UK Home Office set up fake social media network to target young British Muslims

Tania Kent
30 August 2019

A freedom of information request (FOI) has exposed the existence of a covert spying operation by the Conservative government against primarily young British Muslims, through the setting up a fake website.

"This is Woke," a social media network on Facebook and Instagram targeted at young people which describes itself as the work of a "media/news company" that is engaging "in critical discussions around Muslim identity, tradition and reform," was in fact created by a media company on behalf of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) at the Home Office.

The revelation, after its exposure by news journal Middle Eastern Eye (MEE), produced outrage among many of the 75,000 followers of the site. Following the FOI request, the OSCT refused to disclose details to MEE about the network. It would not explain the reason it was created, claiming that to do so would "prejudice the national security of the UK."

The OSCT told MEE that national security concerns were "of overriding importance" and that the "Disclosure of information about 'This Is Woke' would open up detailed information about organisations and individuals who are engaged in the delivery of, and who are supporting activities to prevent terrorism."

This strongly suggests that the government has been storing information on the users of the website and particularly those who may have made critical comments about government policy, especially in relation to military operations by Britain in the Middle East, as well as having many spies in and around oppositional organisations.

The content of the "This Is Woke" Facebook page and Instagram feed was created for the OSCT by a London-based communications company, Breakthrough Media. The name of the network comes from a popular expression, being "woke," referring to people who are conscious of social injustice, especially in opposition to racism.

Videos on the site talk about reasons for wearing the hijab as well as gender relations and extremism. One video, which has been shared on Facebook more than 1.7 million times, is called "It's time to hold extremism to account for terrorism, not Islam."

The Home Office confirmed to BBC News its involvement with "This is Woke," saying, "We are committed to using all of the tools available to counter the threat from terrorism in the UK."

It added, "The Home Office works in partnership with a range of organisations from across civil society, industry, private and public sectors to reduce vulnerabilities to organised criminal, extremist and terrorist threats in the UK."

The project is part of the UK's counter-radicalisation programme known as Prevent. As part of this programme, a secretive unit within the OSCT called the Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU) has for several years been mounting covert propaganda campaigns.

After an overhaul of Prevent in 2011, Theresa May, then the UK's home secretary, told a parliamentary committee which provides some oversight of the OSCT that RICU was "road-testing some quite innovative approaches to counter-ideological messages."

Internal RICU documents seen by MEE show that these messages are intended "to effect behavioural and attitudinal change" among what the unit terms "Prevent audiences." These are defined as British Muslims, particularly males, aged 15 to 39.

Breakthrough Media, a private-sector contractor, says privately in internal papers that its work on behalf of the unit is intended to "promote a reconciled British Muslim identity"—that is to launch an ideological campaign in defence of British imperialist interests.

Breakthrough has recently changed its name to Zinc Network, a move that started in Australia, where the company had been caught persuading Muslims and a Christian clergyman to promote Australian government policies, including support for military intervention in Syria, without explicitly informing these individuals that it was working for the government.

"This Is Woke" is just a small part of the material being produced in the UK under the direction of RICU. In other

© World Socialist Web Site

internal documents, the unit says it is working "at an industrial scale and pace."

Past projects include a website, Facebook page, Twitter feed and leafleting campaign called Help for Syria, that appeared to be a charitable venture but was in fact a "strategic communications platform" intended to influence conversations among young British Muslims and reduce any desire to travel to Syria.

Former Home Office officials say RICU has also been working to influence the arts in the UK, and government lawyers have moved to block the disclosure of material that would show the role it has played in the production of supposedly independent radio shows.

As well as producing campaigns directed at Muslim audiences in the UK, Breakthrough/Zinc has been helping RICU with projects that are aimed at Muslims in France, Belgium, North Africa and the Middle East, Kenya, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

The people who participated in the "This Is Woke" panel discussions are identified only by their first names in the videos posted on Facebook. The women who were interviewed for the video entitled, "What does wearing a hijab mean to you?"—viewed by over 250,000 people—were approached on the campus of the School of Oriental and African Studies, which is part of the University of London. They were asked whether they would participate in a film marking International Women's Day.

"That's what the team from Breakthrough said," says one, Elif Kalin. "We certainly weren't told that it was anything to do with the Prevent programme." It is also not clear whether the campus itself was colluding with the project and other government funded propaganda and spying operations as many universities have been exposed as being funded by UK defence projects.

It was revealed in July that the Ministry of Defence has paid SOAS at least £400,000 since 2016 to provide "cultural advice" for its operations abroad. Lectures were delivered by eleven members of SOAS staff, including Gilbert Achcar, a leading representative of the Pabloite United Secretariat. There were many outraged comments on social media in response to the revelations about the real role of "This is Woke." One commenter on Twitter wrote, "This is a complete absence of transparency and is just one of the many reasons why there is such little trust between Muslim communities and the government." Another added, "The betrayal of trust that we face at every level of every institution including online spaces, media platforms, arts and culture events, civic life and everything else is honestly something I think everyone concerned with racism at ALL needs to be SCREAMING about. This is urgent."

The Prevent Strategy, under which the setting up of the fake site was organised, has cost £40 million and was first introduced by Tony Blair's Labour government in 2003.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition reviewed Prevent in 2011. In 2014, the Prevent Strategy led to the introduction of "British values" in the school curriculum. The inspection criteria of Ofsted—the body that inspects English Schools and Local Education Authorities—also entrenches these values. This includes the promotion of British "democracy" and the "rule of law," under conditions in which civil liberties and democratic rights are being eviscerated in a sustained offensive.

The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 added a "Prevent Duty" to the responsibility of schools, colleges, universities and health care professionals.

Since July 2015, teachers have been legally obliged to report any suspected "extremist" behaviour to police. This has turned teachers into a spying agency for the authorities, with children as young as four being referred to police. This has led to great unease among teachers and there have been many calls for its scrapping by both teaching and health professionals, as well as human rights organisations.

Latest figures show a sharp jump in referrals to Channel, Prevent's sister organisation, after the government placed a statutory duty on teachers, doctors and social workers to pass on the names of those they believe are vulnerable to radicalisation. Some 8,000 referrals have been made thus far.

While the program has so far led to thousands of Muslim students being subject to investigation, the ultimate target of these measures is the entire working class. The definitions of "terrorism" and "extremism" have been deliberately kept loose in government legislation so that they can be applied to clamp down on just about any form of political opposition.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site