



IMPACT REPORT

**BIG
BROTHER
WATCH**

2023



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KEY SUCCESSES: 2023

Exposed Britain's 'Ministry of Truth' and the government's abuse of counter-disinformation powers to monitor and censor critics, with national media coverage

Made the Government shut down its counter-disinformation unit, the 'Rapid Response Unit', and reform the Counter Disinformation Unit into the 'National Security Online Information Team' (NSOIT) with a restricted remit, following our Ministry of Truth campaign

Secured a formal apology from the Government to a British journalist and broadcaster for unlawfully spreading misinformation about her under the guise of 'countering misinformation', following our investigation and legal action

65 UK parliamentarians and 130 international human rights groups backed our call for an urgent stop to facial recognition

Achieved reform of live facial recognition in the retail sector after our legal complaint to the ICO about Facewatch prompted their finding of 8 breaches of data protection law

Successfully pressured the Co-op, Iceland, Marks and Spencers, Morrisons and the UK's biggest supermarket chain Tesco to drop Chinese Hikvision cameras from their stores

Successfully lobbied the Government to commit to introduce legislative privacy protections and a prohibition on state programmability before any CBDC is introduced

Big Brother Watch's briefings informed countless parliamentary debates and we were directly referenced 27 times in parliament - up from 16 times in 2022

Our victories in 2023 belong to our supporters, without whom we would not exist. Thank you for making history with us.

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Surveillance & Power

Surveillance and Power

Stop Facial Recognition

In 2023, we relaunched our parliamentary campaign to stop live facial recognition with greater political support than ever before. Our work was much needed - as diminished police forces struggled to address growing shoplifting and crime in the cost of living crisis, ministers vowed to increase Orwellian surveillance, positioning dangerously ineffective and authoritarian facial recognition technology as a solution. Live facial recognition cameras were also used at the Coronation of King Charles III, where numerous peaceful demonstrators were arrested.

Stop facial recognition pledge

Our renewed pledge to stop live facial recognition was launched with a BBC exclusive and is supported by 65 parliamentarians across parties including former minister David Davis MP, leader of the Liberal Democrats Sir Ed Davey MP, former Shadow Attorney General Baroness Shami Chakrabarti, Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights Joanna Cherry KC MP and former Green Party leader Caroline Lucas MP. The pledge is also endorsed by 30 human rights organisations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The pledge achieved further coverage in the Guardian, the Mail, the Express, the Evening Standard, LBC and via Reuters. Our director took part in a debate on live facial recognition on one of the most watched BBC News shows, The Context, as well as an interview for ITV News among others. Madeleine did an interview and call-in debates on BBC 5 Live and BBC Radio 2's Jeremy Vine show opposite the owner of live facial recognition company Facewatch, as well as multiple BBC regional TV and radio stations, and an opinion piece in the Evening Standard opposite a piece by the Policing Minister Chris Philp.

We also expanded our work building solidarity with human rights groups around the world, bringing the weight of their reputations into the debate on the use of the surveillance technology in the UK. We wrote an experts' statement calling for an urgent stop to facial recognition and recruited signatures from 130 leading civil society organisations from around the world and approximately 50 individual experts. The statement achieved coverage on BBC News and Politico.

also provides a legal and policy analysis of 'retrospective facial recognition' and policy recommendations as to how such a technology could be approached in a human rights-compliant way. We launched the report in parliament, with speakers including Dawn Butler MP, Joanna Cherry MP, David Davis MP, Lord Clement-Jones, Baroness Jenny Jones. Attendees included senior Home Office officials, regulators and NGOs.

Lobbying

Our new report, *Biometric Britain: the expansion of facial recognition surveillance*

We also released our new report *Biometric Britain: the expansion of facial recognition surveillance*¹, which lays out in detail the shocking scale of facial recognition in the UK, from our high streets to online facial recognition search engines, and how the country has fallen out of step with the rest of Europe and the democratic world on surveillance. We sent a copy to every parliamentarian.

The report marked 5 years since our groundbreaking report *Face Off: the lawless growth of facial recognition in UK policing*, which revealed that the police's live facial recognition matches were 95% inaccurate at that time; in our new report, we found that the accuracy rate is still only 89%. In addition to providing leading research on various types of intrusive facial recognition being used by public and private authorities, the report

After our report was published, the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee undertook a short inquiry on live facial recognition, to which we provided written evidence. In January 2024, the Committee wrote to the Home Secretary raising concerns that live facial recognition "lacks a clear legal foundation", that there are "no rigorous standards or systems of regulation in respect of the use of LFR" and that "there is no consistency in approaches to training in its use by police forces".²

We wrote a joint letter with Liberty to the former Home Secretary Suella Braverman urging a rethink after she urged police to increase their use of live facial recognition. Later in the year, we signed a joint letter with Liberty to the Times explaining why facial recognition is not the right solution for the rise in shoplifting. Our research found that two thirds of people on police facial recognition watchlists were not wanted for arrest and we placed this story with comments in the Guardian.³

As police in Wales also increased their use of live facial recognition surveillance in the run up to Christmas, we worked closely with ally Senedd members and helped to co-ordinate a cross-party



THE CASE FOR

Chris Philp

ONE of the tools that has been vital in tracking down criminals in the past few years is facial recognition. This technology is also being used to identify unknown people caught on camera committing crimes and help put them behind bars. The technology frees up police time and resources, meaning more officers on the beat. As with all developing technology, it is important to listen to concerns and make sure safety checks are in place. The Met has been transparent and open

... AND AGAINST

Madeleine Stone

BEING forced to hand over our fingerprints to watch a football match would never be considered acceptable. But for the first time, the Met has taken this approach to the faceprints of football supporters. The decision to target supporters for biometric identity checks treats them like potential criminals. Live facial scanning turns public spaces into a police line-up. Of 191 alerts on the system since 2016, only 41 have been correct, and a miniscule 31 have led to arrests. At a time when

in its approach and has had the technology independently tested. An independent study has found it was 100 per cent accurate when used on recorded images, with only one in 6,000 false alerts when used on live images. It also found no significant differences in performance based on gender or ethnicity. In practice, the Met has had no false alerts this year after scanning a quarter of a million faces. We should be embracing this technology, and polling shows most of the public agree. This will help us deliver smarter, more effective policing.

● Chris Philp is minister for crime, policing and fire

police are under huge pressure and turn up to 999 calls hours late, this is hardly an effective use of resources. The inaccuracy is worse for those of us who aren't white men — research demonstrates that facial recognition systems are less accurate for women and people of colour. This means black and Asian Londoners are more likely to be wrongly flagged as criminals and made to prove their innocence due to a dodgy algorithm. This is stop and search on steroids. Live facial recognition is inefficient, intrusive and discriminatory.

● Madeleine Stone is senior advocacy officer at Big Brother Watch



Our renewed pledge to stop live facial recognition was launched with a BBC exclusive and is supported by 65 parliamentarians across parties



We also released our new report Biometric Britain: the expansion of facial recognition surveillance¹, which lays out in detail the shocking scale of facial recognition in the UK, from our high streets.



letter raising concerns to the Chief Constable of South Wales Police from 11 Senedd Members, with press coverage.⁴

In an Institute for Government meeting, Jake publicly questioned the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police about facial recognition and the force's unlawful retention of innocent people's photos. We followed up with the Commissioner in writing.

Retail and non-police facial recognition

We also co-ordinated a letter from parliamentarians to the Frasers Group urging the group to drop live facial recognition from its stores, securing media coverage in the Guardian.⁵ We liaised with the British Retail Consortium and Retail Trust about the growth of facial recognition use in the retail sector – whilst retail representatives are rightly concerned about rising crime, they also tell us that they are suffering from repeat, known perpetrators and a lack of police attendance/investigation, rendering private facial recognition a non-solution to a serious problem. Our work against facial recognition in the private sector was recognised internationally, including in a New York Times feature.

