

UK Counter-terror Programme Targeted “Black Asian Ethnic Minority” (BAME) Women Using Social Media “Influencers”

'Stoosh' campaign aimed at young Asian and Black women was created by media company contracted by Home Office

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Global Research, June 15, 2020

[Middle East Eye](#) 9 June 2020

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

*More evidence is emerging of the British government developing **motivational online media platforms targeted at young women as part of a covert counter-terrorism campaign.***

Security officials have acknowledged that a Facebook page and Instagram account entitled [Stoosh](#) were created as part of the UK's controversial Prevent counter-radicalisation programme.

The admission comes nine months after the same officials confirmed that a similar online platform entitled [This Is Woke](#) had been created as part of the programme.

Stoosh draws its name from a Jamaican patois term meaning superior, while This Is Woke draws upon the expression “stay woke”, a call - originally African-American - to remain aware of social and racial justice issues.

Stoosh Facebook's page was created on 20 March 2017, according to Facebook transparency information. Neither the Facebook nor Instagram pages have been updated since 6 March 2018.

Stoosh describes itself on Facebook as a page that “aims to promote a safe online environment for young women to tell their stories, taking ownership of their own narrative”.

Both Stoosh and This is Woke described themselves on Facebook as having been produced by a “media/news company”.

In fact, they were created by a London-based communications company called Breakthrough Media, which was under contract to the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT), a unit within the UK government's Home Office.

‘Like a cult’

One person who worked on the Stoosh programme at Breakthrough described how a number of people with large social media followings were recruited as influencers, and paid to promote it by using hashtags or retweeting its content.

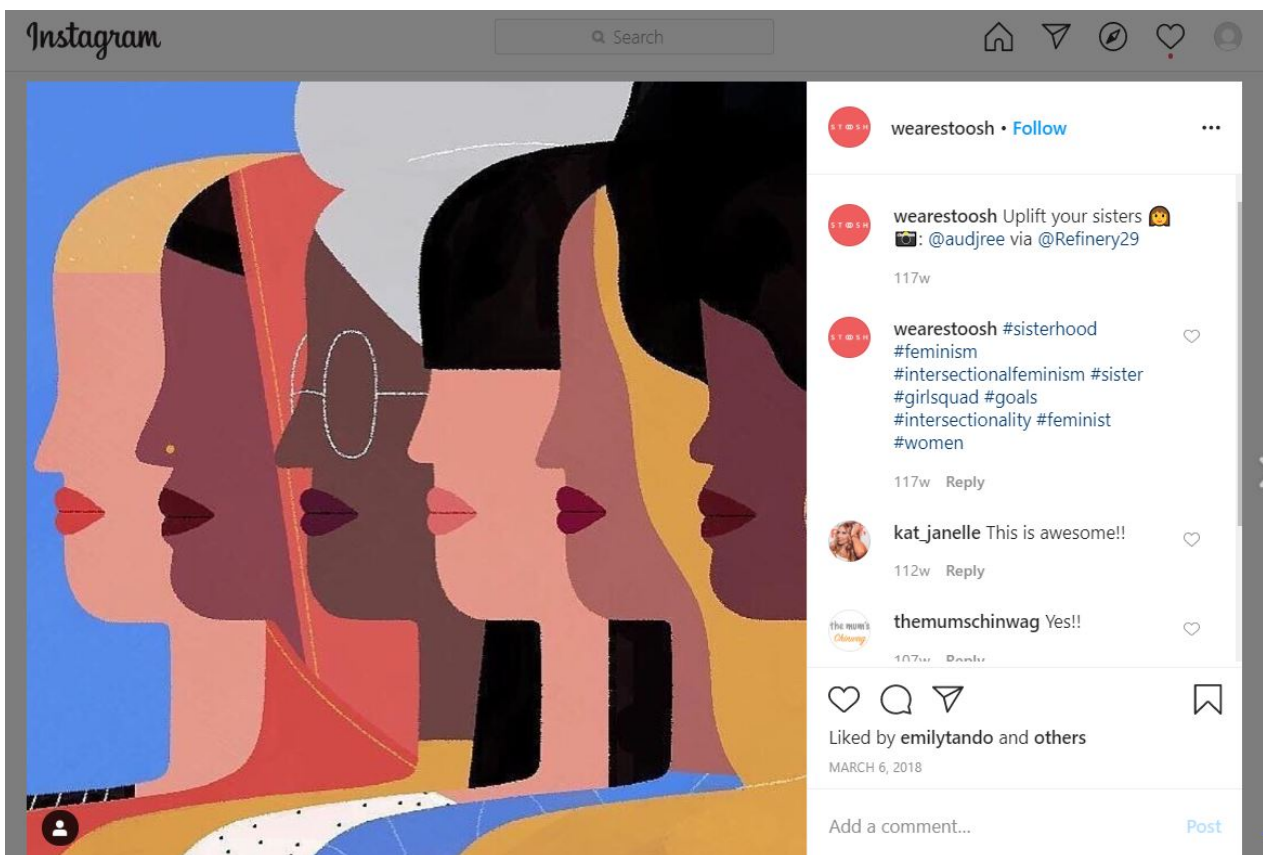
This person said that extensive research was carried out by examining the social media usage of potential influencers – some of them as young as 16 – before they were approached and asked to assist.

