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The espionage tech firm that insists it's 'ideally suited' for getting jabs into arms

Palantir now finds itself key to the vaccination effort but critics say it should not be trusted, reports Oliver Wright

When 91-year-old Margaret Keenan became the first person in the world to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid vaccine, Boris Johnson issued a roll call of appreciation.

"Thank you to our NHS, to all of the scientists, to all the volunteers. We will beat this together," he declared.

However, there was one part of the UK's groundbreaking vaccine programme the prime minister chose not to mention. It involved secretive software developed for western intelligence agencies and a controversial multibillion-pound US tech company.

What also was not mentioned was how the same techniques used to hunt Osama bin Laden were instrumental in getting jabs into the arms of millions of people. The story, which can now be told, dates back to March last year when a company called Palantir was invited to a crisis meeting in Downing Street. At the time Palantir was largely unheard of in Whitehall — except in the closed world of intelligence and defence establishment.

Named after all-seeing crystal balls from The Lord of the Rings, the company was founded in the wake of 9/11 by the controversial tech entrepreneur and Donald Trump supporter Peter Thiel. Its raison d'être was to use technology to help the US pursue the war against terror by developing bespoke software to gather and make sense of vast amounts of data being mined in different formats.

The CIA, the FBI and the Defense Intelligence Agency were all early clients and its central software programme Foundry played a key role in joining the dots of intelligence in the hunt for the fugitive al-Qaeda leader bin Laden.

By 2020 the company was valued at more than £16 billion with an office in London to fulfil contracts with the Ministry of Defence and, although it has never been confirmed, the security services. But it was still a surprise when the company received a call from No 10 asking it to join the likes of Amazon and Google to discuss how it could help the government respond to the pandemic.

"It was quite weird and unusual for us," Louis Mosley, the company's UK chief executive, said in a Zoom interview with the background behind him blurred out. "We weren't exactly on the No 10 mailing list." At the meeting were all the key players: the government's chief scientific officer Sir Patrick Vallance; Sir Simon Stevens, head of the NHS; and later Johnson.

"The first thing they started talking about was this need to bring lots of information together from lots of different parts of the healthcare system, to understand how the virus was spreading, to understand the capacity of the healthcare system to cope," Mosley said. "I shot my hand up and said we really do think we can help." The meeting resulted in Palantir being brought in to set up a system to scrape data on real-time hospital bed occupancy, new admissions as well as intensive care capacity and spare ventilators from more than 200 hospital trusts.

This was combined with other data on tentative case numbers to provide ministers with a real-time "single source of truth" on the progression of the pandemic in the UK and the ability of the NHS to cope. It allowed the NHS and ministers to visualise all this information on a single portal. But it was nothing compared with the programme that quietly got under way last summer with the then-nascent vaccination programme.

At that point no one knew for certain if a Covid vaccine was even possible, let alone when it would come. But out of the public eye, senior NHS leaders were thinking about what would be needed to run an effective vaccination programme covering every adult in the country in the shortest time possible. "The mission of the programme was singular and clear from the very beginning," said Joanna, a software engineer, who worked on the programme from its early days. "The phrase they always used was jabs in arms not fridges."

The problems Palantir was brought in to solve was how to ensure each vaccination centre had everything it needed when it needed it, and how problems could be fixed before lines of octogenarians were turned away from getting jabs because something in the system had gone wrong.

But it was more than that. For the programme to be successful it needed to ensure that across the country and across different age groups and ethnic groups as many people were vaccinated as possible. To do this, Palantir used anonymised patient data to show when an individual had had a jab and, more importantly, identify those who hadn't.

"When we were targeting the over-80s you had some areas where they'd done a particularly good job and everyone had been vaccinated but others that hadn't," said Alex, another engineer on the programme. "So you needed that information so you could change your supply chain to send more vaccines to the places where they hadn't got to all those age groups."

But that was just the start. When the Pfizer vaccine began arriving at vaccine centres, the team realised that they needed to reassess how long it took for individuals to get their jab.

"You had stories of people arriving in black tie because it was the first time that they had left the house in months and this was their ticket to freedom," said Joanna. "I know it's silly, but when it takes longer to get a jab into an arm these minutes matter because you only had six hours to use every single vaccine [when they're taken out of the fridge] and they come in 975 doses."

The other problem was supply. In a normal vaccination programme the NHS would know exactly how much supply of vaccines were available and when future consignments were due. But in the first few months of the Covid programme the team were getting just one of two days notice of shipments coming through. This had to be allocated to vaccine sites and then communicated to patients.

"We had GPs walking the streets delivering letters to their patients asking them to come in the following day to get their vaccine to make sure the slots were filled up. The tech helped us see what was going on but ultimately the success of the programme was the people that have run it," Joanna added.

The Palantir software also ensured that local public health leaders could use the system to know what they were achieving and what they still needed to do to meet the vaccination targets.

The company now has a relationship with the health services to use its software for other initiatives. It could, for example, be used to reduce waiting lists by combining anonymised patient data with hospital capacity.

Yet for some all this is deeply worrying. Digital rights campaigners have launched an online petition against the move. "They help governments, intelligence agencies and border forces to spy on innocent citizens," the petition says.

But Palantir argues that it is ideally suited to deal with sensitive information because of its previous work in the intelligence field. It hopes its track record with the vaccine programme shows that it can be trusted and can come out of the shadows. Or as Joanna put it: "I think this may be the most important work I'll ever be involved in."

Peter Thiel founded Palantir following 9/11