In addition to crime purposes, we also saw an increase of facial recognition in more benign settings, where the privacy and accuracy issues had not been accounted for. For example, we uncovered that a foodbank was using a facial recognition app for its users, that also records what items a person obtains. We wrote to them raising legal concerns and urging them to reconsider, gaining coverage in the Guardian,⁶ the Mirror and BBC News. We also wrote to the SENSE gambling scheme about

balancing the dangers of using live facial recognition to exclude problem gamblers from casinos. In addition, we stopped a chain of gyms from making facial recognition mandatory for entry following our submission of a complaint to the ICO.

Population-level facial recognition databases

At the end of 2023, Policing Minister Chris Philp made an extraordinary announcement that the passport and driving license databases would be subverted into police facial recognition databases, accessible for searches in the course of everyday, low-level policing – effectively putting the population into a permanent police line-up. There is no legal basis for such a use of biometric surveillance and the idea has never been discussed in parliament. Such a precedent would set a disturbing example for potential uses of DNA and other databases.

We responded strongly in the press from the Conservative Party conference, where the announcement was made, with our director giving recorded interviews to Sky News, LBC, Times Radio and press comments across the media. Our Head of Research and Investigations Jake gave an interview to Channel 5. Madeleine wrote her first opinion piece for the Telegraph⁷ online on the issue. We also drafted an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill to prevent the driving license database being used for population-level facial recognition surveillance, and used this as a lobbying tool with parliamentarians.

We have been in contact with regulators and the Home Office about the Minister's plans, who appear to know little/

nothing about them. Our work to stop this alarming development will continue into 2024.

Helping affected people

The team attended police deployments of live facial recognition across the year, monitoring police use of the technology and offering advice to anyone adversely affected. We published advice for the general public on our website, with strong SEO, offering support if they are affected by facial recognition by the police or retailers.⁸ Several people have come forward. We have also published advice for protest groups on facial recognition.⁹

Engagement with regulators

We continue to pressure the Information Commissioner to uphold the law and protect people's data rights regarding facial recognition. In 2023, the ICO concluded its investigation into live facial recognition in retail following our 2022 legal complaint – it found that the company Facewatch breached 8 areas of the Data Protection Act 2018. As a result of our work, private facial recognition companies must follow a raft of new standards including that they may only use live facial recognition in relation to serious crime, and a facial recognition flag now must be as much a human as an automated process as facial recognition flags must be confirmed by a super-recogniser before being forwarded to staff. This is a major change that undermines the live facial recognition business model and better protects individuals' rights.

Concerningly, in our ongoing investigations, we obtained a Home

Office document proving that the Policing Minister had lobbied the ICO for a "favourable outcome" on Facewatch, after holding private meetings with the company during the ICO's investigation. We published these documents with exclusive coverage of in the Observer.¹⁰

Whilst our complaint to the ICO was vindicated, we felt the regulator should be undertaking its own investigations and pursuing more serious enforcement actions. As a result, we helped parliamentarians to write a letter¹¹ to the ICO raising concerns about its low enforcement with coverage in the Times.

Madeleine provided a written response to the ICO's consultation on biometric data in October.

Engagement with stakeholders

We have held scores of meetings with stakeholders during this period about facial recognition, including regulators such as the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Northern Ireland Human Rights Advisor; Deputy Mayor of London for Policing and Crime Sophie Linden; Met Police Facial Recognition Lead Lindsey Chiswick; Home Office advisors; Shadow Policing and Justice ministers; MPs, peers (and advisors) and councillors from all parties.

Big Brother Watch now chairs a monthly Stop Facial Recognition Coalition meeting with allies from across civil society.

Outcomes:

01 Parliament

65 UK parliamentarians and 130 international human rights groups backed our call for an urgent stop to facial recognition

02 Reform

Live facial recognition in the retail sector was reformed after our legal complaint to the ICO about Facewatch prompted their finding of 8 breaches of data protection law

03 Media

National and international media coverage

Ban Hikvision

In 2023, we raised the profile of our campaign against Hikvision and Chinese state-owned CCTV more than ever before, gaining major national media and political attention.

In February, we rapidly organised a 'spy balloon' stunt on Parliament Square in response to the US-China 'spy balloon' incident, achieving coverage in the Telegraph and Sky News.

We furthered the investigation we had published in 2022, and achieved national media coverage including Channel 4 News and the Mail on scandals that Hikvision cameras were found at military sites and GCHQ, and that they were used during the coronation of King Charles III.

In June, our work and investigation into the spread of Hikvision cameras across Britain was featured on a BBC Panorama

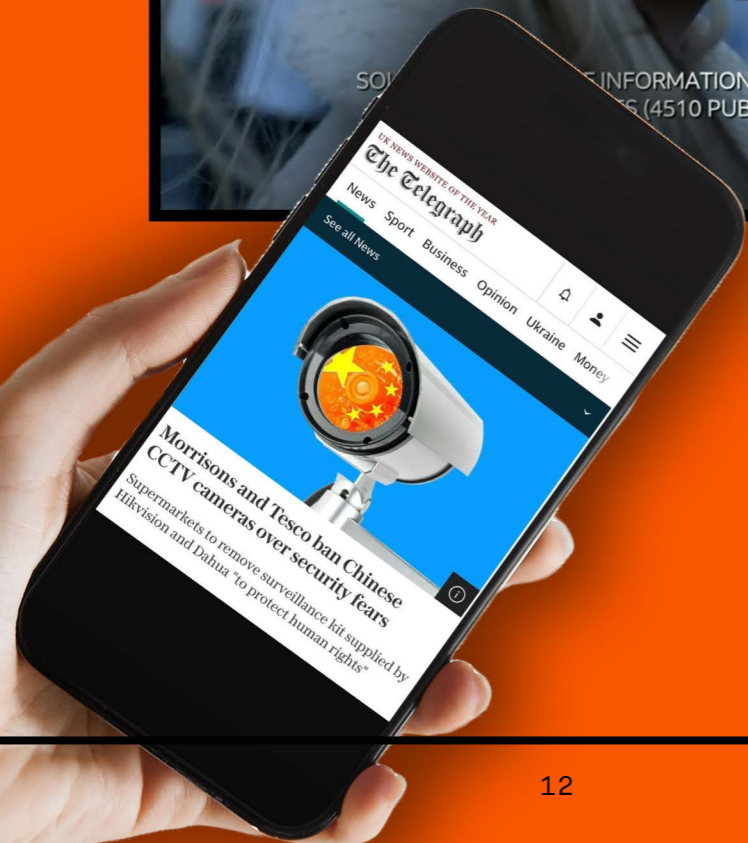
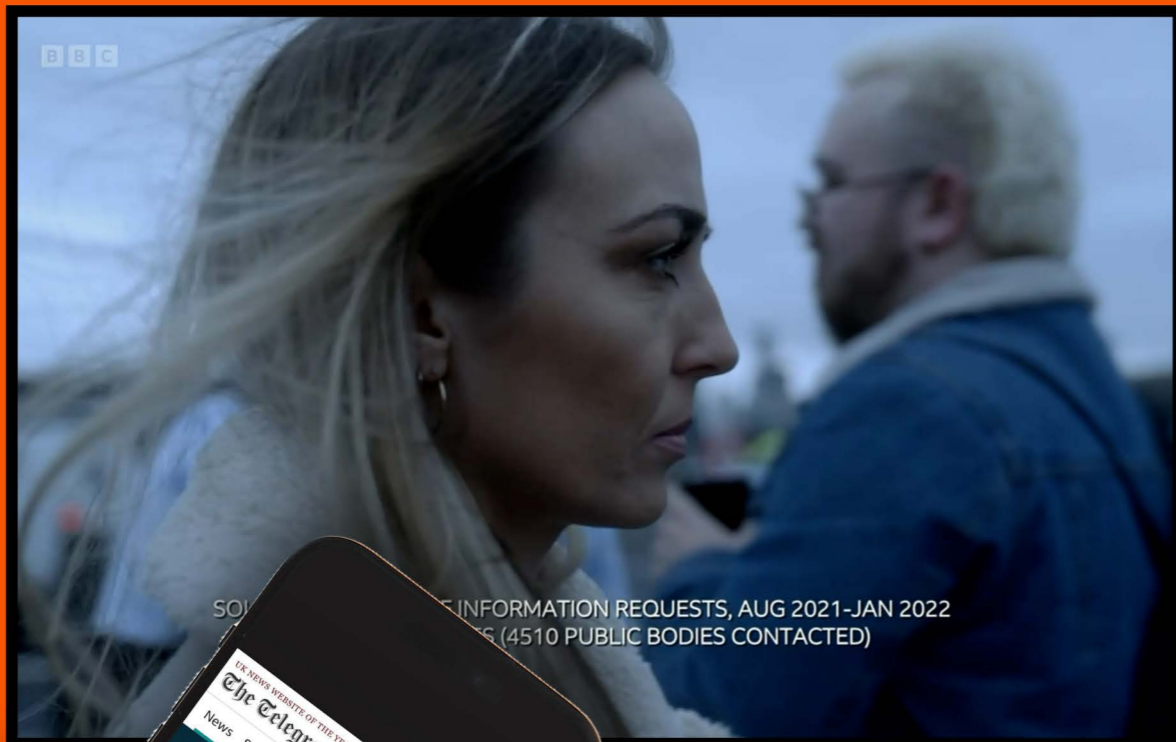
the year, meeting and working with the Labour frontbench team; leading Conservative backbenchers such as Iain Duncan Smith; and the cross-party China Research Group.

