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# The Politics of Communicating COVID in the United Kingdom

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Like every country in the past two years, the United Kingdom has seen its fair share of COVID fake news in circulation. An early example in the first days of the pandemic was the rumor that the disease was spread by 5 G technology, a story that led to a number of masts being vandalized, significantly hampering the emergency services (Martin, 2020). A different strand of misinformation denied that COVID even existed or was far milder than had been claimed by the government. “Evidence” for views of this kind often involved videos of empty hospitals (Giles, Goodman, & Robinson, 2021), with believers arguing that the danger of the disease was being exaggerated in order to introduce draconian restrictions on personal liberty. More recently, the anti-vaccination movement has been strong enough to stage protests involving large numbers of people, some of which have led to violence, intimidating behavior and arrests (Gayle, 2021).

However, the biggest challenge to public understanding and engaged debate on COVID-related issues was not necessarily posed by such blatant examples of misinformation. Instead, as academic research has shown, more significant is obfuscation in government communications and news reporting that failed to effectively contextualize the UK’s COVID response, particularly with international comparisons (Cushion, Morani, Kyriakidou, & Soo, 2021). The latter issue is particularly significant, as UK seems to have had a poor pandemic when its efforts were juxtaposed with similar countries. At the time of writing, the UK’s COVID death-rate per 100,000 people was 226.6. In France, the comparable figure was 188.4 in France and in Germany 138.9 (Financial Times, 2022).<sup>1</sup>

Despite his electoral success, it is hard to imagine a politician more ill-suited to the requirements of sober public health communication than Boris Johnson, a former journalist, controversialist and television panel show guest. Examples of Johnson’s communication during the pandemic included a claim that the virus would be defeated in 12 weeks in March 2020, referring to the government’s desperate quest to source emergency ventilators as “operation last gasp,” and claiming that the UK’s procurement of personal protective equipment and the effectiveness of the country’s test and trace systems were “world-beating” (they probably were not). Perhaps in an effort to counteract these weaknesses, the government made notable use of experts in its COVID communication strategy. Civil service scientific officials regularly appeared in daily pandemic press conferences with elected politicians, with some – notably England’s Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty and Deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor Jonathan Van-Tam – becoming household names.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the recent history of the British political communication, this was a notable development. Famously in the 2016 EU Membership referendum campaign, leave supporter and Conservative cabinet minister Michael Gove claimed that “people of this country have had enough of experts” (Mance, 2016). Gove’s argument was self-serving (he was dismissing a particular set of economic models), but his observation became emblematic of broader decline in a technocratic, expert-led forms of political communication that seemed to be occurring across liberal democracies more generally (Waisbord,

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<sup>1</sup>Figures correct on the 18th January 2022.

<sup>2</sup>In one of the more bizarre moments of the pandemic, Whitty even became involved in a social media spat with Trinidadian singer Nicky Minaj over rumored vaccine side effects (Looi, 2021).

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2018). In the UK in the age of COVID though, it seemed that experts were to some extent back in fashion, even if they were in the slightly uncomfortable position of having to share a platform with the very politicians who had recently been denigrating them.

The pandemic also interacted with Brexit-fueled misinformation in other ways. Arguably, the UK's one success in pandemic-response public policy was rapidly rolling out vaccines in late 2020 and early 2021. The UK government had hedged its bets by placing significant vaccine orders with a number of suppliers early in their development stage. They also quickly opted for an innovative dosing regime, separating the first and second doses by 12 weeks, instead of the 3–4 weeks that had been used in medical trials. This meant that finite supplies of vaccines could be used to offer some protection (particularly against severe disease) to more of the most vulnerable. These twin factors gave the UK a significant vaccination lead over European neighbors in the early 2021. In March 2021, the UK had vaccinated 40% of its population. The EU average at this point was somewhere around 12–14% (Davies, 2021). However, this undoubted success was quickly linked to inaccurate information, with government ministers, including the Prime Minister, claiming that it was a tangible success created by Brexit. However, there is one problem with this argument: the UK's vaccination program was conceived and commenced during the 2020 transition period, when the UK had left the EU's political structures but was still wholly bound into its regulatory framework. In other words, the UK's vaccine success could (and essentially did) happen inside the EU (Kane, 2020).

The UK has historically been a highly centralized democracy, with power focused in London. However, the pandemic highlighted the country's increasingly fractured constitutional and communication environment. The devolution settlement created by the Labour governments of Tony Blair (1997 to 2007) created Parliaments/Assemblies as well as Executive governments in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, as well as a directly elected Mayor in London. Other cities and regions, including Manchester and Liverpool, gained mayors in later waves of reform. One important consequence of the devolution of powers across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland during the pandemic was different rules and restrictions being enforced across the four nations of the UK.<sup>3</sup> Political leaders from the different jurisdictions positioned themselves rhetorically against each other. Notably, Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish First Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party, adopted a sober model of communication coupled with a cautious approach to the pandemic. This very much positioned her an anti-Boris Johnson figure (Garland & Lilleker, 2021).

At the time of writing, the biggest single party political story generated by the pandemic is continuing to play out, and the Johnson premiership hangs in the balance. This follows revelations that his staff held parties in the Prime Minister's residence 10 Downing Street when the rest of the country was in lockdown. Johnson personally attended at least some of these parties. News stories about these events were first published in the Daily Mirror newspaper, with additional revelations following in other outlets over a period of several weeks (for a full list of the allegations, see Strick, 2022). Johnson first denied these stories entirely, but as the evidence grew, has claimed that he believed the events to be work related.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Presidency of the United States, no one has ever been removed from the office of British Premiership for their personal conduct. If, as now seems plausible, these stories are terminal for Johnson's leadership, he will become the first British Prime Minister to be brought down in this manner. If this comes to pass, it would be an important reminder that, despite all the misinformation and misdirection, a free investigative press can still effectively hold politicians to account for their actions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

<sup>3</sup>In one notable and comic incident, Chester Football Club who are based on the England-Wales border had to cancel a film showing at its ground. The entrance to the stadium was in the England, where public events were allowed, but the toilet facilities were in Wales, where they were not.

<sup>4</sup>To put this claim in some perspective, some of these events involved invitations being sent to 100 people. At others, staff are alleged to have been sent to local supermarkets with suitcases to purchase alcohol.

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