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THE UK

From consensus to confusion

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Political context

The UK government entered the COVID-19 crisis with a legacy of ten years of austerity and a country divided by nearly four years of Brexit. Boris Johnson started his premiership in July 2019 as one of the least trusted leaders in recent history (Grieve, 2019). In the lead up to the general election six months later, a litany of mishaps appeared to undermine his reputation further. His decision to prorogue (close) Parliament was ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court, 21 senior Conservatives were expelled from his party, and the government lost 12 parliamentary divisions (votes).

However, Johnson could rely on three sources of political capital when the crisis hit. He had vanquished his opponents to win the most decisive general election victory in ten years, he fulfilled his promise to 'Get Brexit Done' when the new parliament ratified the EU Withdrawal Bill, and as a consistent supporter of the National Health Service (NHS) he had distanced himself from his party's austerity agenda by promising more money for hospitals, schools and the police in the 2019 Conservative party manifesto,.

Full of confidence following election victory, he started to marginalise the media. Journalists were excluded from political briefings, and ministerial appearances were limited. Johnson's controversial senior adviser Dominic Cummings exceeded his powers by sacking a political adviser and was accused of threatening to 'whack' the BBC (Shipman, 2020). Disagreements with the three devolved nations, not least over Brexit, threatened consensus within the Union. Hence the context is of a leader with a semi-authoritarian approach to governance with significant strength in parliament, but not necessarily commanding the support of the whole country.

Chronology

Communication moments and media events

The Health Secretary chaired the first government emergency (COBRA) meeting to discuss the virus on January 24, informing reporters the threat to the UK was 'low' (ITV News, 2020a). The next day, the Foreign Office advised against all travel to China's affected Hubei province. The prime minister (PM) missed four further COBRA meetings, chairing his first on March 2 (Calvert et al., 2020a). At a televised press briefing on March 3, Johnson spoke positively about shaking hands with hospitalised coronavirus patients, on the same day that a sub-group of SAGE, the government's scientific advisory group, advised against 'handshakes.' On March 16, he led the first daily press briefing. These 60–90-minute sessions were broadcast by the BBC, establishing a format that placed government scientists alongside ministers. Deploying short, memorable slogans and distinctive 'emergency' graphics that were widely disseminated on hoardings, the www.gov.uk website, newspapers and social media, the briefings provided the focal point for public communication. See Table 14.1.

Four key media moments challenged the government's narrative: the response to Johnson's sickness absence from 27 March to 27 April, the rising criticism of government delays (Calvert et al., 2020b), Johnson's widely criticised launch of the 'roadmap' to easing lockdown on May 10, and the government's response to the behaviour of Johnson's adviser Dominic Cummings in driving 264 miles to Durham on March 27, the day Johnson tested positive for coronavirus.

Political and social issues

Although the government had distanced itself from post-2010 austerity it could not avoid the damaging legacy of local public service cuts and a largely privatised 'inadequate, unfair and unsustainable' system of elderly care desperately in need of reform (Dilnot, 2011; LGA, 2018). Report recommendations were ignored although the 2019 Conservative Manifesto contained a commitment to bring plans for an integrated and sustainable social care system to parliament within a year (Conservative Party, 2019). A three-day pandemic planning event in October 2016, Exercise Cygnus, revealed flaws in Britain's Emergency Preparedness, Resilience and Response (EPRR) plan but the conclusions were never published (Nuki & Gardner, 2020).

Public trust in government was already low following a series of controversies dating back to the Iraq War of 2003 (Ipsos MORI, 2019) but there were three impartial public institutions that continued to unite the nation: the NHS, the BBC and the monarchy. Protecting the NHS became a key part of the message while the Queen and BBC amplified the government's message; the latter only being critical when there were clear inconsistencies between government announcements and evidence, particularly in relation to the supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) to frontline medical staff, the situation in care