Thousands of members of the public used our 'write to your MP' and later our 'write to the Home Secretary' tool to voice their opposition to Chinese state-owned camera companies operating in their schools and hospitals.

We worked closely with NGOs including Stop Uyghur Genocide, Free Tibet, Hong Kong Watch, building bridges across the sector.

We also met frequently with the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner, who backed our calls for a national surveillance camera review, and met with advisors to the Home Secretary.





In June, our work and investigation into the spread of Hikvision cameras across Britain was featured on a BBC Panorama titled Is China Watching You?, in which our director was interviewed.



Outcomes

01 Supermarkets

Our corporate campaign led to the Co-op, Iceland, Marks and Spencers, Morrisons and the UK's biggest supermarket chain Tesco dropping Hikvision cameras from their stores

02 Councils

Our campaign led to several councils dropping Hikvision cameras, which was covered by the BBC

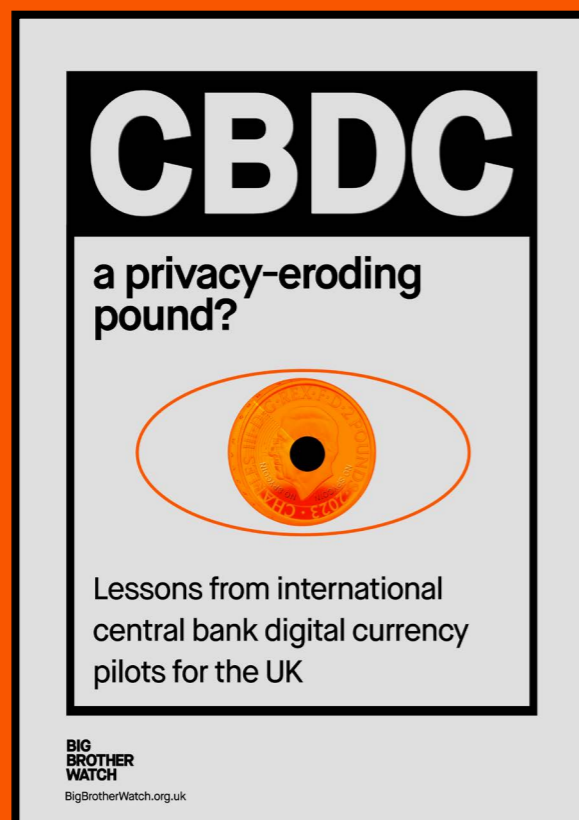


CBDCs and financial privacy

No SpyCoin

In 2023, we launched our “No Spycoin” campaign to protect financial privacy and fairness in response to the Government’s plans to launch a CBDC or digital ‘Bitcoin’ in the UK.

We submitted a response to the Government’s consultation on CBDCs and made a template response tool available to the public on our dedicated NoSpyCoin.co.uk campaign page. We were called to participate in a roundtable meeting on CBDCs with the Treasury. The Government confirmed that 50,000 people submitted responses to the consultation voicing privacy concerns, which is one of the largest consultation responses of recent years – the high response rate was reported by Telegraph.¹² The Government acknowledged the serious and widespread public concern about risks to privacy and liberty posed by CBDC plans, and this had a major impact on their decision-making. The Government’s response to the consultation on CBDCs acceded to our policy asks and pledged to introduce legislative privacy protections, including a prohibition on the Government making the currency programmable, before a CBDC is introduced. This is a very significant development and huge win for liberty.



We published a report on international CBDC case studies with an analysis of the rights and liberty impacts, and articulation of the human rights arguments against privacy-invasive CBDCs, titled 'CBDC - a privacy-eroding pound? Lessons from international central bank digital currency pilots for the UK'.

Our report analysed CBDC projects in Nigeria, Jamaica, Israel, Uruguay, Sweden, the EU and China. We found that none of the CBDC projects had been designed, trialled, or launched in a way which properly preserves privacy; none of the CBDC pilots has been successful and all have had a low uptake; and CBDCs have not solved any of the complex causes of financial exclusion, in fact risking making this problem worse. We sent a copy of the report to stakeholder NGOs, think tanks, and every Member of Parliament. We also launched the report in parliament with high profile parliamentarians (former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell MP, Treasury Committee member Danny Kruger MP) and author Brett Scott speaking on our panel and in attendance, as well as key NGO, think tank, finance and government stakeholders.

We have published opinion pieces on the issue with national media platforms, raising public and political awareness of the rights issues associated with the Government’s CBDC plans across the spectrum. We were the voice for financial freedom and privacy, interviewed in an hour long, live, head to head debate on CBDCs and cashless societies on the UK’s 2nd most listened to radio station, known for political agenda-setting, BBC Radio 4. Our Director also recorded a podcast for Politics Home

on CBDCs with our parliamentary ally, Marcus Fysh MP. Multiple members of staff were interviewed live about the issue on talkTV. Our Advocacy Manager had opinion pieces on CBDCs published with the Telegraph and Unherd, whilst our Legal and Policy Officer published an opinion piece with financial paper City AM, and we were quoted as a leading voice for privacy by political press on the issue, including by Politico. We have played an important role in breaking through with the issue in mainstream political broadcast, print and online media and centring civil liberty concerns.

We are building awareness and action on CBDC issues in the sector, achieving meetings with leading digital rights groups to migrants rights groups and even financial sector representatives. We also sent a joint letter with digital rights NGO Open Rights Group to the Treasury setting out our concerns.

We have successfully raised the profile of the risks the CBDC plans pose to rights, liberty and equality in policy fora. We sent our consultation response and research paper to every parliamentarian and have held meetings with senior parliamentary figures including the Chair of the Economic Affairs Committee, a member of the Treasury Committee, a former Shadow Chancellor, and the Chair of the CBDC parliamentary group, as well as further meetings with Treasury officials. Following our engagement, there have been several parliamentary interventions scrutinising illiberal CBDC plans including several Written Parliamentary Questions and strong scrutiny sessions by the Treasury Committee.



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BBC
ANTISOCIAL
WITH
ADAM FLEMING
Listen now
4
The 'digital pound'

“ COMMENT

Say hello to Bitcoin – and say goodbye to financial privacy

A centralised digital pound could place the state at the heart of all transactions. Every piece of spending would be recordable

MARK JOHNSON

9 June 2023 • 3:40pm

Benefits and Bank Spying

In the November 2023 King's Speech, the Government announced plans to introduce new welfare surveillance powers on the premise of countering fraud. We issued a strong public response defending financial privacy and the presumption of innocence, with our comments published in the Metro and elsewhere.

