THE NATIONAL CENTRE FOR INFORMATION DEFENCE EXAMINED

What can the UK learn from Sweden, France and the United States?



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Executive summary

On 22 September 2026, Prime Minister Andy Burnham announced a National Centre for Information Defence (NCID) to "detect, attribute and disrupt" foreign information attacks. The announcement followed the abolition of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) on 21 July 2026, which scattered its digital and online-harms functions across a strengthened Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the new Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (BIST), and the Cabinet Office.

There is still little information about how the proposed Centre will be set up, what its role will be or what responsibilities it will have. To inform discussion surrounding its possible mandate and governance, this paper explores how other countries have approached the challenge of countering foreign information manipulation and what the UK can learn from their experiences.

France's Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference Service (VIGINUM) and Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency (MPF) are often cited as examples for the UK to follow, including in proposals by the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).[1,2] Yet to date, there has been little analysis of what made each agency legitimate: how it was established, how it was explained to the public and how it is held to account. This paper examines both agencies, alongside case studies of unsuccessful efforts from the US, and identifies lessons, opportunities and considerations for the development of a British equivalent. These lessons provide a starting point for a second publication, which will examine the NCID's capacity, evaluation mechanisms and oversight arrangements in greater detail.

The cases suggest that the process of setting up an agency shapes how it is perceived. In France, consultation before VIGINUM's creation was confined largely to governmental bodies such as the Ministries of the Armed Forces, Foreign Affairs and the Interior, with no evidence of engagement with non-governmental stakeholders such as academics or civil society. Little was communicated publicly about its role, leaving space for critics to question whether it could become a political tool and a vehicle for an 'official truth'. Its leadership later acknowledged this information vacuum fed scepticism, which could only be addressed retroactively through safeguards like annual reporting.

Whilst VIGINUM survived despite these reservations, the same cannot be said across the Atlantic. The US Department of Homeland Security's Disinformation Governance Board, created without public consultation, a clear legal basis, or effective communication, was paused within weeks of being announced.

Sweden took a different approach. It defined the Psychological Defence Agency's mandate through a published inquiry and a broad consultation before the agency was created, which

may have strengthened public trust. However, consultation did not create standing accountability mechanisms, and its success may have depended on levels of institutional trust that are not present elsewhere.

The UK should follow Sweden in involving stakeholders early in the NCID's development. Parliamentarians, academics, journalists and civil society organisations, among others, should have the opportunity to contribute before its remit is settled. This would also help clarify where the Centre's responsibilities begin and end.

This paper does not seek to comment on the operational remit of the NCID, but to identify the practices that have strengthened or undermined similar agencies in recent years. **If Britain's new agency is to succeed, public-facing duties of transparency, accountability and communication must be a core part of the government's strategy from the outset.**

Table of contents

Executive summary 1

1. Introduction 4

2. Lessons from international practice 5

Sweden: The Psychological Defence Agency (MPF) 5

France: The Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference Service (VIGINUM) 7

United States: The Global Engagement Center and the Disinformation Governance Board 9

3. Takeaways 11

4. Concluding considerations 12

Sources 13

1. Introduction

In July 2026, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) – established less than three years earlier as the government's central department for digital and technology policy – was abolished by Prime Minister Andy Burnham as part of a wider reorganisation of government.[3] Its online harms and information resilience functions were transferred to a strengthened Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS); its AI strategy function to the Cabinet Office and the newly created Office for the Prime Minister and Cabinet (OPMC); and its science and research functions to a new Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (BSIT).[4] Even before this reorganisation, UK disinformation policy involved several departments, bodies and regulators, including the Foreign Office, DCMS, the Home Office, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Defence and the Cabinet Office. Ensuring coordination across these efforts, avoiding duplication and maintaining a shared, up-to-date understanding of the threat are therefore increasingly important priorities.