TABLE 14.1 UK chronology

	Date	Diffusion of COVID-19	Key official actions	Key communication events
January	24		Health Secretary Hancock chairs the first COBRA emergency meeting to discuss COVID-19.	Johnson quoted in media saying the threat to the UK was low.
	31	First case detected, a Chinese tourist in the city of York.		
February	6	Second case detected in Brighton, a UK man returning from France.		
	28	First case of local transmission in the UK.		
March	2			Johnson chairs first weekly emergency committee (COBRA) on Covid-19, saying the UK is 'very well prepared.'
	5	First confirmed COVID-19 death in hospital. Case numbers pass 100.		
	13	Confirmed cases rise from 208 to 798.	Government advises care homes close to visitors with symptoms. Premier League fixtures and London marathon postponed.	
	14	Cases rise to 1,140 and deaths to 21.		Government announces that UK has moved from 'contain' to 'delay' and ends community 'test and trace.'

(*Continued*)

TABLE 14.1 (Continued)

Date	Diffusion of COVID-19	Key official actions	Key communication events
16			PM leads the first daily COVID-19 televised press briefing on BBC1, 5 pm; these continue daily til June 23.
17		Chancellor announces largest package of emergency state support for business since the 2008 financial crash with £330bn loans, grants and tax cuts.	
23	Infections rise to more than 6,000.	Government begins lockdown, banning people from leaving home except for essential tasks or exercise. NHS contacts 1.5m clinically vulnerable telling them not to leave home.	
25		*Coronavirus Act 2020* gives government emergency powers.	
26			First 'Clap for Carers'; this would run to end of May.
27	Infections double every 3–4 days. Deaths total 759.	PM Johnson and Health Secretary Matt Hancock test positive and start isolating.	

April	2	Daily hospital admissions peak at 3,121.	Hancock declares target of 100k tests/day by the end of April.	
	5		Johnson admitted to hospital and later intensive care.	Televised broadcast by the Queen is watched by 23.5m.
	10	Daily hospital deaths peak at 980. Doubling time for cases is six days.	Crime falls by 21%. Police report issuing 1,084 fines for flouting lockdown in four weeks.	
	14		Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that public sector borrowing will reach £273 billion (15% GDP).	
	21	Deaths up 828 to 17,337.	Parliament votes to agree a 'hybrid' virtual parliament.	
	27		Johnson returns to work.	
	29	Deaths in all settings recorded, reaching 26,097. Estimated 1/3 deaths found in care homes.		
	30		UK's testing capacity reaches 100k per day.	
	14			
	21			
	26			
	29			
May	5	At 29,427 deaths, the UK has the highest number in Europe.		
	10			Johnson launches widely criticised roadmap to lockdown.

(Continued)

TABLE 14.1 (Continued)

Date	Diffusion of COVID-19	Key official actions	Key communication events
11		Tax payers are now paying the wages of 7.5m people at a cost of £8bn a month.	Johnson briefs parliament on 'roadmap' for easing lockdown. Schools to reopen in England from June 1.
15		Transport for London negotiates £1.6bn bailout following 90% fall in public transport use.	
20			Slogan 'Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives' introduced to much criticism and satire.
23			Cummings' travel during lockdown revealed in press.
28	Deaths reach 37,460.		
31	People in hospital with COVID-19 falls 15% week-on-week. New admissions fall by 20%.	Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) 2020 removes many of the lockdown rules in England.	
June 2	Official report shows people from ethnic minority backgrounds twice as likely to die from COVID-19.	MPs vote to end hybrid parliament.	Education Secretary Williamson U-turns on schools fully opening.
9	129 further deaths recorded. Overall, 50,335 deaths by end June.		Education Secretary Williamson U-turns on schools fully opening.

homes and the ability to test for COVID-19 and develop a track and trace system for those with symptoms.

Social networks and the web

Social networks were polarised over Brexit into ideological camps, including a vociferous anti-Johnson and anti-government one. During the crisis, further ideologically diverse camps emerged, one in favour of lockdown and another that questioned strict social distancing, citing Sweden as more successful in protecting public health and the economy. The dominant group supported lockdown, evidenced by the public shaming of those flouting rules even before lockdown was fully introduced: the #covidiots hashtag went viral during the weekend of March 21–22 (O'Reilly, 2020). There was also extensive sharing of messages which reinforced the government's initial slogan: 'Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.' Social media users promoted a weekly 'Clap for Carers,' mirroring the similar initiative in Italy, that ran from March 26 to the end of May. While conspiracy theories abounded regarding COVID-19 being caused by 5G networks, as well as whether Johnson's diagnosis was a hoax to gain public sympathy, these were spread by a minority and largely drowned out by messages of solidarity with key workers and the sharing of volunteering opportunities to support the most vulnerable.

