

The Shadow Contract, Episode One: The Influencer Campaign

If you're listening to this, it means you care about the truth. At Good Law Project, we don't just expose wrongdoing, we go to court to stop it. From secret NHS data deals, to PPE cronyism, to environmental destruction quietly signed off by the government, we uncover what's hidden, hold power to account and use the law to resist hate and bring hope. But here's the truth. We can only keep protecting you and exposing stories like this one if you stand with us. We don't take corporate money, we answer to no party or private interest. We're people powered. We're funded by people like you. Injustice is not inevitable. So if you believe in truth, accountability and the right to know what's being done in your name, support our work. Go to goodlawproject.org/podcast and give what you can. Because if we don't fight for transparency, who will?

Julia Patterson, Founder and CEO of EveryDoctor: When this email arrived in my inbox, I honestly didn't know what it was at first. I felt quite confused. But when I received their full proposal, I felt absolutely shocked. I was really horrified about what I had found. This is a terrifying example of the kind of activity that none of us wants to think goes on. That a company would go to these lengths to influence public opinion and not just any company. A company that is about to be entrusted with our NHS data, our medical records, our health.

Imagine, you take your child to the doctor. You sit down, ready to explain something tender and important. Your child is struggling with their mental health. Depression, anxiety, self-harm. A sudden pressure grips your chest. You picture the words leaving your mouth and entering a system you can't see. Disappearing into databases you don't control. Who will read that? Where will it be stored?

Could it be shared, misused, twisted? How could your words in those moments impact their life in years to come? Their education, their employability, their civil rights? In that ordinary consultation room, you realize that asking for care might carry a hidden cost. You're not just revealing your child's truth. You're exposing them to risks you can't predict and dangers you can't fully see.

I'm Eliza Pitkin and I work in digital communications at Good Law Project. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, campaigns, call-outs and the rest. I've seen a fair few influencer campaigns in my time, but nothing like this. This is a story on how big companies influence public opinion quietly using influencers, without ever saying who is behind it. This is The Shadow Contract.

We start with what some would call covert influence. Basically bad people doing bad things. We're talking about a company entrusted with our most sensitive health data that was willing to manipulate public opinion from the shadows.

Enter Disrupt Marketing, a glossy London content agency that usually works with high street brands, sportswear, supermarket ads. But this time, they weren't selling leggings. They were selling influence. And the client behind it? A billion dollar surveillance firm with roots in warfare, immigration raids and predictive policing. The name of that company? Palantir. But it wasn't just Palantir and Disrupt Marketing.

Hiding between them, Topham Guerin: a controversial political communications agency criticised for disinformation-style campaigning tactics. Tactics including the 2019 'FactCheckUK' stunt, when the Conservative Party's official Twitter account was rebranded to mimic an independent fact-checking service during a live national TV debate.

So let's start at the beginning. Just before Christmas 2023, Disrupt Marketing sent an email to Dr. Julia Patterson, a former NHS psychiatrist, healthcare influencer and founder of the healthcare advocacy group EveryDoctor. They asked her and several influencers like her to specify their fee expectations for sending two tweets, a video and a follow-up

tweet in support of a campaign which aimed to, and I quote, “clear up misinformation relating to some recent data privacy concerns that were shared in the UK press.” As the CEO of a campaign group advocating for better funding, transparency and protections for NHS staff and patients, Julia thought this sounded intriguing and decided to reply. Soon, like several other influencers who’d shown interest, she received a briefing document.

The header was cryptic. TG x Palantir. Just three words and a million pound breadcrumb trail. The kind of acronym you’d scroll past unless you knew what to look for. Inside, the document painted a picture. It explained how a not-for-profit campaign organisation had been fiercely critical of the NHS. Critical for the awarding of a £330 million contract to American software and data analytics firm, Palantir. The influencers weren’t told what words to use, but the subtext was obvious. Cast doubts on the critics, soothe anxieties about Palantir and make it look natural. Critically, they were told they must keep the brand confidential and not tag Palantir.

Quoting from Topham Guerin email: There is some misinformation being circulated online, largely by the Good Law Project. They are a not-for-profit campaign organisation and have been extremely critical of the contract being awarded to Palantir. They’re spreading fear that as a result of this contract being awarded, private patient data across the United Kingdom may be at risk. The client wants to use four to six influencers who are well-versed in tech, healthcare, government and data privacy to raise awareness of Palantir’s contract with the NHS, which will be one of the largest in the UK’s history, rebut the claims and educate around what it actually means.