The UK's dedicated disinformation function – the Counter Disinformation Unit, later renamed the National Security Online Information Team – has undergone two departmental transfers since its establishment in 2019. The abolition of DSIT brings a further reorganisation of relevant responsibilities: functions previously brought together within one department are now distributed across three. This creates an opportunity to clarify coordination arrangements and ensure that the UK's response remains coherent and adaptable, particularly as AI-generated and AI-amplified disinformation continues to grow in scale and sophistication.

Against this backdrop, in his maiden speech to the UN General Assembly, Andy Burnham highlighted the growing threat posed by disinformation, pointing to hostile actors seeking to distort domestic narratives, and cited an estimated £1.3 billion in annual Kremlin spending on disinformation campaigns. In response, he announced plans to task his security team with developing a new National Centre for Information Defence (NCID), mandated to "detect, attribute and disrupt" hostile state information attacks.[5] However, the announcement provided little detail on the proposed agency's mandate, remit or operational scope. This lack of clarity created an information vacuum which critics were quick to fill. Reform UK leader Nigel Farage was among the first to describe it as a "Ministry of Truth" that would police free speech.[6] In *The Spectator*, Mark Galeotti questioned whether the Centre would duplicate existing intelligence and counter-disinformation structures, and David Shipley echoed the Ministry of Truth label.[7,8] Similarly, the Free Speech Union stated that setting up this national disinformation agency "inevitably means (...) an increase in the monitoring and policing of British citizens and their comments on social media".[9]

Burnham's announcement followed calls for a unified approach to disinformation in Whitehall from the likes of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), and the Rycroft Review.[10,11,12] The CCOD, too, had called for a unified government body in a joint statement with Sam Stockwell of the Alan Turing Institute and Rebecca Skippage, former BBC World Editor for Disinformation.[13] Information since its launch in New York, however, has been largely non-existent, relying on repeated excerpts of the Prime Minister's speech in Parliament, and a single article in The Times citing an anonymous source. With Britain's latest counter-disinformation agency currently suffering from an information void, this paper examines what lessons can be drawn from the creation of comparable agencies abroad.

2. Lessons from international practice

Sweden: The Psychological Defence Agency (MPF)

Establishment

Created in 2022 under the Ministry of Justice and since moved to the Ministry of Defence, the Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar (MPF) leads and coordinates Sweden's psychological defence, with a mandate to identify, analyse and support the response to malign information influence directed at Sweden or Swedish interests.[14,15] The MPF's defining design feature is an external-only remit: unlike its Cold War predecessor, which was tasked with following Swedish public opinion,[16] the agency has no domestic monitoring role in its instruction and states publicly that it does "not monitor or register what is expressed or by whom in the Swedish information environment." The agency also runs a parallel resilience function, training public servants, municipalities and regions through its "Capability Platform" and supporting media companies on request, giving the body a constituency and legitimacy beyond a purely reactive and secretive remit.[17,18,19]

Sweden has operated some form of government-led psychological defence since 1954, although the function was formally abolished in 2002, with what remained of it passing in 2009 to the Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), where it sat until 2022.[20,21] Its modern form took shape after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea revived interest in psychological defence strategies. At the request of the government, a 2017 Statskontoret (Swedish Agency for Public Management) review flagged coordination gaps between government agencies and a lack of clear mandate regarding authorities' role in psychological defence, shortly after the 2016 Media Inquiry had called for clearer coordination of efforts to strengthen citizens' resilience to covert influence.[22,23] Following Prime Minister Stefan Löfven's announcement in January 2018 that a new psychological defence authority would be created,[24] the government appointed a special inquiry that August to review proposals, which reported its findings on 26 May 2020.[25] The process culminated in the establishment of the MPF on 1 January 2022, by government ordinance rather than an act of parliament.[26]

