

Files expose Britain’s secret D-Notice censorship regime

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Journalists

INVESTIGATION

Documents obtained by The Grayzone reveal how British soldiers and spies censor news reporting on “national security,” coercing reporters into silence. The files show the Committee boasting of a “90% + success rate” in enforcing the official British line on any controversial story — or disappearing reports entirely.

A trove of documents obtained by The Grayzone through freedom of information (FOI) requests provide unprecedented insight into Britain’s little-known military and intelligence censorship board. The contents lay bare how the secretive Defence and Security Media Advisory (DSMA) Committee censors the output of British journalists, while categorizing independent media as “extremist” for publishing “embarrassing” stories. The body imposes what are known as D-Notices, gag-orders systematically suppressing information available to the public.

The files provide the clearest view to date of the inner workings of the opaque committee, exposing which news items the British national security state has sought to shape or keep from public view. These include the bizarre 2010 death of a GCHQ codebreaker, MI6 and British special forces activity in the Middle East and Africa, the sexual abuse of children by government officials, and the death of Princess Diana. The files show the shadowy Committee maintains an iron grip over the output of legacy British media outlets, transforming British journalists to royal court stenographers. With the Committee having firmly imposed themselves on the editorial process, a wide range of reporters have submitted “apologies” to the board for their media offenses, flaunting their subservience in order to maintain their standing within British mainstream media. In addition, the documents also show the Committee’s intentions to extend the D-Notice system to social media, stating its desire to engage with “tech giants” in a push to suppress revealing disclosures on platforms like Meta and Twitter/X.

How The Grayzone obtained the files

The DSMA Committee describes itself as “an independent advisory body composed of senior civil servants and editors,” which brings together representatives of the security services, army, government officials, press association chiefs, senior editors, and reporters. The system forges a potent clientelist rapport between journalists and powerful state agencies, heavily influencing what national security matters get reported on in the mainstream, and how. The Committee also routinely issues so-called “D-Notices,” demanding media outlets seek its “advice” before reporting certain stories, or simply asking they avoid particular topics outright. The DSMA Committee is funded by and housed in Britain’s Ministry of Defence (MOD), chaired by the MOD’s Director General of Security Policy Paul Wyatt, and 36-year British Army veteran Brigadier Geoffrey Dodds serves as its secretary, raising serious questions about the extent to which British “news” on national security could effectively be written by the Ministry of Defence. Even though the MOD explicitly retains the right to dismiss its secretary, the DSMA Committee insists it operates independently from the British government. This means the Committee isn’t subject to British FOI laws. So how did The Grayzone obtain these files? The unprecedented disclosure was the result of an effort by the Committee to assist Australia’s government in creating a



D-Notice system of their own. In doing so, it established a paper trail that Canberra was forced to release under its own FOI laws. Australian authorities fought tooth and nail to prevent the documents’ release for over five months, until the country’s Information Commissioner forced the Department of Home Affairs to release them.

Official ‘advice’

The files obtained by The Grayzone comprise records of multiple meetings attended by officials from a variety of Australian government departments and the DSMA Committee, answers from the UK’s Committee staff to questions posed by Canberra on how the system functions in practice, and a 36-page report from a 2015 internal DSMA Committee review, which outlines the history of the D-Notice system and includes a comprehensive list of requests for “advice” received and submitted over the previous five years. The Committee operates simultaneously secretly and above ground. The documents note, “Conversations between the DSMA system and journalists/media organisations are confidential.” In fact, the Committee states in a briefing given to Australian officials that it isn’t even “required to submit evidence from discussions with media as part of police investigations or court proceedings”. In theory, the system is voluntary, and publications are not legally obliged to comply with the Committee’s orders to censor or distort information. But the vast majority of British journalists obey the DSMA Committee’s “advice,” with nearly all D-notices and advice resulting in stories being spiked or altered. The Committee’s 2015 internal review, which was prompted by the Edward Snowden affair, explained how “in serious cases,” the British government can “seek a court injunction” or prosecute journalists who violate Committee advice under the Official Secrets Act — a point the DSMA Secretary, Brig. Dodds, emphasized in meetings with Australian officials. Since then, Britain has introduced sweeping new national security laws, under which journalists and whistleblowers could also face prosecution.

DSMA conceals MI6 murder of crack codebreaker?