So clearly this wasn’t just a misfire. It was a glimpse behind the firewall into a world where corporate actors try to rewrite public opinion before the public even knows there’s a story.

Julia Patterson: “I didn’t quite know what to make of it initially. I found it confusing, but I got back to the team and asked them for more

information because I wanted to know who else was involved and what line of messaging they were taking with this campaign.

I'm not as well aware about Palantir as Good Law Project is, but clearly I work in the healthcare advocacy space. I've been well aware of what data campaigns have been saying, the concerns from patients for a very long time about Palantir and the work they've been doing. And so any campaign involving promoting their messaging or things they're saying raised a red flag for me, I have to admit. So I wanted to know who else was involved and what it was all about."

Designed to filter into socials over the Christmas break, the campaign would sow the seeds of doubt around the work being done by Good Law Project as they shone a spotlight on the NHS contract and their entanglement with Palantir. Palantir, let's not forget, is a company linked to US immigration and customs enforcement, predictive policing programmes and military surveillance projects.

Julia Patterson: "This email dropped into my inbox just before Christmas and it was a time of high stress and pressure within our campaigning work anyway, it always is around Christmas.

I have to admit when I received the second email from the company with an attached document laying out the project, I was then absolutely shocked about what I found and I felt really horrified and I felt incredibly indignant as well."

It was a campaign designed to discredit and deplatform a quest for transparency and due diligence. A quest to protect our valuable health data from this shady organisation.

But with a single poorly targeted email, Disrupt Marketing pulled back the curtain on the entire shadowy campaign, exposing their collaboration with Topham Guerin, the mysterious TG from the email header, and their puppet master, Palantir. That's gotta be awkward. When we asked for comment, Disrupt Marketing told us they had a limited brief to source influencers and they were never paid by Topham Guerin or Palantir for their work.

But still, why is it so nailed down a blackboard cringe? Because not only was Julia Patterson the founder and CEO of EveryDoctor, a campaign group established to protect NHS staff and resist privatisation, she's actually a good friend of Good Law Project, having worked closely to successfully challenge the government's illegal VIP lane for politically connected PPE suppliers.

Good Law Project had been working since July 2023 to make sure that NHS patients would have the ability to opt out of having their information shared with private companies. Companies just like Palantir. It was in the November that Good Law Project formally announced their intention to mount legal challenges to ensure the NHS would handle sensitive data properly.

Jo Maugham, Founder of Good Law Project: "We were running an unusually conservative campaign actually against Palantir. The story was quite a complicated story."

Here's Jo Maugham, Founder of Good Law Project.

"We didn't know that we understood the story perfectly, so we were telling it very, very cautiously. We tend to become clearer in our tone of voice as we feel we understand the story better, and that, you know, with a story like this one just takes time. Despite telling the story very cautiously, we began to get a lot of pushback on social media from, you know, quite establishment accounts. So health correspondence at major newspapers. And we didn't really understand where that was coming from.

I mean, we also got community noted on Twitter. It was the first time that had ever happened. Something that we had said that I believed then and still believe now was right and justified. Community noted, in other words, Twitter put up a notice saying that what we'd said was false and wrong in consequence of a big pushback by prominent influences on on Twitter and I just didn't understand where that was coming from because as I say we'd been super careful, super cautious and you see from time to time on social media this stuff happening and you wonder to yourself well maybe

I got it wrong maybe, although I think I'm right, maybe I'm just not right about this – but generally speaking if you spend as I do too much time on social media you can see where there has been a disruption in the force, if you like.

Something unusual, in other words, happening that can't really be explained by normal metrics. But I just put it down to, well, it's just one of those things, I'll never know. I mean, all of this stuff was happening and we just didn't know where it was coming from until at least I was contacted by a friend of mine who is a healthcare influencer, as it happens. And she told me about an email that she had received.”

Our friend of course is Julia, who upon receiving the disrupt email sent it almost immediately to Jo.

Jo Maugham: “And the email basically wanted to know what she would want to be paid for sending out some messages, some content on social media, smearing Good Law Project's campaign about Palantir, smearing it over the Christmas period where I guess they thought we'd all be, you know, sitting back and tucking into our nut loaf or whatever it is that Palantir reckons progressives do over Christmas.

