

# British government moves to censor media coverage of spying operations

By Robert Stevens  
21 June 2013

The *Guardian* reported June 17 that UK Defence officials issued a confidential D-Notice (Defence Advisory Notice) June 7 to the BBC and other media organisations.

D-Notices are official requests to news editors not to publish or broadcast items on specified subjects on the grounds of “national security”. They are issued by the Defence, Press and Broadcasting Advisory Committee, which operates between government departments dealing with intelligence and national security, and the media.

The D-Notice was issued the day after the *Guardian* had exposed, based on leaks provided by former US National Security Agency (NSA) sub-contractor Edward Snowden, vast and systematic police-state surveillance conducted under the Obama administration by the NSA. Its purpose was to censor any further coverage.

The order is marked, “Private and Confidential: Not for publication, broadcast or use on social media” and reads: “There have been a number of articles recently in connection with some of the ways in which the UK Intelligence Services obtain information from foreign sources.

“Although none of these recent articles has contravened any of the guidelines contained within the Defence Advisory Notice System, the intelligence services are concerned that further developments of this same theme may begin to jeopardize both national security and possibly UK personnel.”

The same day that the *Guardian* revealed the existence of the D-Notice, and the G8 summit of world leaders opened in Northern Ireland, the newspaper broke a five-page story based on further documents made available by Snowden. It catalogued the way that the British government, through its Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) spy centre, had mounted an intensive spying operation on foreign politicians attending two G20 summit meetings in

London in 2009.

It should be noted that the *Guardian* did not reveal the D-Notice’s existence until it had been in operation for 10 days and first made public on the British politics blog “Guido Fawkes.”

The *Guardian* claims “it is not clear what impact the warning has had on media coverage of Snowden’s revelations relating to British intelligence.” However, no other national newspaper has commented on the issuing of the D-Notice and Foreign Secretary William Hague, the minister responsible for GCHQ, was not asked about the *Guardian*’s claims about the UK governments’ spying when he appeared on BBC radio’s flagship “Today” programme on the morning the article was published. A short item on the story appeared at the end of the “Today” programme but there has been no further mention, indicating that the BBC is fully on board with the D-Notice.

The *Guardian*’s UK spying operation story was ignored by most national newspapers, including the *Times* and the *Financial Times*, in their coverage of the G8 summit. Others gave it scant attention. The *Independent* and the *Daily Telegraph* published short, almost identical articles, which sought to brush the story under the carpet. The *Daily Telegraph* merely noted that it had “the potential to embarrass the Prime Minister [David Cameron] as he hosts leaders from the world’s most powerful countries at the G8 summit in Northern Ireland”. It has since completely dropped the story.

Commenting on the failure to follow up the *Guardian*’s story, Dominic Ponsford, the editor of *Press Gazette*, a magazine and web site for UK journalists, pointed to the anti-democratic basis of the D-Notice system, which has five separate, all-embracing standing notices in place ready to enforce.

Ponsford stated, “My understanding is that Monday’s *Guardian* coverage is seen as being in breach of DA

Notice 5 [known as United Kingdom Security & Intelligence Services & Special Services]. This requests that editors seek advice from the DA Notice Committee secretary before publishing details of: ‘specific covert operations, sources and methods of the Security Service, SIS and GCHQ, Defence Intelligence Units, Special Forces and those involved with them, the application of those methods, including the interception of communications, and their targets; the same applies to those engaged on counter-terrorist operations’”

Whilst the overwhelming majority of the media have complied with the D-Notice and remain silent, the right-wing *Daily Mail* has launched an open attack on the *Guardian* and its exposures using explicitly anti-democratic and authoritarian arguments.

In an article published June 18 with the headline, “Shock horror! Britain spies on other nations”, columnist Stephen Glover writes, “Five pages of The Guardian newspaper were yesterday given over to what was presented as one of the most outrageous scandals of modern times. Horror of horrors, Britain has allegedly been bugging other governments.

“Whatever The Guardian, with its head in the clouds, may believe, the British government has an obligation to protect this country’s strategic and economic interests in a world in which foreign governments are ruthlessly pursuing theirs.”

Glover continued, “If our security services weren’t trying to find out the private thoughts of other key governments before important international meetings, they would be failing in their duty.”

Enthusing over the BBC’s silence over the reports, Glover wrote, “Even the BBC, which normally treats The Guardian as its house journal and guiding star, has so far not followed up the paper’s latest overblown revelations with as much enthusiasm as might have been expected.”

Glover concluded his piece by declaring that the interests of the British ruling class were all-important and were being directly threatened by the *Guardian*’s exposures. “Don’t imagine the paper is being naïve: it is far too sophisticated for that. Treachery is too strong a word, but it is impossible to find any decent motive for what The Guardian has done. These supposedly world-shattering revelations were intended to damage the British government at the beginning of a crucial summit.”

A D-Notice was also served on the UK media in November 2010, two days prior to WikiLeaks beginning publication of 251,287 leaked US embassy cables. The cables exposed the real state of international relations, the

undercover criminal activities of the US and other governments.

That D-Notice stated, “aspects of national security might be put at risk if a major UK media news outlet brought such information into obvious public prominence through its general publication or broadcast.” It asked editors to seek “advice before publishing or broadcasting any information drawn from these latest WikiLeaks’ disclosures” and warned of the “potential consequential effects of disclosing information which would put at risk the safety and security of Britons working or living in volatile regions where such publicity might trigger violent local reactions, for example Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

The message was clear. The press were under orders not to say or do anything to jeopardise the illegal and criminal wars of aggression in which the UK was involved.

As well as the draconian D-Notice’s preventing the publication of stories deemed detrimental to the “national interest”, the British ruling elite presides over a legal system that includes “super-injunctions” that allow wealthy individuals to do the same without anyone knowing of it. Britain also has some of the most punitive libel legislation in the world. What is being defended by such means is the “right” of the ruling class to conceal their illegal and criminal practises from the population.

In the UK as in the US, the mainstream media as a whole is playing its assigned role. The response of media outlets to the June 17 D-Notice is ample proof that rather than exposing government criminality, their own self-censorship serves to abet this criminality.

To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>