government also introduced a secretive programme to curtail discussion of Covid lockdowns."

As in Britain, U.S. officials leaned on multiple private firms to suppress messages the government didn't like.

"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) played a direct role in policing permissible speech on social media throughout the COVID-19 pandemic," *Reason's* Robby Soave [reported](#) in January. "Confidential emails obtained by *Reason* show that Facebook moderators were in constant contact with the CDC, and routinely asked government health officials to vet claims relating to the virus, mitigation efforts such as masks, and vaccines."

Censors Defending the Indefensible

Not only did government officials seek to muzzle people—often intelligent, well-informed people—who dared to disagree with them, they often did so to advance serious policy errors that might have been avoided if open and healthy debate had been allowed. Just this week, the UK's Institute of Economic Affairs [published a peer-reviewed analysis](#) showing that during the COVID-19 pandemic, "harsher restrictions, like stay-at-home rules and school closures, generated very high costs but produced only negligible health benefits."

"The science of lockdowns is clear; the data are in: the lives saved were a drop in the bucket compared to the staggering collateral costs imposed," comments Johns Hopkins University's Steve Hanke, who co-authored the analysis with Jonas Herby of Denmark's Center for Political Studies and Lars Jonung of Sweden's Lund University.

Among other costs, researchers find that restrictive pandemic policies took an enormous toll on people's mental health.

"My colleagues and I conducted a review of all of the studies on mental health conducted during the first year of the pandemic," social psychology professor Gery Karantzas of

Australia’s Deakin University [wrote last year](#). “We found that overall, social restrictions doubled people’s odds of experiencing mental health symptoms.... Those who experienced lockdowns were twice as likely to experience mental ill health than those who didn’t.”

Children took a particular hit from lockdowns implemented with no viable plan for keeping them educated and engaged.

“Children lost an average of one-third of a year of school during the coronavirus pandemic,” *Reason’s* Emma Camp [pointed out](#) in February. “Researchers say the loss is largely due to the disruption and damage school closures—and the subsequent shift to distance learning—brought on children’s physical and mental health.”

Violating Rights and Pushing Bad Policy

Suppressing opposing opinions from physicians, journalists, activists, and anybody else who might have seen downsides to the policies preferred by those in power turns out to have been not just a violation of free speech rights (a big deal itself), but an excellent way of greasing the path to disaster. What officialdom called “disinformation” was actually the sort of healthy debate that raises valid concerns, differing values, and important considerations overlooked by thin-skinned authoritarians who prefer censorship over challenges to their egos.

The *Telegraph* quoted criticism from civil liberties advocates as well as lawmakers from the ruling Conservative Party that implemented Britain’s lockdowns and speech controls.

“It is becoming increasingly clear that many of the foundations of our democracy – such as free speech and parliamentary scrutiny – were completely disregarded during the pandemic,” commented Miriam Cates, a Conservative member of Parliament.

We could say much of the same here in the U.S. and [elsewhere in the world](#). Unfortunately, despite their annoyance at being exposed, there’s little evidence that authoritarian officials have learned any lessons.

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