And they picked the wrong person, I guess. They hadn't spotted that Julia Patterson and I were friends. And what I could see was that Palantir had hired this agency called Topham Guerin. Topham Guerin is kind of a well-known agency because it does lots of kind of social media disinformation work for right-wing political parties.”

If you want to understand Topham Guerin, the digital agency behind some of the most striking political campaigns of the past few years, think less Don Draper and more TikTok hustler. Their claim to fame comes from their role in Boris Johnson's 2019 UK general election campaign, where they turned Conservative Party social media feeds into meme factories. There were awkward low-budget boomer memes on Facebook, rebranded fact check accounts on Twitter, @FactCheckUK, to attack Labour, and a viral clip of Johnson pocketing a reporter's phone that

played like accidental slapstick. These weren't glitches in the campaign. They were strategy.

The economic logic is elegant, if slightly sinister. Traditional campaigns burn money on television spots and carefully polished messages. Topham Guerin, by contrast, trades in the cheapest and most abundant commodity: emotion.

They've perfected the art of micro-targeted outrage and humour, producing endless, shareable content designed to be forwarded in WhatsApp groups or rage-tweeted into viral oblivion. They became known for pumping out deliberately amateur-looking boomer memes at scale, a strategy reported at the time and later criticised for its ethics and disinformation risks.

As Topham Guerin's own strapline claims, they are a global agency built for influence at the ballot box, in the boardroom and beyond. It came as no surprise to Jo that this was the case, only that TG had been caught so effortlessly in the act.

Jo Maugham: "What was unusual about this, I think, was not that it had happened, but that we could see that it had happened. We had almost all of the paperwork. If I could choose for anything different to happen, I guess it would have been that Julia would have gone back to Topham Guerin to say, I'd love to do this. I'd like £10,000 to send out some messages. It would have been interesting to see how much Topham Guerin was prepared to pay influencers secretly to smear us. I say secretly, of course, because one of the conditions of participating in this campaign was that you were not allowed to mention that you were working for Palantir.

For most people to discover that they were the target of a smear campaign being run by this marketing agency that works for libertarian right-wing political parties around the world, whose client was this company Palantir, headed by the kind of dark lord Peter Thiel would be very bad news. I was delighted because it showed that the work that we were doing was having an impact. Topham Guerin don't come cheap.

Palantir would have had to have thought, fucking hell, this is hurting us. We need to do something about it. So they would have paid Topham Guerin to run this campaign. Topham Guerin would have had a budget for influencers. I don't know how many influencers that they were going to handle but this whole thing was not cheap.

And I also didn't think it was the first such campaign that Palantir had run against us. I can't prove to the contrary, but then you don't usually get the documents. And I thought this shows that we are succeeding. This shows that we are hurting them. When you're getting criticized by these big powerful actors, it doesn't necessarily mean that you are getting stuff right. But when you are not being criticized, it does mean that you are getting it wrong, because they come after you if you're hurting them."

When Palantir's lawyers were pressed to identify the supposed misinformation Good Law Project had allegedly spread to justify this effort, they offered nothing. No examples, no citations, just silence.

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Palantir called it an exploratory project that never took off. NHS England has opened an investigation, noting that even planning such a strategy could have breached Palantir's contract, which clearly banned publicity without prior approval. We asked the NHS what happened to this investigation, but they didn't tell us. They just said that Palantir only operate under the instruction of the NHS.

And Palantir says it complies with all laws and lawful data sharing agreements, adding that how patient data is used is controlled entirely by their customers, which is to say the government. They claim they take a quote: “rigorous approach to respecting human rights from development to customer use of our products.” They also say they are very proud of the support they have provided to Israel.

When Good Law Project asked to see the Palantir contract, entire pages were redacted. Not tech specs, not pricing. 417 pages of a 586-page document blacked out. Crucially, though, those redactions weren't at the hands of Palantir, but at the hands of the NHS itself, to protect information that was still subject to commercial negotiation.

That's not red tape. That's a red flag. And here's the real kicker. The contract they were still negotiating had already been awarded.

We all remember Cambridge Analytica. At least we think we do. The name is now shorthand for a particular kind of digital betrayal. Back in 2018, the scandal erupted. Millions of Facebook profiles quietly harvested, behavioural models constructed and hyper-targeted political adverts deployed to sway elections.

There was outrage, of course. Politicians wagged fingers, regulators promised reforms and Facebook was grilled in public. For many of us, it was the moment we realised that our social media feeds weren't just innocent distractions. They had become precision tools for persuasion. But a smear campaign, like the one waged by Palantir here, insists we ask the question, have we actually learned our lesson?

