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How spying on campaigners became mainstream in the UK

Many of the UK's most prominent institutions are using private intelligence firms to snoop on activists

[Jenna Corderoy](#)

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Fracking firm Cuadrilla has monitored campaigners' social media posts | Mark Kerrison/In Pictures via Getty Images

Campaigners in the UK have long been aware that spies could be infiltrating their networks. From undercover cops to social media monitoring, the right to protest comes with the risk of surveillance.

Just this week, openDemocracy revealed how a gold mining company in Northern Ireland spent years monitoring a 72-year-old activist, amassing a 92-page dossier of information on his campaigning.

But snooping is no longer the preserve of police and private intelligence firms. Increasingly, many of the country's leading political and cultural institutions are tracking peaceful activists.

This surveillance lurks in the background as protests take place, with almost no transparency or accountability. But for the past few years, openDemocracy has been working with activists to help them exercise their legal information rights in efforts to find out who has been monitoring them.

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Monitoring in London

Intelligence firm Welund, which was reportedly set up by a former MI6 agent, is said to boast a client list that includes many of the world's biggest oil and gas firms. And one of the firm's top officials is reported to have described the green movement as an "existential threat" to the oil and gas industry.

In 2021, we revealed that Welund was hired by BP to monitor an environmental campaigner, Chris Garrard, as the oil company gathered CCTV images of him, his social media activity and notes about his appearance.

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Welund provides a curated daily dashboard with listings of planned demonstrations, events and protests

Greater London Authority internal email

The spy firm has also been hired by public authorities. London's City Hall faced criticism for signing a £12,000, year-long contract with Welund in April 2020, in which the firm was paid to provide intelligence about activists. Documents obtained by openDemocracy now show that the Greater London Authority (GLA) had previously hired the firm on another contract several months earlier, in 2019.

"Welund provides a curated daily dashboard with listings of planned demonstrations, events and protests," an internal GLA email says. It adds that the firm has "consistently given warning of gatherings in London that are potentially disruptive, that [City Hall] did not have information on from other sources – including [the Metropolitan Police]."

The GLA was also implicated in the intelligence gathering of environmental protesters last summer. openDemocracy revealed how security officials linked to a GLA event "spied" on a group of environmental activists and blocked them from participating in a public debate.

Video footage obtained by openDemocracy shows how campaigners who wanted to ask questions at an event with London Mayor Sadiq Khan at the O2 arena were personally identified and turned away at the door.

In one clip, a plain-clothes security official at the entrance calls out the campaigners' names as they approach, but refuses to tell them who he is working for. A second clip also shows an O2 security guard admitting he had received "intelligence" about the green campaigners.

One email exchange between GLA officials refers to "intelligence being filtered through on the night" about a planned protest, and adds: "O2's security intelligence unit is extremely good and effective."

Questions have been raised over how campaigners were identified, although there is no suggestion that Welund was involved.

While private companies step up their surveillance of campaigners, their activities are gradually being exposed using powerful legal requests.

Subject Access Requests (SARs), which allow individuals to obtain copies of any personal information that a UK business or organisation holds about them, are being increasingly used by environmental activists to understand how they are being monitored by corporations.

‘Discreet’ conversations

Welund is one of several intelligence firms to be hired by prominent public institutions. But it seems that one company in particular enjoys access to the upper levels of government.

Hakluyt, which is chaired by Conservative peer Paul Deighton, has been described as a “retirement home for ex-MI6 officers”. It made headlines last month for hiring the UK’s Brexit negotiator, Ollie Robbins.

In 2001, a few years after Hakluyt was founded, The Sunday Times accused the company of deploying an agent to spy on Greenpeace campaigners on behalf of oil companies. Hakluyt now says it has “no relationship with the spooky world” and that snooping on NGOs would be beyond the pale. Records show it has recently met ministers and advised a number of cultural institutions, but often without much transparency.

openDemocracy previously reported how Hakluyt met with then-minister for investment Gerry Grimstone in 2020 – during which no minutes were taken. But internal documents suggest that a government operation called Project DEFEND, which aimed to reduce the UK’s reliance on China for medical equipment, was discussed at the meeting.