The tenor changed with the introduction of a new slogan on May 20, alongside the easing of lockdown. 'Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives' was widely mocked with a meme generator (imgflp.com) allowing users to share subverted humorous versions. Critics of easing restrictions, the flocking of citizens to beauty spots during the hot May Bank Holiday weekend, U-turns over the full opening of schools and the enforced wearing of face masks from June 15 abounded. These, on the back of the scandal over Cummings' journey to Durham, and subsequent 60-mile round trip to Barnard Castle at the height of the pandemic, allegedly to test his ability to drive led to more widespread criticisms of the government's handling of the pandemic.

Hence, social media initially amplified the government's message and encouraged social norms to develop through shaming and supporting key workers, especially as health professionals turned to social media to plead with the public to obey the guidelines. However, it was also a platform for criticism, in particular, the sharing of alternative perspectives from non-British media sources (Dettmer, 2020). Anti-government voices also focused on the long-term record of post 2010 Conservative governments as well as the specific handling of the crisis, mirroring downward shifts in the polls.

Analysis

After a slow start, the UK lockdown began on March 23 and achieved high compliance largely through consent rather than enforcement (Nice, 2020). The government communications campaign focusing on the widely viewed televised

daily briefings achieved high levels of political consensus, media cooperation and public engagement (Mayhew, 2020; Tobitt, 2020). Approval was 72%, according to YouGov, during the first week of lockdown and remained high despite Johnson's absence (Opinium, 2020), demonstrating the largely 'non-partisan status-quo bias' also seen on social media (Blais et al., 2020). This started to slide after May 10 when Johnson launched a widely criticised 'roadmap' for the easing of lockdown and worsened in response to the Cummings affair two weeks later. Approval dropped to 46% as lockdown was eased and the downward trajectory continued to 41% by May 29 (Walker, 2020a). By June 8, a YouGov international survey of 22 countries found that the UK government's net approval rating of −15 was joint lowest with Mexico (Armstrong, 2020). What changed in the intervening 11 weeks?

A 'part-time' prime minister?

As the pandemic took hold in China during January 2020, Johnson and his girlfriend Carrie Symonds returned to London after a week's holiday on the Caribbean island of Mustique. In mid-February, as floods threatened homes in the north, midlands and Wales, Johnson spent ten days at his country home. At weekly parliamentary questions to the prime minister on February 26, outgoing opposition Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, described him as 'a part-time Prime Minister,' calling on him to chair a COBRA meeting (Walker, 2020b). Three days later, and 11 days after a court approved Johnson's second divorce, Symonds announced their engagement and her pregnancy on Instagram, saying the baby would be born in the summer. Wilfred was born on April 29.

The intrusion of the prime minister's complicated private life, the use of vaguely inaccurate statements and an on-off approach to visible leadership continued to influence communication processes during the first months of the pandemic. The format for briefings was established at the first session at 5 pm on March 16, and deviated little thereafter: the elegant but neutral wood-panelled room, the three wooden lecterns facing the camera, with the prime minister at the centre flanked by the Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Medical Officer and two Union Jack flags. The session began with a daily update on the statistics, followed by thankyous, announcements, a rundown on charts by the scientist of the day and finally, questions from the media, starting with the BBC, and later involving the public. The refrain throughout was 'This is an unprecedented global pandemic, and we have taken the right steps at the right time to combat it, guided at all times by the best scientific advice.'

