

Just Following the Science: fact-checking journalism and the Government's lockdown argumentation

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Introduction

The global Coronavirus pandemic has restored the rhetorical prominence of 'evidence-based policy making' in the UK, after the misleading and propagandistic argumentation of the EU Referendum and its aftermath. In the run up to the Referendum vote, pro-Brexit Conservative MP, Michael Gove notoriously claimed that "the people of this country have had enough of experts [from] organisations [with] acronyms saying they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong", and noted that he was "asking the British public to trust *themselves*", privileging instinct over evidence (*Guardian*, 2016). However, when the pandemic reached the UK, the Conservative government (now led mainly by Brexiteers) were quick to assert – borrowing a phrase already used in the US by Mike Pence and Barack Obama – that they were 'following the science'.

On the one hand, it is hard to fault a commitment to evidence-based policy-making in the unfolding of a crisis that turned out to be unprecedented in living memory. On the other hand, a vocal dedication to 'following the science' can simply be a strategic discourse through which politicians aim to distance themselves from unpopular decisions, blame the scientists for the failure of those measures, or obscure the political and ideological aspects of the decision-making. Whether the scientific advice was sound, given the available evidence at the time, and indeed what *was* known about the virus, with reasonable certainty, at any particular time (such as its transmission methods and rate), and are still open questions, and beyond the remit of this Chapter. But there was one frequently repeated claim that was attributed to behavioural science – an interdisciplinary field in the social sciences – that finds no support in the minuted meetings of the relevant scientific advisory committees, and appears to be what we might call a 'white coat-washing' of a common sense belief, political ideology or other socially unpalatable form of reasoning.

In a series of press conferences in early March 2020, the UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer for England (with counterparts in the devolved nations) explained that it would be counterproductive to bring in restrictions on social contact to slow transmission at that point in the pandemic, because there was evidence that people would tire of restrictions and they would only be sustainable for a short time, a concept they eventually labelled 'behavioural fatigue'. However, behavioural fatigue was not a scientific term – it was not recognised by behavioural psychologists, even the Government's own advisers (Mahase, 2020; Michie and West, 2020), whilst hundreds of others in the field demanded to see the evidence base for the concept (UK Behavioural Scientists, 2020), and a later systematic review found insufficient basis to suggest that it had been suitable for informing policy (Harvey, 2020). The decision not to implement restrictions sooner – not least allowing the Cheltenham Cup race to go ahead – was later criticised for having cost thousands of lives.

This Chapter assesses the news media's role in the public communication and scrutiny of the Government's argument in favour of delaying lockdown, with a particular focus on the notion of 'behavioural fatigue,' and – given the propensity of 'objective' news styles to adopt

a stenographic approach (Birks, forthcoming) – the extent to which the Government’s reasoning was subjected to fact-checking and other forms of interpretive journalism. Concerns about facts and evidence during the Covid-19 pandemic have tended to focus on the dangerous misinformation and disinformation that has circulated on social media and coalesced into conspiracy theories that threaten to undermine official messages on public hygiene. As important as these problems are, we should not lose sight of the need to hold Government to account, at such an important time, for the quality of its decision-making.

The British strategy for dealing with Covid in international context

There were differing strategies for dealing with the pandemic around the world, ranging from containment and eradication strategies to the pursuit of ‘herd immunity’ and even outright denial. Containment and eradication strategies were pursued most effectively in South East Asia, where there was experience of previous epidemics of related viruses causing respiratory illness and death. A World Health Organisation (WHO) expert group reported on China’s success in containing the virus but made clear that their test, track and trace system was labour-intensive and painstaking, making this unattractive to many Western nations (Freedman, 2020: 39) New Zealand being an obvious exception and the most prominent example of a country that eradicated covid within its borders.

Nonetheless, the first European countries to suffer outbreaks moved quickly to suppress transmission, starting with Italy’s imposition of lockdown in the Lombardy region on 8 March and then throughout the nation from 11 March, followed by France and Spain, while other countries cancelled mass events, closed schools or blocked flights from countries with high infection rates (Freedman, 2020: 49). Meanwhile, in the UK, which was then estimated to be four weeks behind Italy (in reality, just two), the British Government simply asked those with symptoms to self-isolate for seven days.

The alternative strategy to suppression was to pursue herd immunity – a state where a sufficient proportion of the population are immune so that the risk of transmission is low enough to protect those who are not. This is usually achieved through vaccination but with the most optimistic estimate of a vaccine being developed and approved put at a year, the only available route was through the same proportion of people being exposed to the virus, making the substantial and highly contested assumptions that immunity would be long-lasting and that the virus would only mutate to become less (rather than more) harmful. Only one European country – Sweden – stuck with this policy, though the country’s Public Health Agency’s chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell denied that this was the case (Bjorklund, 2020).