Strengths

Extensive stakeholder and public consultations. Before the MPF was officially established, a consultation process solicited feedback from relevant authorities, organisations, municipalities and the public. More than 100 stakeholders were invited to contribute written submissions to the consultation, of which over 80 responded. This included a diverse range of stakeholders including municipalities, universities, government agencies, the Armed Forces, the Swedish Police Authority, Sveriges Radio and the Swedish Union of Journalists.[27,28] Whilst such consultation is standard Swedish practice, with government agencies obliged to respond, by gathering a breadth of external opinions the government was able to assess support for the MPF and address public concerns regarding the MPF's remit and design. Although some critics still called the agency a "Ministry of Truth" at its launch,[29] this transparent approach may have limited such objections and the information vacuum concerns that have surrounded other counter-disinformation agencies, and in turn, improved public trust in the MPF.

Clear mandate set before launch. Sweden defined the MPF's mandate before the agency existed. The Psychological Defence Inquiry found that psychological defence lacked

coordination, clear steering and division of responsibility, and the Government shaped the agency's remit following this guidance.[30,31]

Weaknesses

Accountability is weak and mostly runs upwards to Government. The MPF is primarily an advisory and coordinating body that sits under the government, with its instruction requiring it to report relevant information influence to the Government "without delay".[32] The MPF has no governing board, whilst its advisory council, which includes three MPs, is appointed by the Government and chaired by the Director General it advises.[33] External scrutiny therefore relies on general Swedish public administration channels: as a public authority it is subject to public records rules, and complaints about its handling of a matter can be brought to the Parliamentary Ombudsmen.[34] Beyond that council and a statutory annual report,[35] we found no standing external oversight of the MPF's operational judgements, which were tested in 2024 when the agency reported a TV4 investigation into Sweden Democrat troll accounts to the broadcasting regulator, only to admit that its "quality assurance process failed"[36] before the programme was cleared.[37] Evidence of the MPF's effectiveness is also thin and comes almost entirely from the agency's own channels or commissioned academic work.

Unique social environment. The effectiveness of Sweden's psychological defence model is heavily influenced by above-average institutional trust, with 69% of Swedes reporting high or moderately high trust in the police and 64% in the courts in 2023, against OECD averages of 63% and 54%.[38,39] Trust in the national government is, however, only modestly above the norm, at 43% against an OECD average of 39%.[40] In more polarised environments or societies with lower trust in government, similar state-level interventions may face heightened risks of being perceived as censorship or government propaganda.[41]

For any UK equivalent, the Swedish experience suggests that a broad consultation and a clearly bounded mandate, agreed before the agency is created, can support public trust. The success of the Swedish model depends partly on high pre-existing institutional trust, and consultation alone did not provide lasting accountability.

France: The Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference Service (VIGINUM)

Establishment

VIGINUM was established under the Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security (SGDSN) following a series of foreign information operations against France, building from earlier legislative efforts.

After the 2017 'Macron Leaks', in which 15GB of data and over 21,000 emails were stolen from President Macron's campaign, a bill on information manipulation was introduced in 2018 that extended media regulators' powers and required online platforms to report on their efforts against online disinformation.[42,43] The bill proved divisive; the Senate rejected it twice over concerns about freedom of expression, but it ultimately passed in the National Assembly in November 2018.[44] That year, the government created an interministerial Committee for Fighting Information Manipulation under the SGDSN, aiming to build a shared understanding of the threat across ministries. The establishment of a dedicated disinformation agency was considered but not pursued amid concerns that monitoring disinformation and safeguarding freedom of speech was too politically sensitive at the time.

This changed after the 2020 murder of teacher Samuel Paty and the subsequent online amplification of calls to boycott French products, which prompted the creation of the temporary taskforce "Honfleur".[45] After confirming that the rapidly spreading #BoycottFranceProducts campaign had been artificially amplified, President Macron decided in January 2021 to make "Honfleur" a permanent unit: VIGINUM.

