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US–UK Intel Agencies Declare Cyber War on Independent Media

British and American state intelligence agencies are "weaponizing truth" to quash vaccine hesitancy as both nations prepare for mass inoculations, in a recently announced "cyber war" to be commanded by AI-powered arbiters of truth against information sources that challenge official narratives.

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In just the past week, the national-security states of the United States and United Kingdom have discreetly let it be known that the cyber tools and online tactics previously designed for use in the post-9/11 "war on terror" are now being repurposed for use against information sources promoting "vaccine hesitancy" and information related to Covid-19 that runs counter to their state narratives.

A new cyber offensive was launched on Monday by the UK's signal intelligence agency, Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), which seeks to target websites that publish content deemed to be "propaganda" that raises concerns regarding state-sponsored Covid-19 vaccine development and the multi-national pharmaceutical corporations involved.

Similar efforts are underway in the United States, with the US military recently funding a CIA-backed firm—stuffed with former counterterrorism officials who were behind the occupation of Iraq and the rise of the so-called Islamic State—to develop an AI algorithm aimed specifically at new websites promoting "suspected" disinformation related to the Covid-19 crisis and the US military–led Covid-19 vaccination effort known as Operation Warp Speed.

Both countries are preparing to silence independent journalists who raise legitimate concerns over pharmaceutical industry corruption or the extreme secrecy [1] surrounding state-sponsored Covid-19 vaccination efforts, now that Pfizer's vaccine candidate is slated to be approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) by month's end.

Pfizer's history of being fined billions for illegal marketing [2] and for bribing government officials to help them cover up an illegal drug trial that killed eleven children [3] (among other crimes) has gone unmentioned by most mass media outlets, which instead have celebra-

ted the apparently imminent approval of the company's Covid-19 vaccine without questioning the company's history or that the mRNA technology used in the vaccine has sped through normal safety trial protocols and has never been approved for human use. Also unmentioned is that the head of the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, Patrizia Cavazzoni, is the former Pfizer vice president for product safety [4] who covered up the connection of one of its products to birth defects. [5]

Essentially, the power of the state is being wielded like never before to police online speech and to deplatform news websites to protect the interests of powerful corporations like Pfizer and other scandal-ridden pharmaceutical giants as well as the interests of the US and UK national-security states, which themselves are intimately involved in the Covid-19 vaccination endeavor. [6]

UK Intelligence's New Cyberwar Targeting "Anti-Vaccine Propaganda"

On Monday, the UK newspaper The Times reported [7] that the UK's GCHQ "has begun an offensive cyber-operation to disrupt anti-vaccine propaganda being spread by hostile states" and "is using a toolkit developed to tackle disinformation and recruitment material peddled by Islamic State" to do so. In addition, the UK government has ordered the British military's 77th Brigade, which specializes in "information warfare," [8] to launch an online campaign to counter "deceptive narratives" about Covid-19 vaccine candidates.

The newly announced GCHQ "cyber war" will not only take down "anti-vaccine propaganda" but will also seek to "disrupt the operations of the cyberactors responsible for it, including encrypting their data so they cannot access it and blocking their communications with each other." The effort will also involve GCHQ reaching out to other countries in the "Five Eyes" alliance (US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) to alert their partner agencies in those countries to target such "propaganda" sites hosted within their borders.

The Times stated that "the government regards tackling false information about inoculation as a rising priority as the prospect of a reliable vaccine against the coronavirus draws closer," suggesting that efforts will continue to ramp up as a vaccine candidate gets closer to approval.

It seems that, from the perspective of the UK national-security state, those who question corruption in the pharmaceutical industry and its possible impact on the leading experimental Covid-19 vaccine candidates (all of which use experimental vaccine technologies that have never before been approved for human use) should be targeted with tools originally designed to combat terrorist propaganda.

While The Times asserted that the effort would target content "that originated only from state adversaries" and would not target the sites of "ordinary citizens," the newspaper suggested that the effort would rely on the US government for determining whether or not a site is part of a "foreign disinformation" operation.