The UK also started down this route – and also obfuscated about its intentions – albeit with mitigations to ‘flatten the curve’ of infections to avoid the NHS becoming overwhelmed and to ‘delay’ the peak of the curve to summer when there is less pressure on NHS services from seasonal illnesses. This approach began to shift from 16 March, and lockdown was finally introduced on 23 March 2020. The analysis that follows examines first, the Government’s argumentation, as represented by the first three press conferences on the crisis that took place before the strategy shifted. Secondly, it examines the scientific advice to assess the extent to which the Government appear to have been guided by the science and the extent to which they were transparent about the strategy and the reasoning for pursuing it.

Thirdly, it will turn to the news reporting of ‘the science’, with a specific focus on accounts of the press conferences. Finally, I move to the extent to which fact-checking demystified the argumentation and what more could have been done to hold the Government to account for its lack of transparency and failure to produce evidence on a key premise in their argument against lockdown.

The UK Government’s argument against lockdown: ‘behavioural fatigue’

This account of the Government’s public communication draws on the Covid-19 press briefings that are available on the 10 Downing Street YouTube channel.¹ In all three of these the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson was flanked by Sir Patrick Vallance, the Government Chief Scientific Advisor (GCSA) and Professor Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for England. The following analysis uses Fairclough and Fairclough’s (2012) Political Discourse Analysis methodology, a combination of argumentation theory and critical discourse analysis, to unpick the stated and unstated premises and how they connect (see Fig 1).

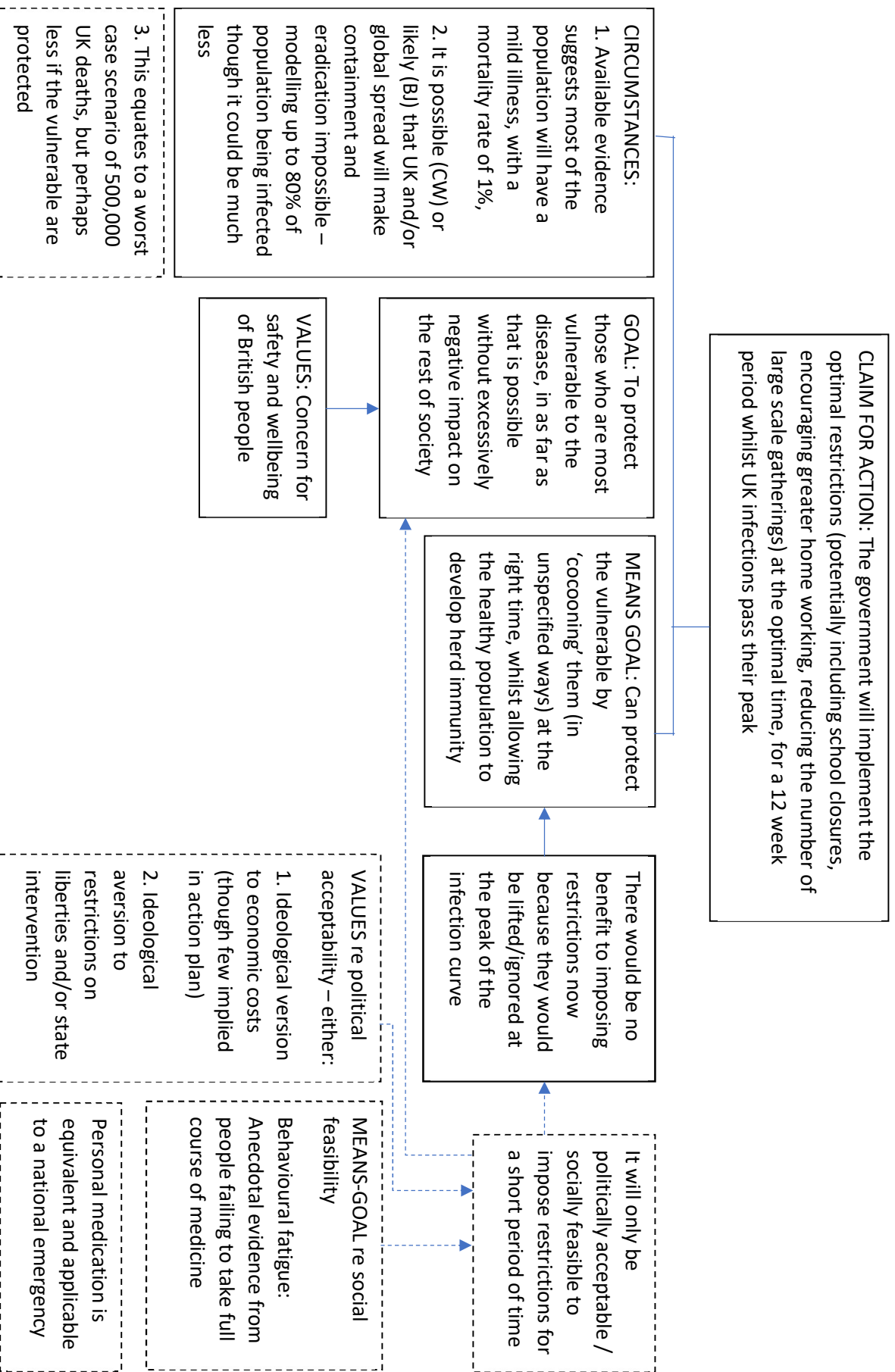
The first of these press conferences took place on 3 March (No. 10 Downing Street, 2020a), two days before the first confirmed UK death from Covid-19, at which Johnson announced the publication of a Coronavirus action plan (UK Government, 2020). The *claim for action* was a four-point strategy that was occasionally presented as four stages, but was in reality two: ‘contain’, then ‘delay’, accompanied by two parallel strands of planning: ‘research’ (virology analysis and the development of a vaccine) and ‘mitigate’ (reducing the effects on public services). The ‘contain’ phase involved measures aimed at preventing transmission from infected individuals, by tracing and testing all those who had come in contact with confirmed cases.