We also compiled a list of 130 parliamentarians that have expertise or an interest in welfare and/or surveillance, and posted them a copy of our 2021 report, *Poverty Panopticon: the hidden algorithms shaping Britain's welfare state*.¹³



Posting 130 copies of our Poverty Panopticon reports with letters to parliamentarians raising the alarm about financial surveillance

At the end of November, the Government introduced sweeping financial surveillance powers via an amendment to an unrelated Bill, the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, at Report Stage – almost nine months after the Bill was introduced – meaning the extraordinary power would have inadequate scrutiny. However, thanks to our dynamic team, we quickly wrote a policy briefing and sent it to every parliamentarian. Our director was a panellist on LBC's Cross Questions with Iain Dale shortly after Report Stage in the Commons, and instigated a debate on the show about the powers.

We plan to launch a major campaign to defeat the powers in 2024.

The powers would force banks and any other institutions the Government chooses, such as building societies and online marketplaces, to constantly monitor all of their customers' personal financial details according to secret criteria decided by the government, and send frequent reports to government. The power has been proposed on the premise of looking for signals of potential fraud and error relating to welfare payments, meaning this is also an explicitly non-criminal power, introducing mass financial surveillance for bureaucratic and administrative purposes. Such a power would be destined for mission creep and deeper mass financial surveillance for any number of state interests.

We had meetings with senior officials at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on the issue and initiated widespread civil society engagement to start building a coalition of opposition.

Relatedly, we continued to push for transparency over the state's growing use of algorithms in the welfare system. We strengthened our civil society relationships on this issue, including meetings with Child Poverty Action Group, Public Law Project with whom we sent a joint complaint to the Information Commissioner regarding DWP's opacity and refusal to respond to FOIs on welfare surveillance and algorithms. Our comments on DWP and AI secrecy were published in the Guardian numerous times.

Outcomes

01 Legislation

The Government pledged to introduce legislative privacy protections and a prohibition on state programmability before any CBDC is introduced

Investigatory Powers

Big Brother Watch remained Britain's foremost expert group scrutinising state surveillance powers and legislation.

In November 2023, the Government introduced a fast-tracked Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill in the House of Lords seeking to extend the extraordinary mass surveillance powers, particularly internet connection records and bulk personal datasets, enacted under the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. We took a leading role among civil society groups and rapidly produced comprehensive written briefings, recommendations and draft amendments for all parliamentarians. We liaised with the Labour front bench and other opposition parties, as well as major tech firms from Google to Signal, and worked closely with other NGOs including Rights and Security International, Privacy International, Liberty and Reset among others.

The Government brought forward its own amendment to roll back on its attempt to lower the threshold for communications data mass surveillance after we provided a deep analysis of relevant laws and raised the potential of legal non-compliance/ challenges in our briefing. Our director was interviewed and quoted by Politico on the Bill.

Outcomes

01 Reform

The Government rolled back on its attempt to lower the threshold for communications data mass surveillance following our analysis



Free Expression

Free Expression

Ministry of Truth

In January 2023, we published a groundbreaking investigative report exposing the existence of a UK 'Ministry of Truth' – a network of secretive, so-called "counter disinformation" government units that extensively monitor online opinions and flag social media posts to platforms for censorship. We found that, far from purely targeting foreign disinformation, these units were routinely recording the domestic, lawful and truthful speech of government critics, including dissent from parliamentarians (including David Davis MP and Caroline Lucas MP), journalists, world-leading academics and activists under the guise of combatting "dis/misinformation". We carried out the investigation by using Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests, speculative Data Subject Access Requests with potentially-affected individuals, open source research – and also by exclusively interviewing¹⁴ a military whistleblower from the secretive British army unit, 77 Brigade. Through interviews and subsequent targeted FOI requests, we acquired documentary evidence and personal testimony to show that the British Army undertook domestic political monitoring online, on behalf of the Government, against its own population – in direct contradiction of public denials of such activity.

We launched our report in a packed event in UK Parliament, with speakers including former Minister David Davis MP, former Shadow Attorney General Baroness Shami Chakrabarti, Oxford University's Director of the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine Professor Carl Heneghan, and free expression specialist Gavin Millar KC.



Our report led to statements by the Defence Secretary, parliamentary questions,

a question at Prime Minister's Questions, an invitation for urgent questions from the Speaker of the House of Commons, and our work has been referenced multiple times in parliamentary debates.

To date, Big Brother Watch has achieved major news coverage of this investigation including a major exclusive with the country's most read weekend paper, the Mail on Sunday, including a double page spread, comment page by lead columnist Peter Hitchens and editorial leader.

We achieved front page coverage in the Telegraph, a week of successive daily coverage and an opinion piece¹⁵ by our Director in the same paper, coverage in the Times, Daily Mail, and major coverage in the Guardian with 350k online views.¹⁶ Broadcast coverage included talkTV, GB News (including Andrew Doyle's Free Speech Nation), LBC as well as other national radio and digital media including Triggernometry (140k views) and Stay Free (429k views across Rumble/YouTube). Our initial Twitter thread breaking the news of our first publication in this investigation was read 1.5 million times.



We launched a new campaign site, MiniTruth.co.uk,¹⁷ and a petition with Change.org which received 32,750 signatures.

We sent letters to the chairs of the Defence Committee, Intelligence and Security Committee, and Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee. We met with members of some of those committees, who subsequently put questions to

ministers about the work of the counter-disinformation units. We met with many other MPs, from all parties, who put questions to ministers about the issue over the parliamentary year. We also supported David Davis MP, Caroline Lucas MP and Bell Riberio-Addy MP, who had each been affected by UK government counter disinformation units, in writing a cross-party letter to the Secretary of State calling for the Counter Disinformation Unit to be immediately suspended.¹⁸

We also wrote to the CEO of X/Twitter, Elon Musk, to raise our concerns about social media platforms' engagement with government counter-disinformation units and to request further disclosure. We met on several occasions with senior X staff. They disclosed in writing that the majority, **58%, of content flagged to the platform by the Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU) during the pandemic period did not in fact breach their terms of service**, which were extremely broad at the time. We placed this important information as a story with [the Telegraph](#).

We wrote a letter to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry after the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) provided written evidence to the Inquiry about its counter disinformation activities. We provided important information about the reality of the government's counter disinformation activities, as discovered in our investigation, to fill in the many missing gaps from the government's curated evidence.