It's not hard to see why people might feel uneasy when they discover that the company set to help manage our NHS health data has, at least considered, plans for a behind-the-scenes influencer campaign aimed at shaping the public conversation around that same contract.

That doesn't prove wrongdoing, but it does create a perception problem. Because if a company appears willing to shape the narrative quietly when its critics become inconvenient, some people might reasonably wonder

whether it's fair to ask harder questions about trust, transparency and stewardship of something as sensitive as our health data.

Julia Patterson: "We are operating, all of us campaigners, on social media platforms which are largely owned and controlled by extremely wealthy individuals with their own desires and agendas. And they can be difficult places to operate for that reason. That's not going to change. We're living through late stage capitalism where there are corporations with a lot of money who hold a lot of power who are going to continue to try and change the public conversation to their own ends.

And we need to just keep agile and keep aware and keep connected as well actually. The public put their trust into influencers and you know they do that because they believe that influencer within the campaigning space, healthcare space, has their interests at heart. I think these sorts of things going on where someone's being paid to promote a particular message really kind of erode that trust and I think the public deserves to know what's happening."

There is also a deeper layer this time which hits far closer to home for many of us. Cambridge Analytica for all its impact, centred on our political choices. Palantir's NHS project deals with something far more intimate, our health data. Information about our diagnoses, treatments, mental health, even our genetic markers. These are details we disclose reluctantly and only because we trust that they will be used responsibly by responsible organisations safeguarded from misuse and applied to our care rather than to someone else's bottom line.

If the same company entrusted with that data is even considering covert campaigns to discredit watchdogs rather than engage openly with their concerns, are we not right to at least question the safety of our most personal health data in its hands?

In the wake of Cambridge Analytica, trust in Facebook plummeted. Users began deleting accounts, regulators circled and the company's reputation took lasting damage. But perhaps the most lasting damage was seen in our loss of trust. Trust in organisations to take our data and keep it safe.

So now, when you place an organisation like Palantir in a position of trust over our most intimate health data, the lack of trust alone becomes a threat. If patients begin to doubt that their records are safe, or fear that they could be used for purposes they never agreed to, they may withhold information from their doctors, undermining both their care and public health as a whole.

Jo Maugham: “One of the big areas in which Good Law Project works is trans rights. And through doing that work, I’ve seen how data is weaponised against particularly vulnerable or targeted communities. So I’ve seen how the NHS has called families with a trans kid in to see doctors on false premises.

Those meetings have led to referrals to social services and sometimes those referrals have led to contact with the police. And all of that has been made possible because the NHS has known that somebody in that family is trans and the fact of the NHS knowing that someone in that family is trans and taking the steps that I have seen be taken in consequence of that knowledge has caused me to tell families whose trans family member is presently not known to the NHS not to tell the NHS because I believe that that data will be misused and I believe it will be misused because I’ve seen it be misused.

So I have become very very wary, not because I’m a conspiracy theorist – I’ve become very very wary because through my own eyes I have seen how NHS data has been weaponised to go after undesirables. I’ve become very, very wary of the NHS holding data and by extension very, very wary of political creatures brought in from outside of public service having access to that data.”

The question now is whether we want to drift into another crisis or whether we can insist on the safeguards that history should have taught us to demand. At the very least, this means radical transparency, full disclosure of any effort to influence public opinion, especially on matters as critical as the NHS. It means robust oversight of private contractors with serious consequences for any breaches and bad form. And perhaps most importantly, it means recognising that in the 21st century, our trust

in institutions is not just an abstract value; it is infrastructure. And like all infrastructure, it can be sabotaged. When disinformation becomes a business model, when shadow agencies like Topham Guerin are paid to reshape public opinion, trust stops being earned. It's stolen. Without it, systems as vital as healthcare cannot function.

Julia Patterson: “As a doctor by background, it was almost scary to think of the influence you can have when you just put something out onto the internet. I've always been very well aware of that. There's a real responsibility that comes because people have trust in doctors generally. So I've always tried to be careful to be responsible about what it is I say online. I think the knowledge that people are monetising that trust for something, which I think is pretty awful, is a bad thing.

And I have huge concerns about the future of our healthcare service and the fact that lots of politicians are pushing for a change to an insurance-based model and various concerns about how data could be utilised by insurance companies and others to put a price on the healthcare or the healthcare policies that a patient might need. And I don't think that is going to benefit patients in the future. And so I have real concerns about that, quite honestly.”