The taskforce's leader, Lt-Col Marc-Antoine Brillant, led a small team in reviewing comparable bodies abroad. The review focused on how each body treated freedom of expression and whether it targeted foreign disinformation, domestic disinformation or both.[46] The SGDSN engaged extensively within government and Parliament, circulating a draft decree to the Ministries of the Armed Forces, Foreign Affairs and the Interior, who agreed on the unit's core missions, mandate, and safeguards,[47] and briefing representatives of Parliament's political groups before the decree was issued. VIGINUM was formally established by Decree No. 2021-922 in July 2021.[48]

Strengths

Oversight built into its operating model. An Ethics and Scientific Committee monitors the agency's activities and has access to relevant operational documents.[49] The French data protection authority, CNIL, also oversees how personal data is collected and used.[50] These arrangements provide safeguards around the agency's powers and offer mechanisms for independent scrutiny.

Public reporting provides a further layer of accountability. VIGINUM publishes an annual report setting out its activities, methods and priorities. Since 2026, this has been a legal requirement.[51] Regular reporting gives journalists, researchers and the wider public greater insight into the agency's work and helps address concerns about its role and powers, and strengthens the ability to counter the accusations of a secretive "Ministry of Truth".

Its position within government also shapes how it can operate. VIGINUM sits within the Prime Minister's General Secretariat for Defence and National Security (SGDSN), rather than

a department responsible for digital or media policy. It is also the designated state body for detecting and analysing foreign digital interference. This gives the function a clear institutional home and places it within France's wider national security response.

Weaknesses

A lack of early stakeholder engagement and public communication left VIGINUM open to criticism over its purpose and role. There is no evidence of engagement with academics, platforms, civil society or journalists prior to VIGINUM's creation; these occurred afterwards through its ethics committee and outreach. The limited public information available prior to the establishment of the agency fuelled concerns that VIGINUM could become a tool for censorship or impose an "official truth"[52] – concerns that its leadership later acknowledged had been exacerbated by the lack of public understanding of the unit.[53,54]

Questions also remain about the independence of oversight and the resources available to the agency. Although VIGINUM is subject to scrutiny by an Ethics and Scientific Committee, the committee has an advisory role and reports to the Prime Minister through the SGDSN, the agency's parent body.[55] This raises questions about the extent of independent scrutiny, particularly during politically sensitive periods. In addition, reported staffing levels have fallen short of initial targets,[56] highlighting the importance of sustained investment to maintain the agency's capacity as information threats evolve.

For any UK equivalent, the French experience suggests that limited consultation and insufficient public communication contributed to uncertainty about the agency's role. This information vacuum among relevant stakeholders and the wider public can create space for ill-founded criticism.

United States: The Global Engagement Center and the Disinformation Governance Board

Establishment

Although the United States has twice set up a dedicated unit to counter disinformation, on neither occasion did it consult the public before doing so. The US State Department announced its Global Engagement Center (GEC) in January 2016 as the successor to an existing counter-terrorism office,[57,58] before both President Obama and Congress formalised the centre by executive order and its annual defence bill respectively.[59,60,61] The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), by contrast, designed its Disinformation Governance Board (DGB) entirely in-house,[62] with Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas signing its charter in February 2022, two months before its existence became public.[63] Whilst the GEC operated under its statute for eight years until Congress allowed its mandate to lapse in December 2024,[64] DHS paused the DGB after just 21 days and formally terminated it in August 2022, having never convened.[65,66,67] Both units offer a cautionary tale for any government that would build such a unit without first consulting the public.