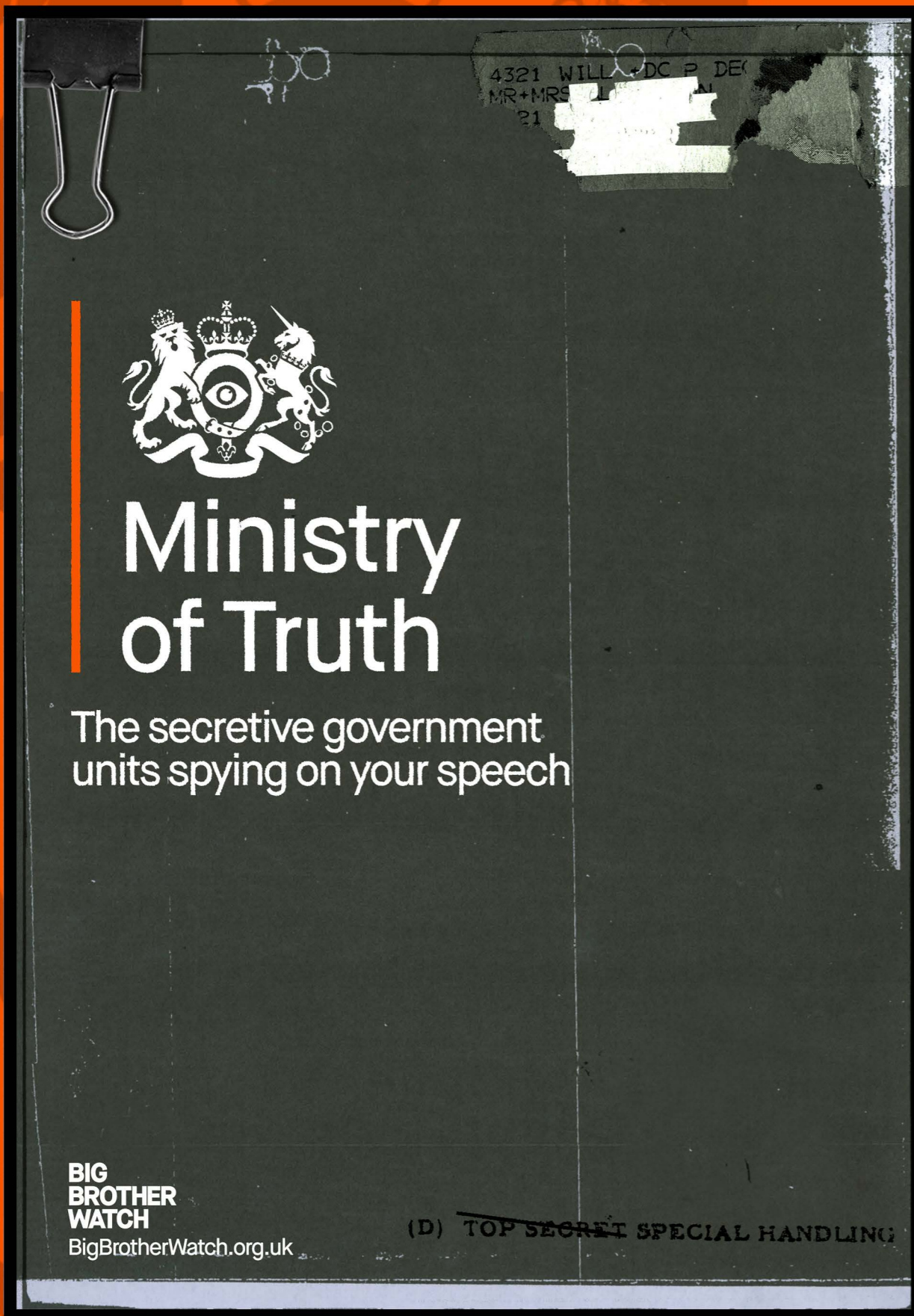
We built relationships with free speech advocates and journalists around the world, including the 'Twitter Files team' in the US, to share information about the growing abuse of counter-disinformation powers and terminology for illegitimate censorship, and strategies for change.

We sought to build the strongest possible campaign to protect freedom of expression, including by taking legal action where necessary. Thanks to our Crowdfunder, through which we raised £38,000, we were able to instruct a legal team and enter into a long battle with government departments for copies of their policies on countering disinformation – which we eventually obtained and analysed. It was clear that policies had changed as a result of our investigation.



Ministry of Truth

7-2017 RECORDED 8



We carried out the investigation by using Freedom of Information Requests, speculative Data Subject Access Requests with potentially-affected individuals, open source research - and also by exclusively interviewing a military whistleblower



Outcomes

01 Shut down

Following our campaign, the Cabinet Office shut down its counter-disinformation unit, the 'Rapid Response Unit'

02 Reform

The government's other unit, the Counter Disinformation Unit, was reformed and retitled the 'National Security Online Information Team' (NSOIT) with a restricted remit to national security and public safety – our investigation is ongoing

03 Apology

Following our legal action, the Government formally apologised to a British journalist and broadcaster after we found counter-disinformation staff unlawfully spread misinformation about her to officials across the UK government – and even counter-terror officials in the US – after she criticised a Covid policy. The government admitted such action was "inaccurate" and "not impartial".

Online Safety Bill

The Online Safety Bill continued to go through Parliament, finally achieving Royal Assent in October 2023. When it passed, we published a blog on '5 things you need to know about the Online Safety Act'.¹⁹

After our phenomenal 2022 win in getting powers to censor "legal but harmful" speech removed from the Bill, we continued to work with parliamentarians to inform them of the shortfalls of the Bill, including the risks posed to freedom of expression. We met with parliamentarians from all parties and continued to work closely with other NGOs and think tanks, co-ordinating our Save Online Speech coalition. We led the coalition in sending impactful written briefings to all peers on the risks the Bill poses to free expression and privacy, including its attack on end to end encryption.

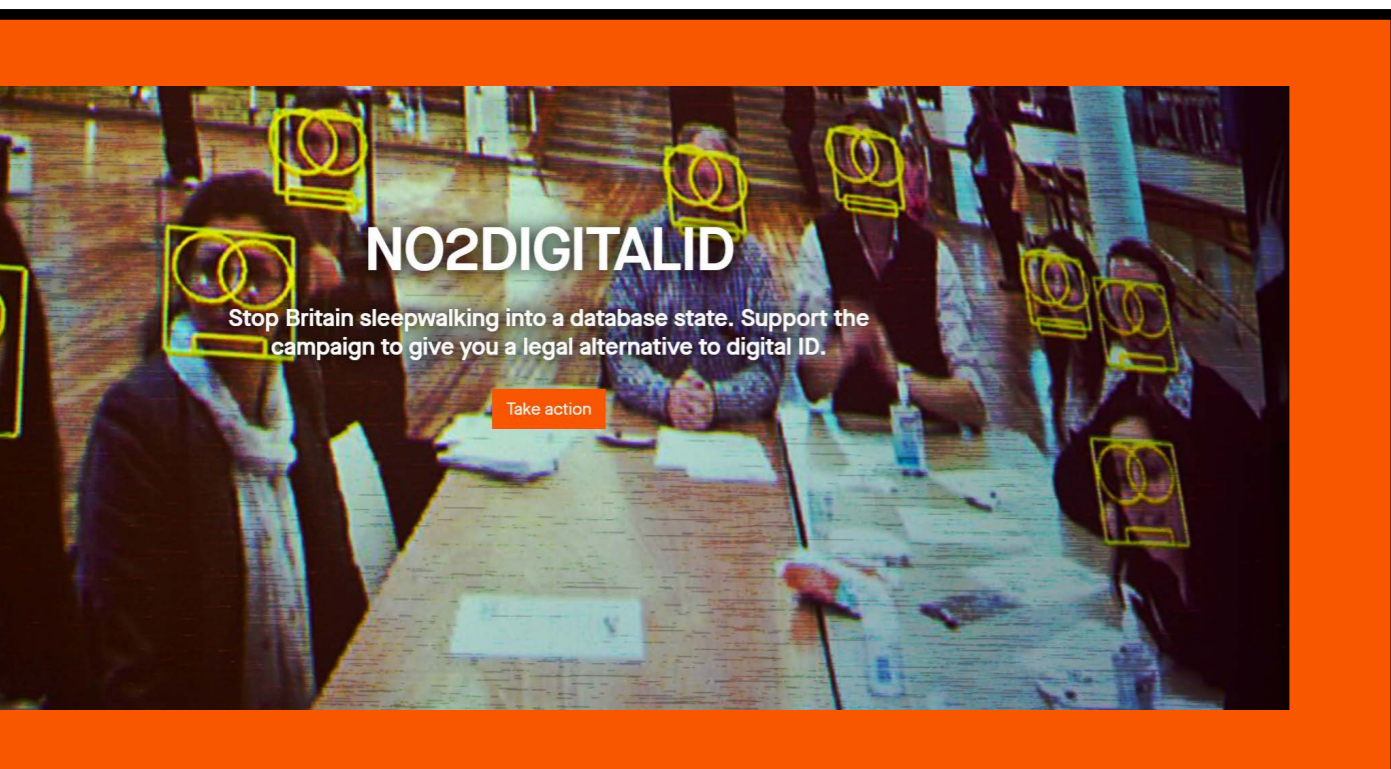
We were prominent voices defending free expression in the media, with our Advocacy Manager quoted in the Economist among other publications on the Bill, and taking part in a podcast with Twitter Files journalist Michael Shellenberger.

Data Rights & Justice

Data Rights & Justice

Digital ID

In 2023, we launched our new #No2DigitalID campaign fighting for the legal right to use non-digital alternatives to digital identities. We launched a new dedicated campaign page with a 'write to your MP' tool.