Over the course of this series, we'll look in great depths at what this bungled smear campaign really exposed. That email itself was just a glimpse, an awkward draft of a strategy. But the questions it raises reach much further. They touch on how our most private information is handled, how power is exercised when scrutiny grows inconvenient and how easily the public's trust can be eroded when transparency gives way to secrecy.

So that's where this story begins, with a single email, a clumsy attempt at covert influence and a glimpse into how far powerful companies will go to control a narrative when scrutiny becomes inconvenient. But to really understand what's at stake here, our data, our trust, our health system, we need to rewind. Because Palantir didn't arrive in the NHS with a fanfare or a billion pound contract. They slipped in quietly during a national crisis under the cover of urgency and fear.

As Duncan McCann, Head of Tech and Data at Good Law Project puts it:

“They get themselves in, not with, hey, we’re going to revolutionise your whole IT infrastructure. Just give us 330 million and we’ll do that for you. It’s, you have a need here. In this case, it was COVID and we needed emergency stuff up and running quickly. And here they are offering us this amazing service for a pound for three months. Now, when it came time to renew the contract, it wasn’t a pound anymore. It was a million pounds. And then it wasn’t a million pounds. It was 23 million pounds.

So they turn this one pound, we want to come and help in an emergency, into a 50, 60 million dollar contract.”

In the next episode of The Shadow Contract, we go back to that one pound deal, that foot in the door, and examine how Palantir used a global emergency to sink its claws into the NHS. Because influencer campaigns don’t appear out of nowhere, they grow from years of quiet expansion, strategic positioning and contracts that start small and end up anything but.

In episode three, we’ll examine why keeping data out of the wrong hands is so vital and what happens when our trust is abused. We’ll look deeper into Palantir, the company at the centre of this story, an organisation not built for the world of public health. Its origins lie in surveillance and counter-terrorism, in policing and border control. Now, it’s set to be deeply embedded in the NHS’s data infrastructure, with access to vast quantities of sensitive medical information while also working alongside UK police.

Duncan McCann: “Looking at their behavior then around the world from their facilitation of ice mass deportations in the US to their involvement with the Israeli government and the genocide in Gaza through to more prosaic involvements in policing departments and others both across Europe and the US. There’s just a litany of problems, a litany of concerns and something that we felt that we really need to do something about.”

At the heart of our series beats a single concern, trust. Trust in the voices we hear online, trust in the institutions that promise to protect our

interests, trust in the private companies that now sit at the heart of the NHS. Trust isn't optional in healthcare, but it seems to be optional for the companies we invite in. The question is whether we'll choose to protect it before someone else decides to sell it.

I'm Eliza Pitkin and I'll see you next time on episode 2 of The Shadow Contract.

We put the claims in this episode to Palantir and the NHS and gave them a chance to respond. That matters because if you're going to hold powerful institutions to account, you have to let them speak for themselves too. Palantir didn't fully respond directly to our concerns about patient data, but have commented previously that they are, quote: "only able to access NHS data under the direction of the data controllers. This only takes place for appropriate engineering activities like data pipeline deployment and product support tasks."

They go on to explain that NHS England has published comprehensive information about how they process data, referring to the NHS's published information governance framework and data protection impact assessment. When challenged previously about their involvement in predictive policing initiatives, Palantir claimed that what they offer is better defined as 'area-based forecasting of risk', insisting that predictive policing is defined more narrowly as predicting whether a particular person is going to commit a crime, which they do not do.

They also strongly insist that quote: "Palantir is not and has never been a surveillance company. We do not conduct surveillance. We do not provide surveillance services, nor do we sell our software for the purposes of enabling unlawful surveillance."

That doesn't rule out lawful surveillance, by the way, or anything that might happen if a future government decides to change the law to allow Palantir to use our NHS data.

When we asked the NHS what happened to their investigation of Disrupt Marketing's poorly realised influencer campaign, they didn't provide a

direct response, instead insisting that Palantir must only operate under the instruction of the NHS.

Palantir says it complies with all laws and lawful data sharing agreements, adding that how patient data is used is controlled entirely by their customers, which is to say, the government. They claim they take a quote: “rigorous approach to respecting human rights, from development to customer use of our products.” They also say they are very proud of the support they have provided to Israel.

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