Meta weighed covert push to disavow critic

LEVEL C1


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I. WARM-UP

1. How should companies respond to strong public criticism?
2. What makes a source seem credible to you online?
3. When can regulation be helpful or harmful?

II. KEY VOCABULARY

undermine
to weaken someone's position or reputation

disavow
to say you do not support or accept someone or something

minutes
the written record of what was said in a meeting

internal
within an organisation, not public

litigation
the process of taking legal action in court

advocate
a person who publicly supports an idea or policy

regulation
an official rule made by authorities

credible
able to be believed; trustworthy

III. READING

Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, discussed an internal "whisper strategy" to undermine the US social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, according to court filings.

Minutes labelled "Well-being Meeting Sound-check Notes" describe ideas to "turn other academics against Haidt" and to get the academic community to "disavow Haidt", including "debunking" his work. The notes also include a goal to "enrage" other scholars "so the media finds him not credible".

A note from 8 March 2023 mentions then research vice-president Curtiss Cobb and calls for a "below-the-line campaign". It also floats asking someone called "Gellman" to write a "takedown piece".

Haidt, author of The Anxious Generation (2024), argues that heavy smartphone use has harmed young people's mental health, and he has become a prominent advocate for stricter regulation, such as under-16 social media bans. Australia adopted such a ban, and UK officials invited him to brief them on a possible ban.

Andrew Gelman, a Columbia professor who has criticised Haidt, wrote that he was not hired by Meta. It is unclear whether Meta acted on the ideas. The documents surfaced in US litigation brought by school districts. Meta was approached for comment.

Reading text adapted from reporting by **The Guardian***: "Meta discussed 'whisper strategy' against...". Original article linked at theenglishwire.com.*

IV. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What tactic did Meta staff discuss using against Jonathan Haidt?
2. Which internal document recorded the ideas about Haidt?
3. What policies has Haidt publicly supported regarding young people?
4. Who denied being hired by Meta to attack Haidt's work?
5. How did the documents become public, according to the report?

V. DISCUSSION

1. When is it acceptable for a company to push back against critics?
2. Do you find Haidt's concerns about smartphones persuasive? Why or why not?
3. What makes academic debate credible in the public eye?
4. Should governments ban social media for under-16s? Why or why not?

VI. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Three-word phrasal-prepositional verbs

Form: verb + particle + preposition (e.g. come up against, put up with). These are fixed and inseparable: the object comes after the whole phrase, even when it is a pronoun.

> *"Officials* **came up against** *fierce criticism from parents."*
>
> *"Many academics refuse to* **go along with** *quiet smear campaigns."*

VII. GRAMMAR EXERCISE

Circle the correct option in each sentence.

1. Academics won't (put up with it / put it up with). _____
2. If the harm is real, firms must (face it up to / face up to it). _____
3. Will other academics (stand him up for / stand up for him)? _____
4. No one should (get it away with / get away with it). _____
5. Few scholars would (look forward to it / look it forward to). _____

Teacher's Notes

TEACHERS ONLY

These notes are designed to help you get the most out of this lesson. Please do not share this page with students.


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I. LESSON GUIDE

- Timing: 8–10 minutes warm-up, 10 minutes vocabulary, 12–15 minutes reading, 10 minutes comprehension, 10 minutes discussion. If needed, fold the grammar stage into reading/comprehension time.
- Pre-teach: undermine, disavow, minutes, litigation. Check students know Meta, Facebook, Instagram, and the idea of a whisper or below-the-line campaign.
- Run the reading in two passes: gist (what happened), then detail (who, when, which document). Sensitivity: the story touches youth mental health; keep discussion on policy and evidence rather than students' personal histories, and allow students to speak generally.
- For discussion, set pairs first so quieter students can form views, then regroup for whole-class debate. Encourage students to support opinions with concrete examples from the text.

II. DISCUSSION FACILITATION TIPS

1. Start with a quick poll (hands up) on whether pushback is fair, then ask for conditions.
2. Have students give one example from their school or work to support their view.
3. Elicit features like transparency, peer review and open data; ask for counterexamples.
4. Split the room for and against; swap partners once and require a new reason.

III. EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Debate: In teams, prepare and deliver 90-second opening statements for or against under-16 bans.

Writing: Write a 120-word brief that Meta could issue responding to the court documents.

IV. ANSWER KEY OVERVIEW

Comprehension questions: short factual answers from the text.

Grammar exercise: Three-word phrasal-prepositional verbs

Discussion: open-ended. Accept any reasonable ideas supported by examples and reasoning.

Answer Key

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These answers are for teachers only. Please do not share this page with students.


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IV. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What tactic did Meta staff discuss using against Jonathan Haidt?
   A "whisper strategy" to undermine him and get academics to disavow him.
2. Which internal document recorded the ideas about Haidt?
   Minutes titled "Well-being Meeting Sound-check Notes".
3. What policies has Haidt publicly supported regarding young people?
   Stricter regulation, including under-16 social media bans.
4. Who denied being hired by Meta to attack Haidt's work?
   Andrew Gelman of Columbia University.
5. How did the documents become public, according to the report?
   They appeared in US litigation filed by school districts.

V. DISCUSSION

Open answers. Accept any reasonable ideas supported by examples and reasoning.

VII. GRAMMAR EXERCISE

Circle the correct option in each sentence.

1. Academics won't (put up with it / put it up with). **put up with it**
2. If the harm is real, firms must (face it up to / face up to it). **face up to it**
3. Will other academics (stand him up for / stand up for him)? **stand up for him**
4. No one should (get it away with / get away with it). **get away with it**
5. Few scholars would (look forward to it / look it forward to). **look forward to it**

VI. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Key point: Form: verb + particle + preposition (e.g. come up against, put up with). These are fixed and inseparable: the object comes after the whole phrase, even when it is a pronoun. (Examples constructed.)

> *"Officials* **came up against** *fierce criticism from parents."*
>
> *"Many academics refuse to* **go along with** *quiet smear campaigns."*