We launched the campaign as the government is introducing a giant digital identity system, One Login, for the public to access basic services like tax and benefits, whereby information on millions of people will be shared between government departments. At the same time, the government is cultivating a "digital identity market" for private companies to perform identity checks online. Ways of proving our identities online can be useful for many people, but privacy protections are paramount to avoid population-level privacy intrusion. The right to choose whether or not to use digital ID would

safeguard our generation and future generations from the most fundamental risk of a database state.

We worked with leading civil liberties advocate David Davis MP who laid an amendment to the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill in November calling for a legal right to choose whether or not to use digital ID. This put the issue on the political agenda in Parliament – the Minister John Whittingdale responded, "Where people want to use a digital verification service, the Government are committed to ensuring that available products and services are

secure and privacy-focused." We will continue to pursue the establishment of a legal right to choose not to use digital ID in 2024.

Big Brother Watch is a member of the Privacy and Inclusion Advisory Forum, which advises government on matters related to digital identity; and our director is a member of the Privacy and Consumer Advisory Group, which advises government on access to public services. We used both of these groups to advance our concerns about the emergence of de facto compulsory digital identity systems. We also participated in Government (DCMS/DSIT) quarterly roundtables on digital identity systems, raising our concerns.

We responded strongly to renewed calls for a national ID system. Early in 2023, former Prime Minister Sir Tony Blair and former Conservative Party leader

Lord Hague released a report calling for national digital IDs incorporating passports, driving licenses, tax records, qualifications and more.

We responded rapidly in the press, including live interviews with our director on ITV's Good Morning Britain, Times Radio and talkTV. Our comments put a punchy critical view into the debate and were quoted across major press coverage of the story, including the BBC²⁰ and the Mail.²¹ Our director also wrote an opinion piece for the Express.²²

We also responded to the OECD's consultation ahead of its Recommendation on the Governance of Digital Identity. The resulting Recommendation,²³ adopted in June 2023, incorporated two of our recommendations, including on the right to an alternative to digital ID.

Outcomes

01 Amendment

We put the campaign for a right to choose not to use digital ID on the political agenda, with a high-profile cross party amendment debated in parliament

02 Media

Our strong rebuttals to proposals for a national ID scheme achieved national media coverage

David Davis 
 @DavidDavisMP

People should be able to verify their identity using non-digital means if they so desire.

Today I tabled an amendment to the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill seeking to guarantee people's right to do this.

My speech in today's debate 🗣️



1:42 And data trading by private companies is an enormous industry - an absolutely enormous and lucrative industry.

We worked with leading civil liberties advocate David Davis MP who laid an amendment to the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill in November calling for a legal right to choose whether or not to use digital ID.

 **MailOnline** News 

Campaigners blast Tony Blair's 'retrograde' plan to impose digital ID cards on all Britons, warning it would create a 'checkpoint society' and 'puts people at risk of identity theft and hacking'

By Danya Bazaraa For Mailonline
09:57, 23 Feb 2023 , updated 10:20, 23 Feb 2023



RADIO 4

Would you support or oppose the introduction of a system of national identity cards in Britain?

Response	Percentage
Strongly support	23%
Somewhat support	31%
Somewhat oppose	13%
Strongly oppose	34%
Don't know	18%

 +7
View gallery

AI, Algorithms, and the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill

Big Brother Watch has remained one of the country's foremost voices on data rights, and among lead groups lobbying for greater rights protections in the context of the Government's Data Protection and Digital Information Bill.

We are concerned by the proposed changes to the UK's protections against solely automated decision making. The Bill includes a strengthening and clarification of the definition of solely automated decision-making, which we had specifically lobbied for, showing Big Brother Watch has the advocacy power to achieve long-term primary legislation reforms.

However, the government is aiming for the UK to be the AI centre and data dumpster of Europe and has drafted a Bill that tears up important UK GDPR safeguards that protect the public from the unfair, opaque and potentially discriminatory impact of automated decision making. Instead of protecting against the impact of algorithmic bias, the Bill would give free reign to organisations using AI systems in high-risk areas of significant consequence (e.g. welfare and policing).

Across 2023, we were in direct contact with the Bill team in Government and are invited to periodic roundtables with the Minister leading the Bill. We have also been in regular contact with the Opposition lead in the Labour Party, as well as Bill leads in other parties (Liberal

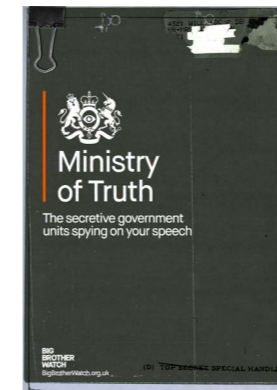
Democrats, SNP and Greens), including by providing oral briefings. We produced expert written briefings at each stage of the Bill, sent to all parliamentarians, and also drafted amendments for parliamentarians. Further, we have worked constructively with civil society, including as part of a coalition of expert data rights groups.

The Bill is not simply a 'technical'/'data' Bill - but a Bill that shapes the future of AI and rights in the UK. We used our excellent advocacy position to campaign for reforms to the Bill that protect privacy and equality from AI and algorithmic harms, particularly in the context of mass data processing and solely automated decisions. This work continues into 2024 along with the passage of the Bill through Parliament.

In 2023, we also extended our expert policy work on AI. We responded to the Government's consultation on its AI White Paper, wrote speeches for MPs for debates involving AI, and gave frequent press commentary on AI, including on the Government's 'AI Safety Summit' in November. Our director participated in a conference with the AI Faith and Civil Society Commission and attended a meeting at 10 Downing Street with the Commission to raise concerns about AI and the future of liberty in the heart of government.

Our director also participated in roundtable meetings with the Information Commissioner to raise concerns about data rights issues across the profile of Big Brother Watch's work.

Reports



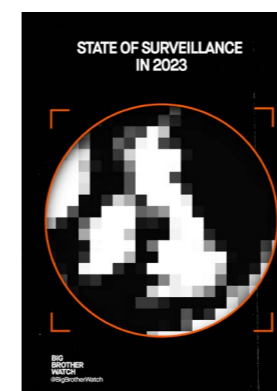
Ministry of Truth: the secretive government units spying on your speech (January 2023)



Biometric Britain: the expansion of facial recognition surveillance (May 2023)




CBDC - a privacy-eroding pound? Lessons from international central bank digital currency pilots for the UK (November 2023)



State of Surveillance in 2023 (December 2023)

This report followed our State of Surveillance 2018 report 5 years prior, and researches, examines and analyses the ways in which modern surveillance is impacting specific groups in the UK, including migrants, minority ethnic groups, women and disabled people/people in receipt of welfare.

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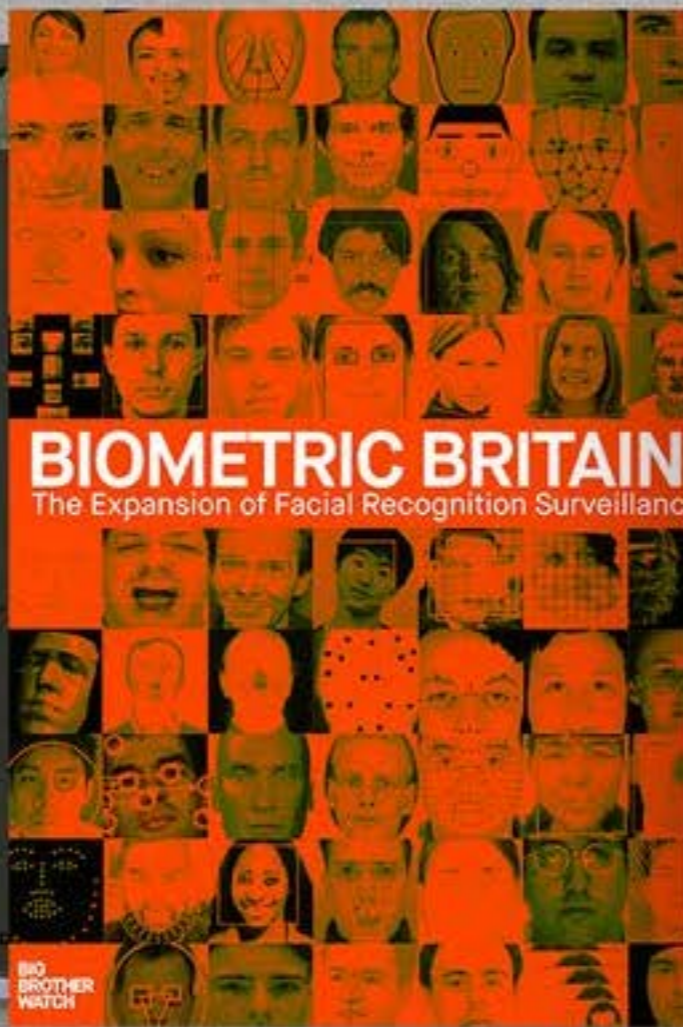


Ministry of Truth

The secretive government units spying on your speech

BIG BROTHER WATCH
BigBrotherWatch.org.uk

ID1 TOP TERNAZ SPECIAL HAND




BIOMETRIC BRITAIN

The Expansion of Facial Recognition Surveillance

BIG BROTHER WATCH

CBDC


a privacy-eroding pound?