Strengths

Building on existing capacity. Having inherited its structure from the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, the GEC moved from announcement to executive order in just 66 days.[68,69,70] In contrast, the Foreign Malign Influence Center, created from scratch in 2019, took almost three years to begin operating.[71]

Statutory footing with built-in review. Placed in law, the GEC also became subject to independent scrutiny: the State Department's Inspector General reviewed its work in 2020 and 2022,[72,73] whilst Congress withheld its funds in 2024 until the department had reported on each of the Inspector General's 18 recommendations.[74] An eight-year sunset clause also ensured that lawmakers would have to revisit its mandate rather than leave it in place indefinitely.[75]

Safeguards and quick responses. Although it never met, the DGB's membership included both the DHS's privacy and civil liberties offices.[76,77] When backlash came, DHS promised a bipartisan review within five days and paused the board within three weeks.[78,79]

Weaknesses

No consultation before launch. Neither unit was shaped by public input. The only outside input into the GEC's design came from a closed three-week review by six private-sector technology companies and outside experts commissioned by the White House.[80,81,82,83,84] In March 2016, 11 civil society groups, including the ACLU, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, instead had to ask the White House for a place in the talks on online extremism[85] that the administration had opened with technology companies on the day the GEC was announced.[86] Within DHS, the DGB's own executive director drew up plans to brief Congress, think tanks and academics before launch, only for communications advisers to drop these in favour of a single item in a Politico newsletter.[87,88] The only public consultation came after the board had been paused: a nine-day comment window that closed three days before the review delivered its verdict.[89,90]

Communication void at rollout. Having signed the charter in February but revealed the board only in late April,[91] DHS took a further five days to publish a fact sheet explaining its

role,[92] in what Mayorkas later conceded to the Senate had been a “suboptimal” rollout.[93] Though its former executive director has rejected comparisons with Orwell’s “Ministry of Truth”,[94] a void allowed critics to define the board before DHS could. Even civil liberties groups that welcomed the department’s attention to disinformation, among them the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the Knight First Amendment Institute, wrote within a week that a “confusing rollout” had “invited misperception and undermined trust”.[95]

Uncertain legal and political footing. Created by a charter rather than legislation and without congressional notification,[96,97] the DGB faced numerous bills seeking to defund or abolish it within two weeks of its unveiling.[98,99] In May 2026, the Government Accountability Office went further still when it ruled that DHS had no statutory authority to create the board and had breached the Antideficiency Act in doing so.[100] Even the GEC’s statute did not secure its future, as its mandate expired in December 2024 after the stopgap spending bill Congress passed omitted a proposed one-year extension.[101,102]

Slow delivery after a fast start. Despite its quick formation, the GEC took more than two years after its statute to receive a permanent head.[103,104] Funding proved just as unreliable, with the State Department’s Inspector General finding that the Department of Defense transferred only $20 million of the $40 million requested for 2018 and $5 million of the $60 million requested for 2019, both in the final days of the fiscal year.[105] By 2022, the same Inspector General found that the GEC had failed to fulfil its mandate, citing a lack of permanent leadership and a “legacy organizational structure” inherited from its counter-terrorism predecessor.[106]

For any UK equivalent, the US record suggests that public consultation before launch, securing a clear legal basis, and engaging in a transparent process throughout are vital for an agency’s long-term survival.

3. Takeaways

The international examples show that there is no single institutional model the UK can simply replicate, but they point to a consistent pattern: how an agency is established, explained and held to account shapes its legitimacy as much as its formal design. Sweden's consultative set-up and clearly bounded mandate, and France's formal oversight arrangements, offer useful lessons, while the US experience highlights the risks of launching without public input, communication or a secure legal basis. The UK's own experience further demonstrates the importance of institutional stability and accountability.

The following takeaways may help inform ongoing discussions about the design and development of the proposed NCID.

Create public channels for stakeholder engagement early

Early engagement can help shape the agency's remit, build public understanding and address concerns before they become entrenched. Sweden defined its agency's mandate through a published inquiry and broad consultation, which was not the case in France and the US. Engaging parliamentarians, academia, civil society, journalists and relevant public and private sector actors early could help avoid an information vacuum and build confidence in the NCID's mandate.

Communicate proactively and put safeguards in place from the outset

An initiative can quickly lose public confidence when its purpose is unclear and critics can define it before the government does. The NCID should explain its responsibilities and limits at launch, including rules on what information it can collect and keep, and safeguards to ensure people can express lawful views without fear of being monitored. Trust should not be assumed: Sweden's approach benefited from high pre-existing institutional trust, which may not be replicable elsewhere.