Before his illness, Johnson chaired seven of the ten daily briefings. After his return on April 27, he chaired eight of the 50 (16%) remaining broadcasts until June 23. Given the campaign's focus on the daily briefings, this is a significant reduction in his public presence as leader of the UK Government's response to the crisis. This contrasts with that of Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who chaired 69 briefings during the same period, often taking advantage of her

earlier 12:30 slot to subvert the agenda of the UK government. Johnson's place at the lectern was taken by a revolving cast of 11 senior ministers, of whom only one was female. Most prominent was the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, with 24 appearances, followed by Dominic Raab, Foreign Secretary and Deputy during Johnson's illness, with 12.

Where the campaign went wrong

The *Coronavirus Act 2020* passed into law on March 25 giving the government wide-ranging emergency powers but why did it choose to draft a new bill when it could have invoked pre-existing emergency law, the *Civil Contingencies Act* (CCA)? It has been argued that in bypassing the CCA the government also avoided its in-built accountability, local funding imperatives and the principle of *subsidiarity* whereby decisions are taken at the lowest appropriate level and coordinated at the highest necessary level (Lent, 2020). This made consensus less sustainable over time as central government side-lined local authorities and public service providers.

A failure to deliver timely and accurate information to all stakeholders began to reassert itself, firstly in response to Johnson's illness. On April 6, Raab told the daily briefing Johnson 'continues to lead the government.' That evening, Johnson was admitted to intensive care. On April 3, Hancock described staying at home as an instruction 'not a request,' later saying 'you should "play your part. Do it for the people you love."' On April 11, the Home Secretary Priti Patel told viewers to 'play your part' or the police would be 'unafraid to act.' Speculation grew in early May that there were moves to ease lockdown when anonymous sources were cited in Conservative-supporting newspapers culminating in a detailed rundown of the 'roadmap' in the *Sunday Telegraph* on May 10, followed that night by Johnson's much-criticised broadcast (Malnick, 2020). MPs, the opposition, the devolved governments and the rest of the media had to wait until the following day for a full briefing. This was the moment when Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland began to publicly diverge from the UK-wide timetable.

On May 23, two left-supporting newspapers published details of Cummings' journeys across the country over the Easter break. Downing Street[1] insisted that his actions were 'in line' with government advice, devoting 90 minutes of live TV to Cummings to defend himself personally. More than 180,000 constituents bombarded their MPs with complaints (Procter et al., 2020), 44 Conservative MPs and a petition of 1m people called on Cummings to resign (Mason, 2020) and social and mainstream media exploded with critique. A series of polls found that confidence in government advice fell following the controversy (Fletcher et al., 2020) while a national survey conducted immediately before and after the Cummings story broke found that the number saying they were prepared to break lockdown rules had doubled (Cartwright, 2020).

Then came the damaging U-turn. On June 9, the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson admitted what teachers had been saying for weeks, that opening

primary schools to all children before the summer break as stated in the 'road-map' was not practical with social distancing. Attempts by ministers on May 16 and 17 to isolate the teaching unions and councils by upholding those still teaching as heroes, and those who questioned the plan as operating against the interests of children, had failed. Following the schools U-turn, political editor Nicholas Watt told the BBC's *Newsnight* programme that he had picked up 'lots of unease' among Conservative MPs, being told by 'a very senior Tory MP' that 'our leadership is pitiful. Boris Johnson needs to be honest.'

Conclusion

The UK entered lockdown relatively late but public, media and political cohesion and compliance remained high, despite the illness of the prime minister. The government moved quickly from its habitual side-lining of mainstream media to a bold attempt at accountability, with ministers and science advisers presenting a united front. The failure to build a national consensus, despite government claims to the contrary, and a return to anonymous briefing of favoured sources, undermined trust between the government, media and the public. This reached a climax over Johnson's support of a controversial senior aide widely believed to have broken lockdown rules at the height of the pandemic. The adviser survived but the reputation of the government and the prime minister fell dramatically, leaving the field increasingly open to critical voices. A series of policy U-turns bred confusion, eroding the simplicity of the government's message. However, the crisis proves it is possible even for divisive governments to instil a shared national purpose and a sense of equality by suspending partisan conflict but to be effective, this must be sustained.

Note

1 The official residence of the prime minister; when official statements are made by the office, but not from any named official, they are classified as having been made by 'Downing Street.'

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