An email sent to Grimstone from a Hakluyt employee in 2020, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, is titled: “A specific matter – confidential”. The employee wrote: “There is a specific and time-urgent matter that we think you may wish to engage with... In our judgement this would be worth your attention. If you agree, delighted to brief you and more importantly to discreetly connect you with [REDACTED].”

Grimstone replied: “We will set up a quick call.”

The email is heavily redacted, with the Department for International Trade claiming that a disclosure would or would be likely to prejudice commercial interests.

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The following year, the then-business secretary Kwasi Kwarteng had what the government termed an “introductory call” with Hakluyt. A FOI request from openDemocracy revealed that there was “no agenda, briefing or notes shared” for this meeting.

Kwarteng also attended a breakfast at Hakluyt’s London office with Deighton and others, where they “discussed COP and decarbonisation as well as the current political situation” But again, records state: “There was no briefing prepared or notes taken of the meeting.’

At least two further meetings between Hakluyt and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy took place last year, but in every case very few records were kept about what was discussed. One document states the conversations aimed to gain Hakluyt's insight on issues affecting the professional and business services sector.

Hakluyt also advises some of the UK's best known cultural institutions. But again, details of their exact relationships are scarce.

According to FOI disclosures, Hakluyt has been an in-kind corporate member of Tate since 2016, providing the galleries with "pro bono advice on various matters". When asked for copies of the advice received, Tate said that it "constitutes information related to due diligence" and refused to disclose it.

Hakluyt is also a corporate member of the British Museum, to which it has donated money. The museum turns to the company for advice "to ensure that potential opportunities and risks have been identified". But again, the British Museum refused our request to see a copy of this advice.

Police informants for gas and oil firms

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests that followed George Floyd's murder in the US in 2020 and a wave of disruptive climate protests in 2020 and 2021, UK police chiefs planned to step up their surveillance of activists. And the renewed efforts have frequently seen public authorities working hand-in-hand with private firms.

For instance, heavily redacted emails obtained by openDemocracy show that oil giant Shell was in close contact with the Metropolitan Police in the run up to its annual general meeting (AGM) last year. The meeting was interrupted by protesters, and three were arrested.

In May last year, a Met Police officer from MO6 Public Order Planning, a unit that "plans and delivers proportionate policing plans in response to events in London", emailed Shell saying: "I am the officer who will be looking at the Shell AGM on Tuesday 24th May 2022. Could you give me as many details as possible about the event and any concerns... [REDACTED] I am trying to get the whole picture for the event [REDACTED]."

Fracking firm Cuadrilla monitored campaigners' social media posts and flagged them to Lancashire Constabulary

In further emails, released to openDemocracy without dates, a Shell official replied: "All in all I am expecting significant protest activity outside the building as well as numerous single shareholders inside disrupting the meeting."

In another case, an investigation by the i newspaper last year showed how fracking firm Cuadrilla monitored campaigners' social media posts and flagged them to Lancashire Constabulary. Now, an exchange of emails obtained by openDemocracy adds new evidence of collaboration between the company and the police.

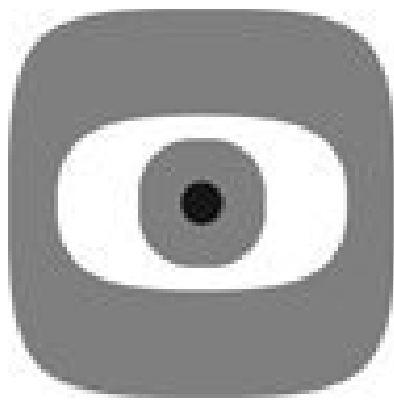
In one email, dated February 2019, Cuadrilla discussed the delivery of equipment to its exploration site, asking the police force "what impact it may have upon the psyche of the campaigners and the subsequent tone of the protest".