Once this was deemed to have failed, and there was widespread domestic or global transmission such that “the idea of containing – which is to say potentially getting rid of this virus completely ceases to make sense” (Prof Chris Whitty (CMO), No. 10 Downing Street, 2020a), this activity would cease, and be replaced with measures to ‘delay’ the peak of infections by slowing, but not *suppressing*, the spread of the virus. From the start, this was explained as being about “lowering the peak impact and pushing it away from the winter season” (UK Government, 2020: 10), and by the third press conference this had become “flatten the curve” (No. 10 Downing Street, 2020c) when the first PowerPoint slide was shown (these presentations were eventually to become a regular feature of the press conferences).

The *goal* was therefore to reduce deaths in a limited and targeted way, whilst minimising social disruption. In answer to a question at the second press conference on 9 March, about how many lives could be saved by pushing back the peak, the GCSA said that the aim was to reduce mortality “as far as we can in the at-risk group by 20 or 30%”² (No. 10 Downing Street, 2020b). He went on to say: “what you *can’t* do is suppress this thing completely, and what you *shouldn’t* do is suppress it completely because all that happens is that it pops up again later in the year when the NHS is at a more vulnerable stage in the winter” (when restrictions are lifted).

The *means-goal* was therefore to temporarily protect or ‘cocoon’ the vulnerable (by asking them to stay at home, though that policy was never specifically announced) and

Fig 1. Political argumentation in government's public communication on dealing with covid, pre-lockdown. Premises in dashed lines are unstated.



reduce social contact overall sufficiently to ‘flatten the curve’, whilst establishing herd immunity in the healthy (and therefore supposedly ‘invulnerable’) population, at which point (with restrictions lifted) those at greatest risk would be able to emerge safely from their cocooning. This was explicitly stated in SAGE meetings and research papers (for example, SAGE, 2020c), and stated by members of SAGE in media interviews (Stewart and Busby, 2020), but never stated in those terms in the action plan or press briefings, although it is strongly implied in the claim above.

The reasons why this might be contentious are clear from the *circumstances* in which the strategy sought to intervene. Although the tone of the first press conference seemed to be pitched at quelling panic, with reassuring messages that for most people Covid-19 is a mild illness, and 99% will recover from it, the unstated implication of this estimated 1% infection fatality rate,³ coupled with the theoretical worst case scenario of 80% contracting Covid-19, is that, unmitigated, the pandemic could cost 500,000 lives. However, when the tone of the third press conference, on 12 March (No. 10 Downing Street, 2020c), became more grave and less reassuring, with Johnson calling it “the worst public health crisis in a generation,” and warning that “more families are going to lose their loved ones before their time,” there was more disquiet.

Patrick Vallance and David Halpern (the CEO of the Behavioural Insights Team, or BIT), used the term ‘herd immunity’ whilst attempting to explain and defend the strategy, sparking further criticism, not least from other epidemiological experts (Stewart and Busby, 2020). Some have argued that this was poor communication strategy that underplayed the aim to protect the elderly (Freedman, 2020: 49) or portrayed herd immunity as an aim rather than a beneficial side-effect (a member of the SAGE modelling sub-group cited in Yong, 2020). Vallance, however, said repeatedly that it was to prevent a second wave when restrictions were lifted. It was a central part of the strategy because of another important premise – that restrictions would only be in place for around 12 weeks.

‘Optimal Timing’

The additional premise beneath the argument about optimal timing is the notion that restrictions could only be reasonably brought in for a short time. The reason given for this in the first press conference was that the disruption to people’s lives had to be proportionate to the benefit in stopping transmission:

If you do it too early you end up with a lot of people having disruption, a lot of societal disruption, at a time you’re not getting benefit, and you also ask a lot of people to go on for a long time doing this (Sir Patrick Vallance (GCSA), No. 10 Downing Street, 2020a).

In the second and third press conferences, however, Witty developed the premise into a more scientific-sounding assessment of the public’s willingness and ability to continue to live under restrictions.