Set out a clear purpose

Monitoring foreign attempts to influence public debate is different from getting involved in domestic political discussion, even if the two can overlap. The NCID should have a clearly explained role, including how it will work with other organisations and how issues that cross the foreign-domestic, such as the inauthentic amplification of UK content, line will be handled.

Secure a clear legal basis and stable footing

The US experience shows how much an agency's survival depends on its legal footing. The DGB, created by charter without legislation or congressional notification, faced bills to abolish it within weeks, while the GEC's statute brought independent review and a sunset clause, though its mandate still lapsed in 2024. A clear legal basis, with built-in review, would give the NCID a firm footing and make its mandate easier to scrutinise.

4. Concluding considerations

The international experience suggests that operational design alone will not determine an agency's effectiveness. How the agency is established, explained and held to account matters as much as its formal structure.

Sweden offers useful lessons in societal resilience and institutional continuity; France provides a framework for clearly defined responsibilities, analytical capabilities and formal oversight; and the US experience highlights the importance of establishing clear institutional boundaries and public legitimacy from the outset. The UK's own experience reinforces the need for a stable institutional home, effective cross-government coordination and meaningful parliamentary scrutiny.

The cases show that the process of setting up an agency shapes how it is perceived. In France, only government bodies were involved in the consultation process before VIGINUM was created, and communication about its mandate was limited. This information vacuum fed scepticism, which its leadership later acknowledged and which could only be addressed after the fact through safeguards like annual reporting. Sweden, by contrast, defined the MPF's mandate through a published inquiry and a broad consultation before the agency existed, which may have helped build public trust. However, consultation did not by itself create standing accountability mechanisms, and Sweden's high institutional trust may make the model harder to replicate elsewhere. Case studies from the US reinforce this point: the DGB's rollout, with no prior consultation and little communication, let critics define the board before DHS could.

The UK proposal should therefore be subject to broad stakeholder engagement, bringing together government, parliamentarians, academia, civil society, journalists and relevant private-sector actors. This would provide an opportunity to test the proposed approach, identify potential gaps and build a shared understanding of the NCID's intended role and remit. Such engagement will be critical to ensuring that the UK's new disinformation agency is well positioned to fulfil its mandate from the outset, and that the proposed institution reflects the breadth of expertise needed to address the UK's information threats while maintaining public trust.

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About us

The Council for Countering Online Disinformation (CCOD) is a member organisation and advocacy group designed to fight back against the growing challenge posed by online disinformation.

With the world entering a new technological era, influencing opinion and human decision-making through false and misleading content has never been so easy. Ofcom now estimates that more than four in ten have been exposed to online mis/disinformation, with seven in ten of those exposed having seen it online. Meanwhile, according to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, approximately six in ten are worried globally about what is real and what is fake when it comes to news online.

The CCOD is the first organisation of its kind committed to advancing solutions to tackling online disinformation. We develop and promote evidence-based public policy recommendations to UK policymakers which seek to promote our trademark holistic approach rooted in innovation, education, and regulation. Our objective is to bring together the key actors working across the information integrity ecosystem, ranging from technology developers and researchers to civil society organisations and media specialists, and ensure that those at the forefront of developing innovative solutions to online disinformation are given a prominent voice in shaping public policy outcomes. In parallel, we support organisations in protecting themselves and their workforces from disinformation risks with our advisory and workforce training services, helping to safeguard markets, economic stability and public trust.

Our work has been featured in Politico, Times Radio, Politics Home and Edelman, among other. We partner with King's College London, LSE, The Alan Turing Institute, RUSI, and the Aspen Institute.

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Authors
Barbara Waldner, Aidan Wrenn-Walz, Emma Laroche, Joshua Tyler

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