The company also informed the police that Extinction Rebellion (XR) was planning to disrupt a "petroleum society dinner" at the Natural History Museum. "Other groups with XR are also involved, but this is the main event," it said. "I am not sure how engaged the police are with the event but the proposed numbers are pretty substantial so worth passing along."

A police official replied: "Leave it with me, I will pass through to [REDACTED] and the Met."

Kevin Blowe, campaigns coordinator at police monitoring organisation Netpol, said that the use of social media monitoring is "the reason why we urge protesters to remember anything shared on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or other social media platforms is never private".

He said: "We encourage campaigns challenging powerful state and corporate interests to assume the worst – and to take the threat of surveillance seriously."



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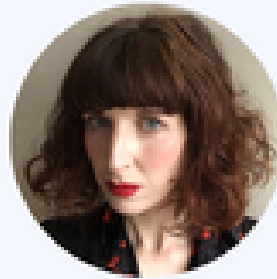
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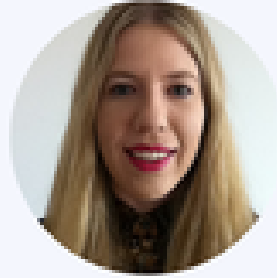
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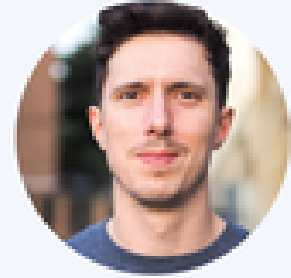
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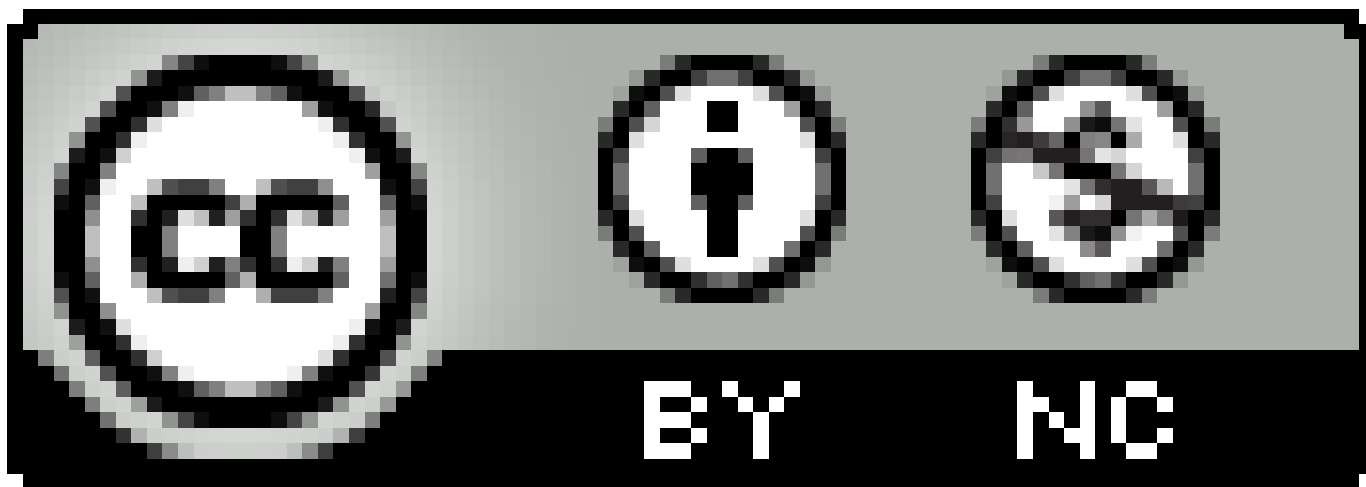
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