Lessons from international central bank digital currency pilots for the UK

BIG BROTHER WATCH
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STATE OF SURVEILLANCE IN 2023



BIG BROTHER WATCH
@BigBrotherWatch

Team

We were delighted to formally welcome two new directors to our board: barristers Jennifer Robinson and Julianne Robinson.



Jennifer Robinson

Jennifer Robinson is a barrister at Doughty Street Chambers in London. Jen has acted in key human rights and media freedom cases in both domestic and international courts. Her work often involves UN engagement and advising governments, individuals, and organisations on international law and human rights issues.

Jen is a trustee of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and sits on the boards of the Grata Fund, the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights, and the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights at Oxford University.



Julianne Morrison

Julianne is a popular barrister at Monckton Chambers whose busy practice covers many of Chambers' core areas of work. She is particularly active in Public Law and Human Rights, Competition and Regulatory, Data Protection and Freedom of Information, as well as a number of areas of European law.

Julianne's practice involves a mixture of led work, in which she has significant experience of complex and high profile litigation, as well as a substantial amount of work in her own right as sole barrister and advocate. Julianne acts before a range of Courts and Tribunals for clients including multinational corporations, governmental and public bodies and private individuals.

We have maintained a dynamic, multi-disciplinary team of dedicated advocates with the skills, expertise and drive to win. At the beginning on 2023, we expanded our team and recruited our 7th member of staff – our Legal and Policy Officer, Susannah Copson, focusing on data protection, financial surveillance and digital identity.



Susannah Copson

Previously, she challenged state misuse of counter-terror architecture and researched the human rights implications of emerging tech in the pandemic response. Susannah holds an LLM in International Human Rights Law from the University of Essex.

We restarted our volunteer programme in October and recruited 5 new volunteers to work with us each one day per week. Our brilliant volunteers come to us from diverse backgrounds, spanning law, politics and communications.



Events

Events we organised in 2023 included:

- Ministry of Truth launch event, UK Parliament, January 2023
- Ministry of Truth talk by Silkie Carlo at the Science Museum, London, March 2023
- Biometric Britain: the expansion of facial recognition surveillance, report launch, UK Parliament, May 2023
- Surveillance after Snowden: 10 years since the mass surveillance revelations with David Davis MP, Shami Chakrabarti, Lord Strasburger, Ben Wizner (ACLU), Ben Jaffey KC, Annie Machon and speakers from Privacy International, Amnesty Tech, ORG, Liberty, UK Parliament, June 2023
- Does the UK need a Digital Bill of Rights? - Big Brother Watch event during Liberal Democrat Party Conference, Bournemouth, September 2023
- Liberty & censorship in the digital age - Big Brother Watch event during Conservative Party Conference, Manchester, October 2023
- Does the UK need a Digital Bill of Rights? - Big Brother Watch event during Labour Conference, Liverpool, October 2023
- CBDC - a privacy-eroding pound? Report launch, UK parliament, November 2023
- State of Surveillance 2023 launch event, Westminster, December 2023

Talks

In 2023, our spokespeople spoke at a range of public events.

Our director, Silkie Carlo, spoke at:

- Unherd Lates panel
- a panel at Liberal Democrats' spring conference in York about AI and democracy
- a panel at the Alan Turing Institute about AI for good and AI risks
- the Science Museum about our report on the Ministry of Truth
- a panel at the Free Speech Union with columnist Peter Hitchens about disinformation
- a panel for the World Ethical Data Forum about smart cities with Annie Machon
- a panel for the Digital Tories in parliament about AI
- a Spectator fringe event at Conservative Party conference on the Online Safety Bill
- a panel on facial recognition at Biometrics Congress
- a panel at the Battle of Ideas festival on online censorship

Our Advocacy Manager, Mark Johnson, spoke at:

- the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies on the Online Safety Bill
- an Index on Censorship/"Legal to say legal to type" event on the Online Safety Bill
- the Living Freedom Conference on our Ministry of Truth revelations.
- a panel at the Battle of Ideas Festival about the right to protest

Our Senior Advocacy Officer, Madeleine Stone, spoke at:

- the PrivSec conference, giving a keynote speech on CCTV
- a panel for the Senedd's Digital Rights cross-party group on facial recognition, opposite South Wales Police; as well as the cross-party group on Human Rights
- a panel at WOMAD festival on free speech online
- the Future of CCTV conference on facial recognition
- and spoke and co-organised a panel with the AI and Society Forum as part of the AI Summit fringe on AI and surveillance with Prof. Pete Fussey, Liberty and Migrants at Work

Our Head of Research and Investigations, Jake Hurfurt, spoke at Kings College London on the profile of our work spanning current surveillance and censorship issues

Our Legal and Policy Officer, Susannah Copson, spoke on a panel at an Open Rights Group/SOAS event on the weakening of the UK's data protection regime

20
23

2023
Recap



BIG BROTHER WATCH

Digital
Communications
Stats 2023

20
23

X (Twitter) totals

12.7 million

Total impressions

70.4k

Total retweets

48.3k

Total link clicks

9,170

New followers

117,770

Total followers

Top performing post on X (Twitter)

Top performing post on X (Twitter)

Big Brother Watch @BigBrotherWatch

BREAKING

Today we can expose... the #MinistryOfTruth

Secretive government units & the British Army have been spying on the public, academics, journalists, human rights campaigners & MPs in the UK...

under the guise of combatting 'misinformation'.

minitruth.co.uk



9:17 AM · Jan 29, 2023 · 1.5M Views

View post engagements

214 2.6K 4.4K 256

2 million

Total impressions

2.6k

Total retweets

3.4k

Total link clicks

4.4k

Likes

550k

Facebook reach

16.9k

Total shares

4.8k

Total link clicks

3,578

New followers

16,788

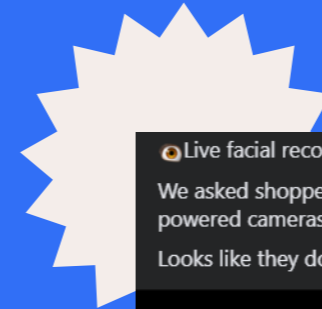
Total followers

460.9k

Total video views

Facebook (Meta)
totals

Top-performing
post on
Facebook (Meta)



📺 Live facial recognition cameras are watching you.
We asked shoppers outside Southern Co-op how they feel about being scanned by intrusive AI-powered cameras.
Looks like they don't like suspicionless mass surveillance 🗨️

0:00 / 0:53

See Insights and Ads [Boost post](#)

👍👎 7.7K 1.6K comments 4.3K shares

Top-performing
post on
Facebook (Meta)