Contained within the internal 2015 DSMA review is a list of examples of “requests for advice” sent to and from the Committee between May 2011 and May 2014. The logs are highly illuminating, revealing the topics about which British reporters felt the need to consult the Committee, and stories the body sought to distort or bury altogether. It is unclear from the document whether particular “requests” entailed the Committee writing to journalists and editors before broadcast and/or publication, or vice versa. A huge number of requests — 50 in total — were filed in relation to the involvement of British intelligence in the CIA’s extraordinary rendition program and related “cooperation” with Muammar Gaddafi’s External Security Organization, as well as the inquest into the death of Gareth Williams, a crack GCHQ codebreaker seconded to MI6. In August 2010, Williams died under extremely strange circumstances in a central London residence owned by Britain’s foreign intelligence agency. Williams’ death was officially ruled “unnatural and likely to have been criminally mediated”. He’d been dead for 10 days by the time his body was discovered in a locked bag in his bathroom. Inexplicably, neither GCHQ nor MI6 had alerted authorities to the codebreaker’s prolonged absence from work. It was only when his sister informed GCHQ he was missing the agencies alerted police — following an unexplained five-hour delay. Investigating detectives were subsequently prohibited from interviewing Williams’ spy agency colleagues, or reviewing relevant documents. The British press quickly moved on from the case, despite the coroner stating that MI6 involvement in Williams’ death was a “legitimate line of inquiry,” which had not been satisfactorily explored by authorities. In the years since, unsubstantiated conspiracy theories claiming Russia was somehow responsible for his murder have widely proliferated, while the deeply suspect conduct of Williams’ British intelligence employers has been forgotten by UK media — a trend that could potentially be

DA Notice Requests for Advice – May-Nov 12			
Subject Area	Serial Numbers	Comments	Total
Special Forces	1795, 1796, 1797, 1806, 1808, 1815, 1823, 1830, 1843,	Olympics, planned SF rescue op in Afghanistan, alleged SF involvement in Syria,	9
Intel Agencies	1793, 1798, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1804, 1807, 1809, 1811, 1812, 1813, 1814, 1822, 1827, 1828, 1829, 1833, 1836, 1839, 1840, 1842, 1848, 1850, 1851, 1858	Naming, DPBAC meeting with C,	25
Current and Recent Military	1831, 1832, 1855,	Northern Ireland troubles	3

Released by Department of Home Affairs under the Freedom of Information Act 1982

32

attributed to DSMA interventions. The files also show how from May to November of 2011, 29 requests related to “intel agencies” were lodged. This included “Libyan involvement,” no doubt a reference to MI6 and SAS operatives being captured infiltrating the country as Tripoli descended into the chaos of a Western-sponsored proxy war. There were 16 requests pertaining to “Wikileaks,” as well as “D For Discretion,” a BBC radio program examining the DSMA Committee’s operations. Whether this reflects the British state broadcaster asking the Committee for information, or journalists wanting guidance for reporting on its contents, is unclear.

Between November 2011 and May 2012, the DSMA issued advice on 14 occasions related to special forces involvement in the London Olympics, and a “failed hostage rescue [operation] in Nigeria”. This references a botched March 2012 Special Boat Service effort to save a pair of European kidnapping victims held by Boko Haram, which collapsed when they were executed by their captors. Details of the raid reported in the media varied from outlet to outlet, suggesting conflicting information may have been provided by the Committee. There were also a number of “miscellaneous” inquiries related to “Porton Down ‘victims’”. It’s unclear why the phrase “victims” was presented in inverted commas as it’s well-established that numerous highly unethical human experiments were conducted over decades at Porton Down, Britain’s leading biological and chemical warfare research institute. In at least one case, a Porton Down test subject was unlawfully killed after being exposed to nerve agents. Much like the victims of the CIA’s MKULTRA mind control program, many British soldiers were secretly dosed with LSD at the facility throughout the 1960s.

‘Intel agencies’ and Princess Diana’s death

From May to November 2012, the Committee handled requests relating to “alleged [British special forces] involvement in Syria”. It was widely speculated that British special forces were present in Syria at this time, though few details have emerged since. Concurrently, the DSMA was also preoccupied with the mysterious shooting in September 2012 of members of the Iraqi-British al-Hilli family in the French Alps. The case remains unsolved today, but in February, Paris suggested an “elite” Swiss special forces soldier “who went off the rails” may have been responsible. The November 2012 to May 2013 period saw requests over a “possible [special forces] rescue op in Nigeria,” a “PQ” — personal question? — regarding a “paedo,” and the March 1996 Dunblane Massacre in which known pedophile Thomas Hamilton murdered 16 children and their teacher at a Scottish primary school. Police reports on Hamilton linking him to influential local figures and historic sex abuse were inexplicably sealed for 100 years, and the mass shooting prompted a national ban on handguns. Between May and November 2013, seven requests regarding “special forces” were filed in relation to the August 1997 death of Princess Diana. Incredibly, a combined total of 85 “intel agency” requests surfaced on Diana’s passing, and NSA leaker Edward Snowden’s revelations. In a disquieting testament to the DSMA Committee’s efficacy, the British media almost entirely ignored the Guardian’s reporting on Snowden’s leaks. What remains uncertain is what intelligence-connected information the Committee dealt with related to the death of Princess Diana. “Miscellaneous” requests during this time period involved a parliamentarian visiting a brothel, “Scottish independence,” and the case of Hollie Greig, a woman with Down’s

People exit the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defense’s main building in London.
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A non-comprehensive list of topics on which the DSMA Committee gave journalists “advice” between May and November 2012 describes numerous requests relating to “alleged SF involved in Syria”.
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