The important thing about the science on this is actually the behavioural science, and what that shows is probably common sense to everybody in this audience, which is that people start off with the best of intentions, but enthusiasm at a certain point starts to flag. If you start too early, and then people’s enthusiasm runs out just about the

peak, which is exactly the time that we want people to be doing these interventions, that is actually not a productive way to do it. So we do need to do it at the last point it is reasonable, so that people will maintain their energy and enthusiasm to get through what will be quite difficult things to do [...] it's important that we do not ask our fellow citizens to do them longer than makes sense from the epidemiology (No. 10 Downing Street, 2020c).

At this point the behavioural scientists, whose work was supposed to be guiding the implementation of restrictions, felt moved to clarify the advice they had actually given (SPI-B, 2020), while others in the field wrote an open letter to the Government expressing surprise at this novel concept and demanding that the evidence base to be made public (UK Behavioural Scientists, 2020). In this crucial element of the argumentation, then, it is not clear that even the Government scientists were 'following the science'.

SAGE scientific advice

This section draws on relevant minutes from meetings and research papers of SAGE and a subgroup of the committee called the Scientific Pandemic Influenza group on Behaviours (SPI-B), as well as articles and an open letter published by members of SPI-B, and context from relevant literature and journalistic investigations. The aim in this section is to provide an abridged but thick narrative of these events, with the help of other accounts from the early literature on the strategic and scientific aspects of the crisis. This will allow me to assess the extent to which the argumentation above did, indeed 'follow the science'.

SAGE met frequently through the initial stages of the pandemic – around twice a week on average through February and March 2020. Months later, under mounting public pressure, the government published the minutes and some research papers from these meetings, that give a sense of the development of the scientific understanding of the virus from early Chinese research, the shifting assumptions plugged into the mathematical modelling of the potential impacts of various interventions, and the key findings.

There is a disclaimer next to each of the document download links, reminding the reader that they "should be viewed in context", bearing in mind the rapidly developing understanding of the novel Coronavirus. However, what is surprising is how much of what became influential later was already known in early March. This includes the likely exponential spread and projected number of deaths, and "whatever the reduction in peak NHS bed demand achieved by these interventions, in the reasonable worst-case scenario demand will still greatly exceed supply" (SAGE, 2020d: 3). In other words, the human cost was made clear from early on in the crisis.

In terms of measures, research papers noted that the most effective action would be "general social distancing of the entire population"⁴ (SAGE, 2020e: 2), and that measures are more effective the earlier they are implemented (SAGE, 2020a: 1). The finding that there was little impact from banning large scale events was indeed stated in the research, but marked as "low confidence", not least because so little was known about the proportion of asymptomatic cases and potential for asymptomatic transmission (SAGE, 2020d: 4). Whitty acknowledged the former as a significant unknown in general, but both advisors oddly omitted it as a caveat on the oft repeated claim that they "actually don't make much difference if you really look at it" (Vallance, No. 10 Downing Street, 2020b). The low

effectiveness aspects were largely based on an assumption that pubs would not be closed, and so attendance at football matches would be displaced to pubs, which would be equally, if not more, risky – a point supported by the behavioural science sub-group (SPI-B, 2020: 2).

Behavioural Science: SPI-B

SAGE reconvened the SPI-B group on 13 February 2020 with the remit to “provide advice aimed at anticipating [problems] and helping people adhere to interventions that are recommended by medical or epidemiological experts” (SPI-B, 2020) and it met three times in the run up to lockdown being announced. Its members are academics in the fields of Health Psychology, Social Psychology, Anthropology and History, but not Communication, which was removed from the group’s remit for this iteration as compared to the previous time they had convened for the 2010 ‘swine flu’ (H1N1) pandemic in 2009/10.

The main point that was picked up from their contributions was that “acts of altruism will likely predominate and the Government could promote and guide these.” Although intended as a response to a suggestion – most likely from the government emergency committee, COBRA – that there could be widespread public disorder, this was picked up by Chris Whitty in response to a journalist’s concern about panic buying to stock up for isolation, the least altruistic aspect of early public behaviour in response to restrictions (No. 10 Downing Street, 2020a). SPI-B also countered the assumption that people were reluctant to endure restrictions, with polling evidence indicating “a likely high level of public support for the cancellation of mass gatherings or general social distancing and the fact that isolation of symptomatic cases is likely to make intuitive sense to most people” (SPI-B, 2020). This certainly seemed to be borne out by the audience questions Health Minister, Matt Hancock found himself answering on BBC Question Time (BBC, 2020) about why such measures were not being adopted. SPI-B could not, however, say what proportion of people would comply with restrictions, as there was, they pointed out, no evidence base. The nearest equivalent was H1N1 (‘Swine flu’), which they said was “different” (it was far less lethal) and “it’s not clear how well the evidence translates” (SPI-B, 2020).

The mathematical modelling made pessimistic assumptions of 50% compliance on the basis of no meaningful evidence, and noted that even this “may be unachievable in the UK population” (SAGE, 2020d: 3). However, following Chris Whitty’s remark about the behavioural science foundations for population ‘fatigue’, the minutes from the following day’s SAGE meeting unusually records a comment on the way scientific claims were being used to justify policy:

Difficulty maintaining behaviours should not be treated as a reason for not communicating with the public about the efficacy of the behaviours and should not be taken as a reason to delay implementation where that is indicated epidemiologically (SAGE, 2020b, also cited in Mahase, 2020).