282k

Facebook
impressions

8.9k

Reactions

218k

Total video views

4.3k

Shares

YouTube totals

212.7k

Views

2.2k

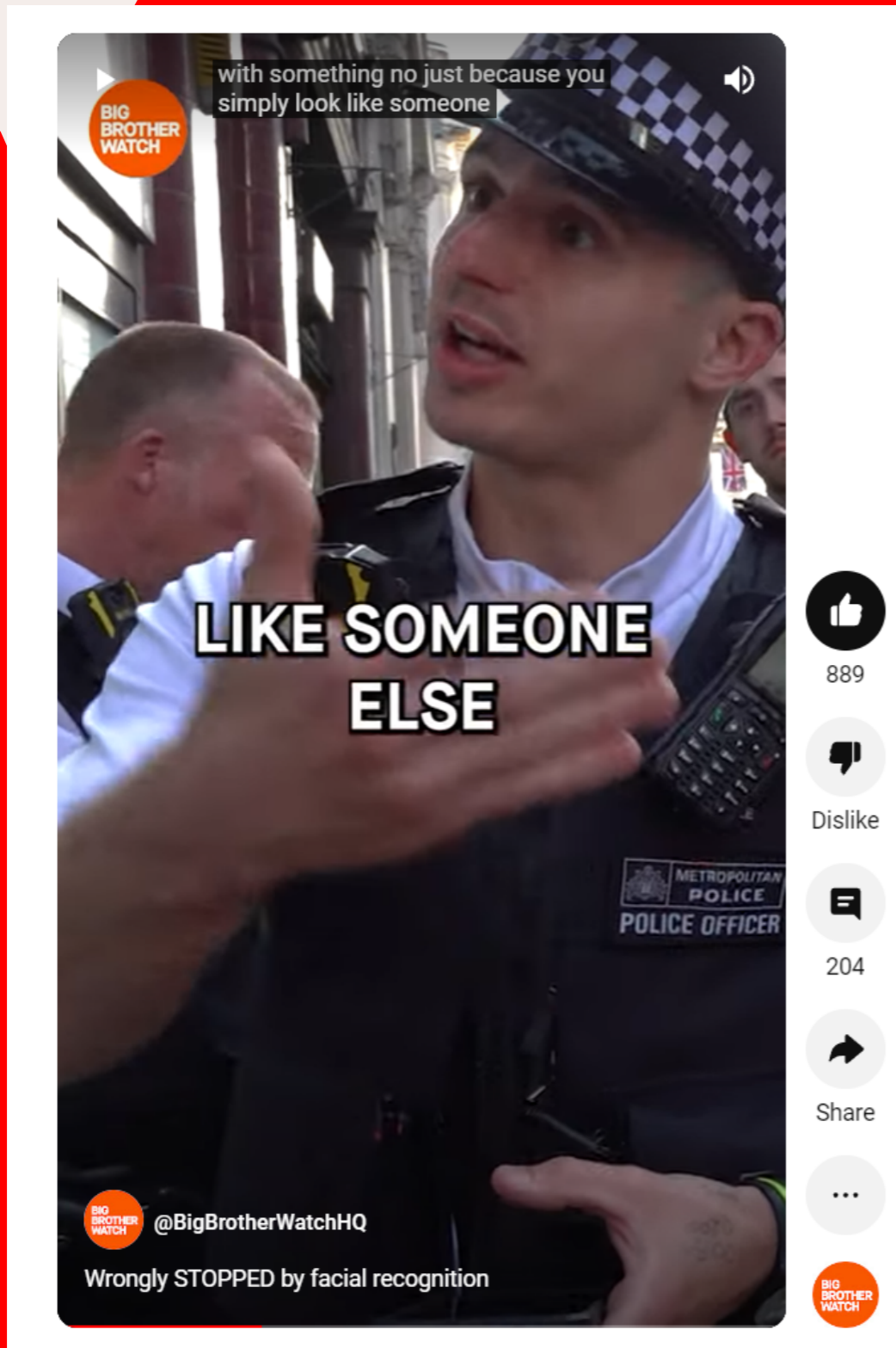
New subscribers

25,495

Total subscribers

Top-performing
post on YouTube
(Shorts)

Top-performing
post on YouTube
(Shorts)



26.6k
Views

37.6k
Shown in feed

49
Subscribers

Top-performing
post on YouTube
(Videos)

Top-performing
post on YouTube
(Videos)



15.2k
Views

104.9k
Impressions

277
Subscribers

Telgram totals

1,768

New followers

3,192

Total followers

Website totals

404,153

Unique Visitors: The unique amount of visitors we've had to our website

835,333

Number of Visits: The number of visits to our website made by all unique visitors

4,397,367

Pages: The number of full pages that have been viewed

Report
downloads

36,726

Ministry of Truth downloads

5,164

Biometric Britain downloads

1,831

CBDC - a privacy-eroding pound? downloads

3,606

State of Surveillance in 2023 downloads

The year ahead in 2024

2024 is a year of major political change, with a UK General Election set and more people across the world going to the ballot box than ever before in human history.

We will be engaging with all major parties to promote our key policy priorities on free speech and privacy, including the need for a Digital Rights Bill.

We will fight to protect financial privacy, roll back state surveillance and protect freedom of expression. In particular, we will work to:

Stop unprecedented mass financial spying on the premise of welfare administration

Prevent mandatory invasive CBDCs and financial surveillance

Investigate the Counter Disinformation Unit's replacement, the National Security Online information Team, ensure free expression is protected online and dismantle the Ministry of Truth

Roll back live facial recognition surveillance

Encourage regulation and limitations on retrospective facial recognition uses

Prevent mandatory digital ID

Curb the bonfire of data protection rights

Investigate and challenge growing employer and workplace surveillance

Curb attempts to expand excessive investigatory powers

Humanity is at a crossroads between technocratic authoritarianism and freedom. Your action decides what path we take.

If our campaigns are successful now, we can protect liberty not only for ourselves but potentially for generations to come.

That's why your support is vital. The fight for the future is now

CLICK HERE TO DONATE

Endnotes

- 1 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Biometric-Britain.pdf>
- 2 <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/519/justice-and-home-affairs-committee/news/199624/lords-committee-questions-legality-of-live-facial-recognition-technology/>
- 3 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2023/10/the-guardian-two-thirds-of-people-on-facial-recognition-watchlist-were-not-wanted-for-arrest/>
- 4 <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/police-ramp-up-surveillance-thousands-28328901>
- 5 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2023/04/the-guardian-mps-and-rights-groups-call-on-frasers-group-to-stop-using-live-facial-recognition-in-stores/>
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- 7 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/12/21/driving-licences-are-the-states-next-weapon-to-rob-privacy/>
- 8 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2023/07/live-facial-recognition-what-do-do-if-you-are-stopped-by-facial-recognition-cameras/>
- 9 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2023/08/a-guide-to-facial-recognition-at-protests-2/>
- 10 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2023/09/the-observer-policing-minister-secretly-lobbied-the-uks-independent-data-regulator-to-favour-facewatches-facial-recognition-software/>
- 11 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Letter-to-JE-181223-1.pdf>
- 12 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2023/07/the-telegraph-50000-people-respond-to-the-government-consultation-on-a-uk-cbdc/>
- 13 [Poverty Panopticon: the hidden algorithms shaping Britain's welfare state – Big Brother Watch, July 2021: https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Poverty-Panopticon.pdf](#)
- 14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNlcapT2dfI>
- 15 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/01/30/time-close-governments-ministry-truth/>
- 16 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2023/06/the-guardian-caroline-lucas-mp-included-in-a-disinformation-report-for-criticising-covid-policies/>
- 17 [MiniTruth.co.uk](#) or <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/campaigns/ministry-of-truth/>
- 18 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/09/11/cdu-suppressing-free-speech-covid-government-opposition/>
- 19 <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/2023/10/five-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-online-safety-bill/>
- 20 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-64729442>
- 21 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11783813/Campaigners-blast-Tony-Blairs-retrograde-plan-impose-digital-ID-cards-Britons.html>
- 22 <https://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/1738148/identity-cards-uk-tony-blair-winston-churchill-comment>
- 23 <https://www.oecd.org/digital/digital-government/oecd-recommendation-on-the-governance-of-digital-identity.html>