“They weren’t told what was going on, they weren’t told about the Home Office,” this person said.

“And we were warned by managers not to talk about Breakthrough outside the office, or put anything about it on our CVs.

“New arrivals to Breakthrough weren’t told what was going on. They were left to work it out.

“It felt like being in a cult. There was a lot of paranoia around the office. People used to walk to the other side of the Thames to have conversations about what they were doing at work.”



The Stoosh Instagram page was last updated on 6 March 2018 (Screengrab)

Breakthrough’s office in London at the time was located close to the river near Waterloo station, on the opposite bank to parliament and nearby government departments including the Home Office.

One influencer – a fashion and lifestyle blogger with tens of thousands of followers on Instagram and YouTube – told Middle East Eye that she had been told that Stoosh was a women’s empowerment project when she was approached and asked to make a film for it.

“I wasn’t told anything about the government or the Home Office,” she said.

Breakthrough has since rebranded itself as [Zinc Network](#), a change that began in Australia, after the company was caught [persuading Muslims](#) and [a Christian clergyman](#) to promote Australian government policies, without explicitly informing them that it was working for the government.

Other work that Zinc Network undertakes for the British government includes [the monitoring of “fake news”](#) emanating from Russia.

‘Code of ethics’

A spokesman for Zinc Network said the company helps its clients tackle some of the world’s toughest social issues.

“We have always taken seriously our responsibility to operate transparently and act with integrity,” he said. “In 2019 we reviewed all internal processes and have installed a code of ethics that respects the agency of everyone taking part in our projects including influencers.

