

Spy Agency's Secret Plans to Foster Online "Conformity" and "Obedience" Exposed

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"Among other things," The Intercept reports, "the document lays out the tactics the agency uses to manipulate public opinion, its scientific and psychological research into how human thinking and behavior can be influenced, and the broad range of targets that are traditionally the province of law enforcement rather than intelligence agencies." (Photo: Getty Images)

With never-before-seen documents accompanied by [new reporting](#) on Monday, *The Intercept's* Glenn Greenwald and Andrew Fishman are offering a more in-depth look than ever into how a secretive unit of the UK's GCHQ surveillance agency used a host of psychological methods and online subterfuge in order to manipulate the behavior of individuals and groups through the internet and other digital forms of communication.

According to the reporting, the latest documents, which were leaked to journalists by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden,

demonstrate how the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group (JTRIG), a unit of the signals intelligence agency Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), is involved in efforts against political groups it considers "extremist," Islamist activity in schools, the drug trade, online fraud, and financial scams.

Though its existence was secret until last year, JTRIG quickly developed a distinctive profile in the public understanding, after documents from NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden [revealed](#) that the unit had engaged in "dirty tricks" like deploying sexual "honey traps" designed to discredit targets, launching denial-of-service attacks to shut down internet chat rooms, pushing veiled propaganda onto social networks, and generally [warping discourse](#) online.

Among the most troubling revelations is a [42-page internal JTRIG memo](#) that describes in detail how the elite unit developed, maintained, and apparently sought to expand its "scientific and psychological research into how human thinking and behavior can be influenced" in order to increase its ability to "manipulate public opinion" via online tools like email, social media, video, discussion forums, and other platforms.

Greenwald and Fishman argue JTRIG's self-documented exploits are most notable because of their "extensive use of propaganda methods and other online tactics of deceit and manipulation" that are not only reserved for "suspected foreign enemies" or criminals, as the agency continues to claim, but have also been used against other groups and individuals that the agency deems threatening or "politically radical."

As *Common Dreams* [reported](#) in February of 2014—when the existence of JTRIG was first made public—the GCHQ has used the unit to develop and deploy a complex series of “dirty tricks,” “propoganda,” and “false flag” operations designed to spy on selected targets who included not only “suspected terrorists” and “criminals” but also diplomats, journalists, and activists.

Included in the new JTRIG memo is this detailed look at the manipulative online tactics developed by the group:

2.5 Operation methods/techniques. All of JTRIG's operations are conducted using cyber technology. Staff described a range of methods/techniques that have been used to-date for conducting effects operations. These included:

- Uploading YouTube videos containing “persuasive” communications (to discredit, promote distrust, dissuade, deter, delay or disrupt)
- Setting up Facebook groups, forums, blogs and Twitter accounts that encourage and monitor discussion on a topic (to discredit, promote distrust, dissuade, deter, delay or disrupt)
- Establishing online aliases/personalities who support the communications or messages in YouTube videos, Facebook groups, forums, blogs etc
- Establishing online aliases/personalities who support other aliases
- Sending spoof e-mails and text messages from a fake person or mimicking a real person (to discredit, promote distrust, dissuade, deceive, deter, delay or disrupt)
- Providing spoof online resources such as magazines and books that provide inaccurate information (to disrupt, delay, deceive, discredit, promote distrust, dissuade, deter or denigrate/degrade)
- Providing online access to uncensored material (to disrupt)
- Sending instant messages to specific individuals giving them instructions for accessing uncensored websites
- Setting up spoof trade sites (or sellers) that may take a customer's money and/or send customers degraded or spoof products (to deny, disrupt, degrade/denigrate, delay, deceive, discredit, dissuade or deter)
- Interrupting (i.e., filtering, deleting, creating or modifying) communications between real customers and traders (to deny, disrupt, delay, deceive, dissuade or deter)
- Taking over control of online websites (to deny, disrupt, discredit or delay)
- Denial of telephone and computer service (to deny, delay or disrupt)
- Hosting targets' online communications/websites for collecting SIGINT (to disrupt, delay, deter or deny)
- Contacting host websites asking them to remove material (to deny, disrupt, delay, dissuade or deter)

The reporting also highlights the internal memo's focus on “manipulation” and how the GCHQ hoped to foster both “conformity” and “obedience” among those targeted:

2.18 *Behavioural science needs.* Staff identified various areas of behavioural science support that their effects and online HUMINT operations might benefit from. These mostly referred to social psychology, and included:

- Psychology of relationships (including online social interactions)
- Cultural impact on social interactions
- Psychology of trust and distrust
- Psychological profiling
- Developing realistic online aliases/personalities
- Psychology of persuasion
- Mass messaging
- Marketing/branding of YouTube videos
- Plausible excuses for not being able to communicate or interact with target online (or face-to-face)
- Effective delay tactics and "hooks" when dealing with online customers
- Online criminal behaviour (e.g., child exploitation, fraud)
- Youth behaviour online
- Online business operations

Read *The Intercept's* full reporting [here](#). And links to the new published documents follow:

- [Behavioural Science Support for JTRIG'S Effects and Online HUMINT Operations](#)
- [UK Ministry Stakeholder Relationships Spreadsheets](#) (13 documents merged)

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