Although communication was removed from the remit of the subgroup, it did regularly express an opinion on this as communication is central to encouraging compliance. Following Johnson’s announcement on 12 March about moving to the delay phase, but without specifying any measures, SPI-B were becoming frustrated with the lack of transparency in communication (Freedman, 2020: 50), and made a pointed remark on 14 March that their “overarching recommendation” was that “people should be treated with

respect, capable of taking decisions for themselves and managing personal risk” (SPI-B, 2020: 2).

‘Behavioural fatigue’

It quickly became very clear, then, that the concept ‘behavioural fatigue’ did not come from the academic behavioural scientists, but it was several weeks before it emerged that “Whitty himself was the main advocate of the ‘fatigue’ notion, based partly on his own experience of patients in medical practice who do not see drug prescriptions through to their completion” (Conn et al., 2020). This is interesting, because it was Whitty who threw the field of behavioural science ‘under the bus’ in his justification of the notion in the third press conference on 12 March. It seems odd that a medical scientist would base such a significant premise in the scientific argumentation on such anecdotal evidence, especially given that SPI-B had already cast doubt on the relevance of the more closely analogous H1N1 as a basis on which to judge how people would respond, given the difference in severity and stakes.

The ‘behavioural fatigue’ premise, which justified curtailing the length of lockdown as an a-priori assumption in the modelling, was therefore in essence no more than the intuitive expression of ‘common sense’ (Harvey, 2020), which is conceivably what some epidemiologists regard the social sciences to be. In a British Medical Journal (BMJ) editorial (Michie and West, 2020), two members of SPI-B argued for the significance of behavioural science in informing policy in pandemic, the need for a strong evidence base on which to secure it, and their concern about the lack of Covid research funding for projects in the field. They raised behavioural fatigue as an example of a common sense idea that is “ill-defined” and damaging:

These interventions need to be informed by a scientific understanding of the complex processes that influence behaviour. Common sense understanding is not enough and can often lead to interventions that are at best wasteful and at worst counterproductive (Michie and West, 2020: 1).

Of course, there is likely to be much more to this than the intuition of one senior advisor (with public support from another) – it is likely that ‘the science’ is not entirely independent from political imperatives, and politicians’ own cognitive biases.

Following the science?

One explanation for the epidemiologists’ limited influence was simply that the scientists were too locked into the assumptions of the flu pandemic planning that was already in place (Grey and MacAskill, 2020) – which was heavily influenced, Freedman (2020: 36) argues, by the experience of H1N1 (‘Swine flu’) – without questioning any of the assumptions attached to that very different scenario. However, it’s clear that many of the scientific advisors *were* convinced of the seriousness of the pandemic (Freedman, 2020: 38-39) – in early March they “were already convinced that Britain was on the brink of a disastrous outbreak” (Grey and MacAskill, 2020).

One member of the modelling sub-group later told Reuters “we had milder interventions in place because no one thought it would be acceptable politically to shut the

country down. We didn't model it because it didn't seem to be on the agenda” (Grey and MacAskill, 2020). Nonetheless, the news agency’s investigation concludes that “the interviews and documents [...] reveal that for more than two months, the scientists whose advice guided Downing Street did not clearly signal their worsening fears to the public or the Government” (Grey and MacAskill, 2020). This assumes, however, that the committee had free reign to answer its own questions, and a remit to make policy recommendations.

In a similar investigation, the *Guardian*, by contrast, places more emphasis on political direction from the Government emergencies committee COBRA, and the argument from prominent SAGE member Prof Neil Ferguson that scientists should not be expected to determine policy decisions:

“While policy can be guided by scientific advice, that does not mean scientific advisers determine policy,” he said. “Though I do try to make it clear to policymakers what the potential consequences of different policies might be, to the extent the science allows” (Conn et al., 2020)

The article also quoted the Chair of the modelling sub-group complaining that the political rhetoric of ‘following the science’ had “sometimes gone a bit past the mark ... asked if he meant that the politicians were passing the buck, Medley replied: ‘Yes’”. (Conn et al., 2020). Interestingly, whilst the Prime Minister had said, in answer to a question in the first press conference, “when it comes to calculating the trade-off that you identify in health capacity and disruption, it’s the science that will help us to take the decision” (No. 10 Downing Street, 2020a), a SAGE research paper dated the next day (4 March) that modelled the impact of various measures under consideration, said explicitly that those trade-offs were a political decision:

SAGE has not provided a recommendation of which interventions, or package of interventions, that Government may choose to apply. Any decision must consider the impacts these interventions may have on society, on individuals, the workforce and businesses, and the operation of Government and public services (SAGE, 2020d).

The released documentation does not record the values and priorities that went into the consideration and weighting of those impacts, but it is the impact on economy and employment that has since become the central trade-off in political deliberations.