This is highly troubling given that the US recently seized the domains of many sites, including the American Herald Tribune, which it erroneously labeled as "Iranian propaganda,"[9] despite its editor in chief, Anthony Hall, being based in Canada. The US government made this claim about the American Herald Tribune after the cybersecurity firm FireEye, a US government contractor, stated that it had "moderate confidence" that the site had been "founded in Iran."

In addition, the fact that GCHQ has alleged that most of the sites it plans to target are "linked to Moscow" gives further cause for concern given that the UK government was caught funding [10] the Institute for Statecraft's Integrity Initiative, which falsely labeled critics of the UK government's actions as well as its narratives with respect to the Syria conflict as being related to "Russian disinformation" campaigns. [11]

Given this precedent, it is certainly plausible that GCHQ could take the word of either an allied government, a government contractor, or perhaps even

an allied media organization such as Bellingcat [12] or the Atlantic Council's DFRLab [13] that a given site is "foreign propaganda" in order to launch a cyber offensive against it. Such concerns are only amplified when one of the main government sources for The Times article bluntly stated that "GCHQ has been told to take out antivaxers [sic] online and on social media. There are ways they have used to monitor and disrupt terrorist propaganda," which suggests that the targets of GCHQ's new cyber war will, in fact, be determined by the content itself rather than their suspected "foreign" origin. The "foreign" aspect instead appears to be a means of evading the prohibition in GCHQ's operational mandate on targeting the speech or websites of ordinary citizens.

This larger pivot toward treating alleged "anti-vaxxers" as "national security threats" has been ongoing for much of this year, spearheaded in part by Imran Ahmed, the CEO of the UK-based Center for Countering Digital Hate [14], a member of the UK government's Steering Committee on Countering Extremism [15] Pilot Task Force, which is part of the UK government's Commission for Countering Extremism.

Ahmed told the UK newspaper The Independent in July that "I would go beyond calling anti-vaxxers conspiracy theorists to say they are an extremist group that pose a national security risk."[16] He then stated that "once someone has been exposed to one type of conspiracy it's easy to lead them down a path where they embrace more radical world views that can lead to violent extremism," thereby implying that "anti-vaxxers" might engage in acts of violent extremism. Among the websites cited by Ahmed's organization [17] as promoting such "extremism" that poses a "national security risk" were Children's Health Defense, the National Vaccine Information Center, Informed Consent Action Network, and Mercola.com, among others.

Similarly, a think tank tied to US intelligence – whose GCHQ equivalent, the National Security Agency, will take part in the newly announced "cyber war" – argued in a research paper published

just months before the onset of the Covid-19 crisis that "the US 'anti-vaxxer' movement would pose a threat to national security in the event of a 'pandemic with a novel organism.'" [18]

InfraGard, "a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and members of the private sector," warned in the paper published last June that "the US anti-vaccine movement would also be connected with 'social media misinformation and propaganda campaigns' orchestrated by the Russian government," as cited by The Guardian [19]. The InfraGard paper further claimed that prominent "anti-vaxxers" are aligned "with other conspiracy movements including the far right . . . and social media misinformation and propaganda campaigns by many foreign and domestic actors. Included among these actors is the Internet Research Agency, the Russian government–aligned organization."

An article published just last month by the Washington Post [20] argued that "vaccine hesitancy is mixing with coronavirus denial and merging with far-right American conspiracy theories, including Qanon," which the FBI named a potential domestic terror threat last year [21]. The article quoted Peter Hotez, dean of the School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, as saying "The US anti-vaccination movement is globalizing and it's going toward more-extremist tendencies."

It is worth pointing out that many so-called "anti-vaxxers" are actually critics of the pharmaceutical industry and are not necessarily opposed to vaccines in and of themselves, making the labels "anti-vaxxer" and "anti-vaccine" misleading. Given that many pharmaceutical giants involved in making Covid-19 vaccines donate heavily to politiciansin both countries [22, 23] and have been involved in numerous safety scandals, using state intelligence agencies to wage cyber war against sites that investigate such concerns is not only troubling for the future of journalism but it suggests that the UK is taking a dangerous leap toward becoming a country that uses its state powers to treat the enemies of corporations as enemies of the state.