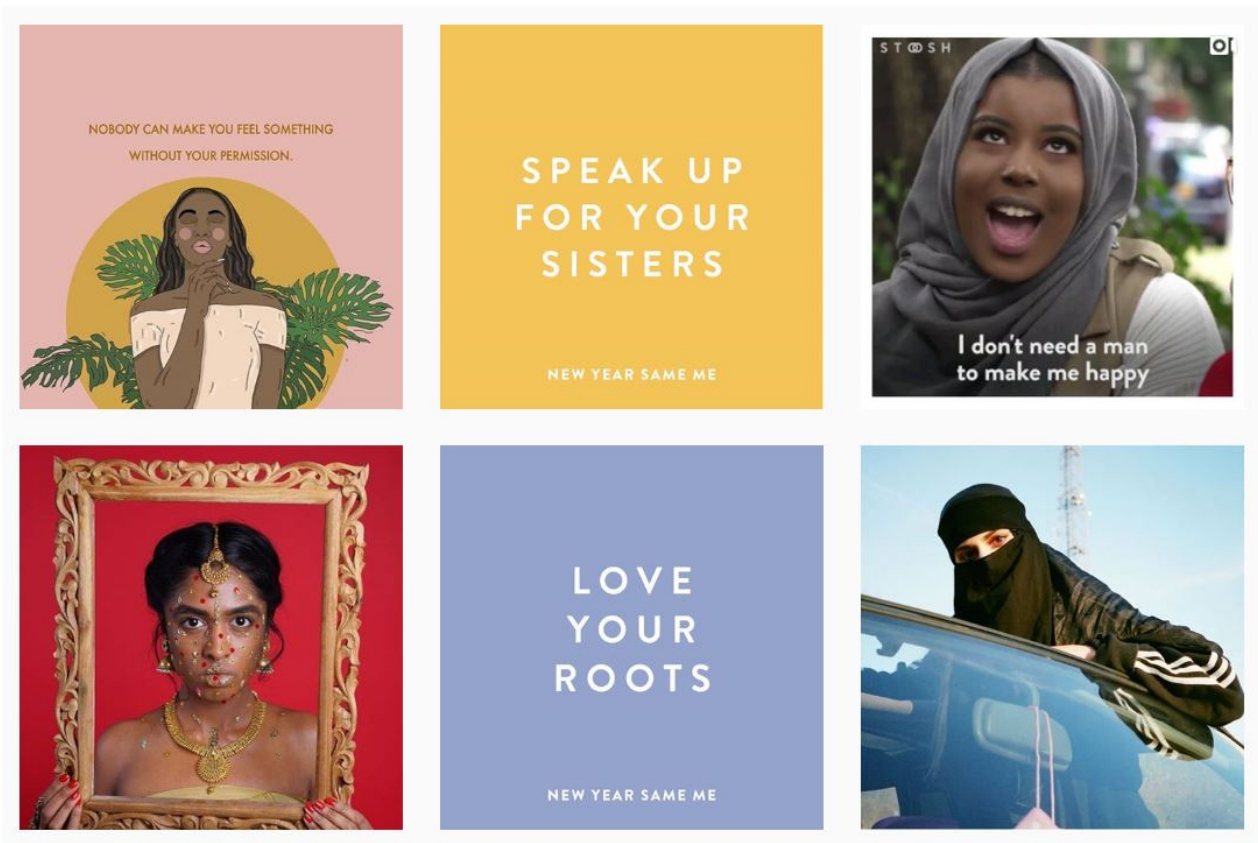
“Supporting communities, brands and governments to promote positive social change is the driving force of our agency.”

The OSCT confirmed its role in the creation of Stoosh following a request made under the UK’s Freedom of Information Act by **Faisal Qureshi**, a British film scriptwriter and producer.

After Qureshi asked the Home Office for any information it held on Stoosh, the OSCT replied, confirming that it did hold material but was considering whether it should be withheld on national security grounds.

The unit then said it would cost too much to provide the information. Qureshi is now asking the UK’s Information Commissioner, which oversees compliance with the Act, to order disclosure of the material.

The OSCT also cited national security concerns when refusing to disclose information it held on its This Is Woke platform under the Freedom of Information Act.



Stoosh's Instagram page featured motivational slogans, videos and images posted by other influencers (Screengrab)

The unit will not explain how it believes its bogus “media/news” platforms protects the UK’s national security.

However, a series of leaks from within the Home Office and its private sector contractors have shown that one purpose of the Prevent programme is to “effect attitudinal and behavioural change” among British Muslims, and to create what one document refers to as “a reconciled British Muslim identity”.

Much of the work is known to be co-ordinated by a secretive propaganda section within the OSCT called the Research, Information and Communications Unit, which has employed behavioural psychologists and anthropologists, as well as marketing and digital media specialists.

Before it was exposed as one of the OSCT’s covert counter-radicalisation initiatives, This Is Woke featured videos with titles such as “A trillion-ton iceberg has broken off Antarctica” and “Millions of pangolins are hunted each year” alongside others with titles such as “It’s time to hold extremism to account for terrorism, not Islam”.

The site also featured short panel discussions, with four young people sitting on a sofa debating subjects such as “What is fake news?” Interspersed among them videos with titles such as “What does wearing a hijab mean to you?”

Much of the Stoosh Instagram and Facebook material focuses on women who are described as “real women” and “empowered”.

Prominent among them is [Angela Davis](#), the Marxist African American activist and academic, who is described on the Stoosh Facebook page as “influential”, “intelligent” and “incredible”. Another woman featured is veteran Egyptian feminist campaigner [Nawal El-Sadawi](#) who is described as a “protector”, “powerful” and “tenacious”.

Other unacknowledged OSCT projects have included a film about Muslim athletes, which was filmed in Afghanistan and Pakistan without the director being informed that he was working for the British government; programmes [broadcast on local radio stations](#) across Britain during Ramadan; and stalls set up during freshers’ fairs at universities.

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Featured image: An image posted on the Stoosh Facebook page showing political activist Angela Davis (Facebook)

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