One indication that this may have been the case even before the cost of the pandemic became clear,⁵ is a speech on 3 February 2020 in which Johnson warned of “a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation that go beyond what is medically rational to the point of doing real and unnecessary economic damage,” but also that the UK would be the “supercharged champion of the right of the populations of the earth to buy and sell freely among each other” (Johnson, 2020). The other element is therefore likely to be, as a Downing Street insider put it, Johnson’s “libertarian instincts” (Conn et al., 2020). Harvey further argues that “policy makers may have felt the need to provide a separate rationale for this decision that they judged would be more acceptable to the general public” (Harvey, 2020: 3). The resulting image of the British public as selfish and unable to bear privation in the national good, however, jarred somewhat – journalists were surprised during the press conference that, invited by a Daily Mail reporter to wax Churchillian about the British ‘bulldog’ spirit, Johnson “declined to do so” (Letts, 2020).

Mainstream news reporting on ‘the science’

The following enquiry makes a thematic content analysis of a sample of 37 newspaper articles reporting on those first three press conferences. The articles were retrieved from Lexis Nexis on the search term (*coronavirus AND "press conference") OR (follow* W/2 science) OR "behavioural fatigue,"* and indexed at the topic ‘COVID-19 Coronavirus’ and ‘Boris Johnson,’ in the pre-set group ‘UK National Newspapers,’ for the period 3 to 13 March, in news or comment (but not sport and other features). Of these, 10 related to the first press conference, a further 10 to the second, and 17 to the third. The articles were coded for mentions of the key premises from the argumentation set out above:

- 1) the circumstances of estimated death rate and the worst case scenario death count implied by that;
- 2) the means-goal of herd immunity in the healthy population whilst cocooning the vulnerable during the peak of infections, and flattening that peak to enable the NHS to cope;
- 3) the premise against bringing in those cocooning and delaying measures immediately – because they would only be tenable for a short period of time so would be lifted or ignored when most needed during the peak;
- 4) and the premise for that short period of restrictions – ‘(behavioural) fatigue’

The main focus on the reporting was on conveying the potential measures being considered to slow the spread of the virus and the various mitigations being prepared in case of public services being overwhelmed, but 26 of the 37 made some reference to the scientific argumentation that justified the choice of measures.

There was a shift in the reporting of the press conferences that reflected the shifting focus of journalists’ questions to the assembled experts. At first, questions and reporting both focused on the four-point plan and the mitigations being prepared for a public emergency, and to a lesser extent, the likely impact on people’s plans, such as taking foreign holidays. Over the next two press conferences, once it became clear that the UK was taking a different approach from other European countries, attention did pivot to the timing of delay measures and the reasons for not taking immediate action.

Indeed, the premise that was most commonly reported (in 16 articles, 43%) was the means-goal of delaying the peak of infections into the summer and flattening the curve. Interestingly, behavioural fatigue was the second most common (10, 27%), six in reporting of the second press conference and four related to the third. Interestingly, only four mentioned herd immunity – all in relation to the third press conference – despite this being relatively controversial over this period (62 articles from a search on ‘herd immunity’ indexed at ‘Covid Coronavirus’), though more so after the Government began to change tack. However, there was little attention paid to the potential number of deaths over the course of the pandemic from this strategy, perhaps because the ‘worst case scenario’ estimate of 500,000 had been leaked and played down the previous week, but awareness of the disconnection between the assurances and the numbers became increasingly apparent later in journalists’ questions, if not initially in the reporting.

Six of the news articles mention the reasoning behind waiting for the ‘right time’ to implement restrictions, but initially they conveyed this uncritically. Whilst several journalists asked challenging questions in the press conferences, they largely reported the explanations

descriptively and neutrally, and in the broadsheets' case with extensive direct quotation from Whitty and Vallance. Only one article, a *Daily Mirror* politics piece, drew on other sources, including a survey by the Doctors Association UK that found “just eight out of 1,618 medics felt the NHS is ready for coronavirus” (Crerar, 2020). Just two articles, both in left-leaning newspapers (the *Guardian* and *Mirror*) attempted to extrapolate from the 1% mortality rate to the UK population (rather than to the 80% maximum assumed to be likely to catch it) to make explicit the implied death count behind those reassuring words.

Of course, there are risks inherent in undermining the scientific authority of the Government's response at a time when public trust would soon be crucial to compliance with restrictions, so this hesitance is understandable and arguably appropriate. Furthermore, it is likely that other experts in the fields were reluctant to break ranks and criticise their colleagues on the advisory committees for the same reason – in April 2020 the *Guardian* said some scientists they spoke to “were holding back some of their criticism because they did not want to damage public trust in Government at such a delicate time” (Conn et al., 2020). The authors of the open letter wrote an accompanying article in *Behavioural Scientist* magazine acknowledging the same concerns but that the risk of not speaking out was that “vital opportunities for scrutiny [...] are missed, errors are made, or better alternatives are overlooked” (Hahn, Chater, Lagnado, Osman, and Raihani, 2020).