The CIA-Backed Firm "Weaponizing Truth" with AI

In early October, the US Air Force and US Special Operations Command announced that they had awarded a multi-million-dollar contract to the US-based "machine intelligence" company Primer. Per the press release, "Primer will develop the first-ever machine learning platform to automatically identify and assess suspected disinformation [emphasis added]. Primer will also enhance its natural language processing platform to automatically analyze tactical events to provide commanders with unprecedented insight as events unfold in near real-time." [24]

According to Primer, the company "builds software machines that read and write in English, Russian, and Chinese to automatically unearth trends and patterns across large volumes of data," and their work "supports the mission of the intelligence community and broader DOD by automating reading and research tasks to enhance the speed and quality of decision-making." [25]

In other words, Primer is developing an algorithm that would allow the national-security state to outsource many military and intelligence analyst positions to AI. In fact, the company openly admits this, stating that their current effort "will automate the work typically done by dozens of analysts in a security operations center to ingest all of the data relevant to an event as it happens and funnel it into a unified user interface." [26]

Primer's ultimate goal is to use their AI to entirely automate the shaping of public perceptions and become the arbiter of "truth," as defined by the state. Primer's founder, Sean Gourley, who previously created AI programs for the military to track "insurgency" in post-invasion Iraq [27], asserted in an April blog post that "computational warfare and disinformation campaigns will, in 2020, become a more serious threat than physical war, and we will have to rethink the weapons we deploy to fight them." [28]

In that same post, Gourley argued for the creation of a "Manhattan Project for truth" that would create a publicly available Wikipedia-style databa-

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se built off of "knowledge bases [that] already exist inside many countries' intelligence agencies for national security purposes." Gourley then wrote that "this effort would be ultimately about building and enhancing our collective intelligence and establishing a baseline for what's true or not" as established by intelligence agencies. He concludes his blog post by stating that "in 2020, we will begin to weaponize truth."

Notably, on November 9, the same day that GCHQ announced its plans to target "anti-vaccine propaganda," the US website NextGov reported that Primer's Pentagon-funded effort had turned its attention specifically to "Covid-19 related disinformation." According to Primer's director of science, John Bohannon, "Primer will be integrating bot detection, synthetic text detection and unstructured textual claims analysis capabilities into our existing artificial intelligence platform currently in use with DOD. . . . This will create the first unified mission-ready platform to effectively counter Covid-19-related disinformation in near-real time." [29]

Bohannon, who previously worked as a mainstream journalist embedded with NATO forces in Afghanistan, also told NextGov that Primer's new Covid-19–focused effort "automatically classifies documents into one of 10 categories to enable the detection of the impact of COVID" on areas such as "business, science and technology, employment, the global economy, and elections." The final product is expected to be delivered to the Pentagon in the second quarter of next year.

Though a so-called private company, Primer is deeply linked to the national-security state it is designed to protect by "weaponizing truth." Primer proudly promotes itself as having more than 15 percent of its staff hailing from the US intelligence community or military. The director of the company's National Security Group is Brian Raymond [30], a former CIA intelligence officer who served as the Director for Iraq on the US National Security Council after leaving the agency. [31]

The company also recently added several prominent national-security officials to its board including: Gen. Raymond

Whitney Webb and Derrick Broze reported in detail on their investigation of „Operation Warp Speed" in several articles on the journalistic media platform „The Last American Vagabond" (Photo: Screenshot January 2021, www.thelastamericanvagabond.com, ©Whitney Webb.)

