



Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media & Sport

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Julian Knight MP
Chair
DCMS Select Committee
House of Commons
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Dear Julian,

Thank you for your letter dated 11 March, regarding the Government response to disinformation and misinformation on COVID-19. Thank you for the support that you have voiced for our counter-disinformation efforts. The Government takes this issue extremely seriously, and shares your concerns about the undermining of life-saving factual information at a time of heightened risk to public health. As the Minister responsible for leading the Government's counter-disinformation policy, I am ensuring that the Government is taking all necessary steps to identify and respond to false information relating to COVID-19. This is why we have stood up this dedicated capability and integrated it within the wider Government structures responding to COVID-19, particularly working closely with the public communications teams to ensure the public has reliable and trusted information. I have answered the specific questions raised in your letter below.

“Given that disinformation and misinformation has spread across social media at least since January, why has the Counter Disinformation Unit only been set up now?”

The cross-government capability to tackle disinformation was previously activated to monitor for disinformation related to the European Parliamentary elections in May last year and the UK General Election in December. It brings together existing expertise from within Government to provide a comprehensive picture of the extent, scope and impact of disinformation and misinformation on COVID-19. Although this cross-government capability was recently stood up to formally support efforts on COVID-19, existing structures had been monitoring for disinformation related to the disease as part of their ongoing work prior to this. It is integrated into the Government structures responding to COVID-19 and will remain standing for as long as it is required.

“How is the Counter Disinformation Unit being resourced, in terms of time, staffing and financial support?”

The capability is resourced full time through existing cross-government teams and there are no additional costs associated with it.



“Who is staffing the team and what is their expertise in tackling disinformation and misinformation?”

Addressing the challenges of disinformation and misinformation is a whole of government effort. There are a number of organisations that have relevant capabilities and responsibilities - including open source monitoring and strategic communications. These are brought together through this work to ensure that we are able to identify and prepare to respond to any disinformation campaigns where necessary. This includes teams in DCMS, the Home Office, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, the Cabinet Office and No10. In addition to expertise within Government, this also draws on expertise from academia with whom many of the teams work very closely.

“How is the team working with social media companies, fact-checking organisations and health officials to identify and counter disinformation/misinformation about COVID-19?”

We recognise that industry, academia and civil society have a huge amount of expertise in this space. As such, we have been engaging widely to ensure that we are able to benefit from and support their work on countering mis- and disinformation related to COVID-19.

The Government is working very closely with the social media platforms. This is helping us to understand what is happening on their platforms and the steps that they are taking to address misinformation relating to COVID-19 so we can effectively tackle misinformation and disinformation together. It also allows the social media platforms to be informed where harmful information is identified.

Tech companies have also been working with the Government, NHS and Public Health England to ensure that the public has access to reliable information. Actions by platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Google are focused on connecting people to accurate and authoritative information and removing false claims and misinformation about the virus that could result in harm to the public.

“Who does the unit report to and how will this information reach COBR and other cross-government planning groups?”

I am the Minister responsible for leading the Government’s counter-disinformation policy, including the standing up of this capability. This cross-government capability is designed to bring all the relevant information together and ensure information flows to the appropriate teams. It provides daily updates to the relevant internal COVID-19 response structures. This is designed to ensure that public communications concerning COVID-19 are informed by an understanding of any misinformation and disinformation being observed.

“How will information be publicly disseminated especially to those with differing news consumption habits such as older or younger people, those in rural areas and towns and those who may face language barriers such as tourists?”

As Government one of the best things we can do is make sure that everyone has access to the correct information about the virus. As such, we are working very closely with industry to support the introduction of systems and processes that promote authoritative sources of information. Our public information campaign takes into account the differing media consumption habits of the public, and we are looking at ways to actively engage harder to reach groups.

“Are there plans to make the Counter Disinformation Unit permanent and, if not, how will you ensure that the team’s expertise and experience will not be lost between the COVID-19 crisis and future public emergencies?”

As previously stated, this capability is made up of existing cross-government resources and this is not the first time that it has been stood up. This capability is activated at times where there is a heightened risk of disinformation, such as during democratic events, national security incidents, or public health crises.

There are agreed processes and frameworks in place to ensure that we are able to capture and apply lessons learned to improve our capability and understanding.

In addition, Government is ensuring that it is prepared to identify and respond to disinformation through focusing on:

- Conducting research to better understand scale, scope and impact of disinformation;
- Education and guidance to give citizens the skills to tell fact from fiction; and
- Engaging with the tech sector and social media platforms to strengthen the online environment.

Finally, I wish to reiterate how seriously the Government is taking this issue. I will be prepared to answer any further questions on this topic during my evidence session with the Committee in due course.



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