Since the opposition party was also cautious about appearing to politicise the crisis and keen to appear constructive, the strategy's political critics emerged from within the ruling Conservative party⁶ (though as both stood as candidates for party leader against Boris Johnson, they also risked questions about their motivations). The first was Rory Stewart, whose remarks were mentioned, to a greater or lesser extent, in seven of the 10 articles reporting on the second press conference. By the time of the third press conference, just three days later, it was chair of the Health and Social Care Select Committee, Jeremy Hunt, who was widely quoted calling for stronger measures – in a slightly lower proportion (nine in 17) of articles on the third press conference, but accompanied by a much wider range of voices, including scientific experts now that it had become a legitimate controversy.

On the notion of behavioural fatigue in particular, there was a mixed response. Three articles conveyed the argument through the conventions of ‘objective’ or ‘descriptive’ journalism (Birks, forthcoming), as having been ‘said’ by the CMO or GCSA, while another article reported that they had ‘warned’ about the phenomenon. These speech acts are treated as the ‘facts’, in that it is true that the scientific advisers said these things, whilst taking no responsibility for the truth of what they said. Three more pieces reported that the scientists ‘feared’ or ‘worried’ that people could become fatigued, which infers uncertainty, and the most explicitly sceptical article (Crace's political sketch quoted below) described all three figures as ‘insistent’, which infers a need to persuade or overcome the audience's doubts (a point explicitly made in the next sentence).

The *Independent* was the only newspaper that was explicitly convinced by the claim: Policy Editor Jane Merrick described it as supported by “scientific evidence” (Merrick, 2020, 10 March) and an editorial (*Independent*, 2020, 12 March) called it “logical” and warned that “the actions of individuals prepared to defy the official advice may end up undermining the government's action plan.” Conversely, the *Guardian*'s John Crace, who had previously given a glowing account of the scientific advisers' performance, found the argument unconvincing, an assessment he projected to others at the event:

The three amigos were insistent that if we moved too soon, people would get bored of taking the proper precautions when the pandemic spiked. Not everyone in the room was wholly convinced. The idea that everyone would be running round the streets coughing over one another when they knew the risk of infection was at its highest just because they had already been cooped up for a few weeks seemed far-fetched (Crace, 2020).

Finally, a search for references to ‘behavioural fatigue’ unrelated to the press conferences returned three articles in the sample time period, with two mentions made of the open letter from behavioural scientists challenging the concept in the *Guardian* and *Independent*, with the latter adding a quote from another expert, and an opinion article in the *Guardian* authored by one of the authors of the open letter, adding to the sceptical coverage, though notably only in the left-liberal press.

Of course, this is only a small sample of press reporting, and there is further research to be done beyond this focused snapshot on the central argumentation. The notion of following the science did, however, become widely debated and criticised, with 50 articles mentioning ‘follow(ed/ing) the science’ in March alone, which then increased over April (111) and May (116), until lockdown measures were eased. However, in initial hard news coverage, government argumentation was treated uncritically. This might, however, be where fact-checking journalism could be expected to step in.

Fact-checking on the Government response

The analysis in this section draws on a content analysis of all Covid-related fact-checks, over the first three months of 2020, from the three main UK fact-checkers: Channel 4 FactCheck, BBC Reality Check and independent charity Full Fact. The two media-based fact-checkers were launched to fact-check Election campaigns, and expanded to cover general politics, with a focus on checking politicians’ claims, whilst Full Fact was originally launched to improve evidence-based policy making and has a wider remit (Birks, 2019). Unlike their US equivalents that launched what is now a global fact-checking movement, these British organisations don’t always check a specific claim and give a verdict on it, but instead include explanatory journalism.

The proportion of full fact-checks (with verdict) to explainers that do not check a specific claim was not out of line with recent elections, but there were very significant differences between the three main fact-checkers, with Full Fact focusing much more strongly on *debunking* rumours, scams and conspiracy theories (90% full fact-checks), whilst Channel 4 FactCheck largely *explained* the scientific evidence or reasoning (32% full fact-checks). In both cases, there was a focus on reinforcing official and information advice in the face of damaging mis- and disinformation that could undermine the effectiveness of the national response, which clearly has an important role to play, but there were also risks in being too uncritical of Government, including undermining their own cognitive authority among a sceptical audience.

Out of a total 96 articles, 26 items focused on governments’ responses to the crisis, 14 of which were related to the UK or ‘devolved nations’ Governments. Of these, six were either explainers about lockdown rules or fact-checks of inconsistent statements in official advice. That leaves 8 that addressed critical issues in relation to the UK Government response. Two

were on the extent of the rollout of testing, and one was devoted to the number of ventilators in British hospitals. Of course, both of these issues were addressed much more effectively through investigative journalism - not least by Channel 4 News - into 'chumocracy' appointments such as Dido Harding (a Conservative peer who was appointed to run track and trace despite having no public health experiences or qualifications), and related failings in testing rollout, or the shortage of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) stocks or failures in and supply.