Thomas (ret.), who led the command of all US and NATO Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan and is the former commander of both US Special Operations Command and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). [32]

Lt. Gen. Vera Linn Jamieson (ret.), the former deputy chief of staff for Air Force Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance who led the Air Force's intelligence and cyber forces. She also personally developed "strategic partnerships" between the Air Force and Microsoft, Amazon, Google, and IBM in order "to accelerate the Air Force's digital transformation." [33]

Brett McGurk [34], one of the "chief architects" of the Iraq War "surge," alongside the notorious Kagan family [35], as NSC Director for Iraq, and then as special assistant to the president and senior Director for Iraq and Afghanistan during the Bush administration. Under Obama

and during part of the Trump administration, McGurk was the special presidential envoy [36] for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS at the State Department, helping to manage the "dirty war" waged by the US, the UK, and other allies against Syria. [37]

In addition to those recent board hires, Primer brought on Sue Gordon, the former principal deputy director of National Intelligence, as a strategic adviser. Gordon previously "drove partnerships within the US Intelligence Community and provided advice to the National Security Council in her role as deputy director of national intelligence" and had a twenty-seven-year career at the CIA. [38]

The deep links are unsurprising, given that Primer is financially backed by the CIA's venture-capital arm In-Q-Tel [39] and the venture-capital arm of billionaire Mike Bloomberg, Bloomberg Beta [40].

Operation Warp Speed's Disinformation Blitzkrieg

The rapid increase in interest by the US and UK national-security states toward Covid-19 "disinformation," particularly as it relates to upcoming Covid-19 vaccination campaigns, is intimately related to the media-engagement strategy of the US government's Operation Warp Speed.

Officially a "public-private partnership," Operation Warp Speed, which has the goal of vaccinating 300 million Americans by next January, is dominated by the US military and also involves several US intelligence agencies [41], including the National Security Agency (NSA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as well as intelligence-linked tech giants Google, Oracle, and Palantir [42, 43]. Several reports published in The Last American Vagabondby this author and journalist Derrick Broze have revealed the extreme secrecy of the operation, its numerous conflicts of interest, and its deep ties to Silicon Valley and Orwellian technocratic initiatives. [44]

Warp Speed's official guidance discusses at length its phased plan for engaging the public and addressing issues of "vaccine hesitancy." According to the Warp Speed document entitled "From the Factory to the Frontlines," "strategic communications and public messaging are critical to ensure maximum acceptance of vaccines, requiring a saturation of messaging across the national media." It also states that "working with established partners—especially those that are trusted sources for target audiences—is critical to advancing public understanding of, access to, and acceptance of eventual vaccines" and that "identifying the right messages to promote vaccine confidence, countering misinformation, and targeting outreach to vulnerable and at-risk populations will be necessary to achieve high coverage." [45]

The document also notes that Warp Speed will employ the CDC's three-pronged strategic framework for its communications effort. The third pillar of that strategy is entitled "Stop Myths" and has as a main focus "establish[ing] partnerships to contain the spread of misinformation" as well as "work[ing] with local partners and trusted messengers to improve confidence in vaccines."

Though that particular Warp Speed document is short on specifics, the CDC's Covid-19 Vaccination Program Interim Playbook contains additional information. It states that Operation Warp Speed will "engage and use a wide range of partners, collaborations, and communication and news media channels to achieve communication goals, understanding that channel preferences and credible sources vary among audiences and people at higher risk for severe illness and critical populations, and channels vary in their capacity to achieve different communication objectives." It states that it will focus its efforts in this regard on "traditional media channels" (print, radio, and TV) as well as "digital media" (internet, social media, and text messaging). [46]

The CDC document further reveals that the "public messaging" campaign to "promote vaccine uptake" and address "vaccine hesitancy" is divided into four phases and adds that the overall communication strategy of Warp Speed "should be timely and applicable for the current phase of the Covid-19 Vaccination program."

Those phases are:
1. Before a vaccine is available
2. The vaccine is available in limited supply for certain populations of early focus
3. The vaccine is increasingly available for other critical populations and the general public
4. The vaccine is widely available

Given that the Covid-19 vaccine candidate produced by Pfizer is expected to be approved by the end of November, it appears that the US national-security state, which is essentially running Operation Warp Speed, along with "trusted messengers" in mass media, is preparing to enter the second phase of its communications strategy, one in which news organizations and journalists who raise legitimate concerns about Warp Speed will be de-platformed to make way for the "required" saturation of pro-vaccine messaging across the English-speaking media landscape.

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