Mostly notably, then, only *one* item in this period directly questioned the rationale of decision-making – that was an explainer on why the Government had decided not to close schools (on 12 March) as they had in other countries, which merely explained the Government's reasoning (Worrall, 2020b). Two explainers from BBC Reality Check addressed the question of compensation (to allow people to self-isolate by outlining the entitlement to statutory sick pay) more obliquely. Both of these explainers at least anticipated problems that the Government had yet (at the time) to address (which *were* then, of course, addressed by allowing key-workers' children to take their online classes in school, and through the introduction the furlough scheme).

Herd immunity

On the issue of whether the Government was entertaining the notion of 'herd immunity' as a serious strategy, the decision was not directly scrutinised, but two pieces addressed what had been said by key figures. One item by Full Fact fact-checked a clip (circulated on social media), from a daytime TV show, which appeared to show Boris Johnson suggesting that the policy was to allow Covid to spread through the population. The conclusion reached by Full Fact, was that the clip had taken his remark out of context, and that he had gone on to say that it would be better to reduce the burden on the NHS during the peak (Full Fact, 2020), but the fact-check does not explain the implications of the 'flatten the curve' strategy in terms of deaths and pressure on the NHS.

The other piece, from C4 FactCheck three days later, explained what Sir Patrick Vallance meant by 'herd immunity' when he was quoted in the media remarking that it *was* part of government strategy (Worrall, 2020a). However, it was informed by the Science Media Centre and therefore was more nuanced than the Full Fact fact-check. As well as putting the number of potential deaths at 'hundreds of thousands', it acknowledged important caveats not made clear in the briefings – or even in the critical assessments of experts in the later news reporting – such as limitations in current understanding of the potential for reinfection and virus mutation, and the likelihood that public hygiene measures would need to stay in place until a vaccine was rolled out. Despite the controversy over behavioural fatigue, including criticism of the field of behavioural science and 'fake science' (Oliver, 2020) the only fact-check to address it was published in the BMJ and not until August (Mahase, 2020).

Summary and conclusion

Taking such a prominent public role in policy-making and political communication puts scientists in a perilous position, but Boris Johnson and Matt Hancock made it more so by pretending that the decisions taken were not political. The slogan 'following the science' also

implies that ‘the science’ of modelling and forecasting is singular and factual rather than contested and theoretical. It skates over the nuances and caveats about the assumptions plugged into the models, much of which depend on the notoriously tricky prediction of human behaviour (much like the science of economic forecasting that was so maligned in the Brexit campaign), and much of which will have been political judgements about what measures and severity were on the table.

However, the claim ‘behavioural fatigue’ is less easy to understand, as it appears to be a presentational fig-leaf for a constraint driven by the Prime Minister’s libertarian aversion to imposing restrictions. Since the *Guardian* reported “frictions” between the chief scientists and the politicians they were trying to “cajole” toward the right decisions, scientific opinion seems to have been used to legitimate, rather than to lead policy. Whilst it is understandable that journalists might be cautious about inflating a particular risk out of proportion, causing panic and then looking foolish, or that they might be wary of undermining faith in public health messaging, the information disseminated *itself* implied an unacceptably high death toll, and only very weak and vague forms of mitigation.

Of course, despite their doubts, gently raised in questions at the press conferences, the fact that very few journalists have a science background, meant that they were especially reliant on their sources to interpret the data (Goldacre, 2009). In a situation where reports and official minutes of meetings were not open to full scrutiny, and with few of the scientific experts willing to break ranks to make public criticisms, it is unsurprising that news reporting was uncritical until *politicians* reproached Government Ministers, at which point the strategy of critique was legitimised.

This is where fact-checking journalism can excel, but in this crucial period of fatal prevarication, with one exception (Worrall 2020a) it simply parroted the Government’s answers and missed the key questions. As the authors of the open letter from behavioural scientists argued, we may be lacking in expertise to judge the pandemic response as a whole, “but we can scrutinize and check those parts that are within our own areas of expertise, and we can scrutinise the overall arguments and considerations about how those parts are supposed to hang together” (Hahn et al., 2020). The latter is a task for interpretive journalism – to identify the premises in the arguments put forward, to ask experts if those premises hold true, and to evaluate the extent to which those premises fit together in a logical and coherent argument.

Notes

¹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8o7mIMg3mmO9-dx3e2iFgw/videos>

² In fact, a SAGE research paper (SAGE, 2020) indicates that this is the estimated impact on deaths overall from cocooning the elderly, though this would still mean 350,000 deaths on the basis of the unmitigated worst case scenario.

³ The *case* fatality rate (percentage mortality of confirmed cases) was much higher due to the high number of undiagnosed mild and asymptomatic cases.

⁴ A caveat was noted that they would only be effective whilst in place, inferring that a second wave would occur if lifted before there was a vaccine

⁵ Certainly, it was likely to have been a factor when Johnson considered herd immunity again in September, even as Vallance and Whitty urged him to impose a ‘circuit-breaker’ lockdown, taking advice instead from two Oxford scientists and Sweden’s Anders Tegnell (McNally, 2020)

⁶ Although Stewart had by then resigned from the party and was then standing as an independent candidate for London Mayor

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