

The challenges of providing certainty in the face of wicked problems: analysing the UK government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

While not wholly unprecedented, the COVID-19 pandemic created a series of interconnected unprecedented crises impacting all aspects of economic and social life. The measures introduced to prevent the spread of the virus had significant ramifications and caused crises in the broader spheres of health care, social care, education, social policy, employment policy and immigration policy. As with the workings of any complex system, a problem with one moving part has a knock-on effect on all others. These 'wicked problems' – complex, interdependent, unpredictable, open-ended (Rittel and Webber 1973) – arise from developments in the social and natural world (Alford and Head 2017), and require new and different approaches to planning and decision-making by all stakeholders. However, often, government responses to such problems demonstrate over-confidence, insufficient preparedness, an inability to process complex scientific evidence and a lack of imagination with regard to likely outcomes – these traits are all highlighted as evidence of bad leadership, not just in politics (Örtenblad 2021) .

The complexity of the interconnected crises has shown conventional crisis management and the rules and norms of crisis communication ill-equipped for the challenges. To demonstrate the complexity and the challenges for crisis management we analyse the Boris Johnson-led UK government's management of the pandemic. As a global travel hub, the UK was highly likely to suffer from the spread of any highly contagious virus and therefore required a strategically planned and coordinated approach. The UK is a unitary state with some powers devolved to the administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, Scotland enjoying greater fiscal autonomy, increasing the complexity of government. The key question we pose in this paper focuses on the management and communication approach of the Westminster UK government. Specifically, to what extent did the character and composition of the government, its representatives and its advisory bodies, and the constraints imposed on decision making, hinder developing an effective strategy for reducing the spread and impact of Covid-19. In doing so we ask what lessons can be learned for governments facing situations of unprecedented seriousness and impact and what sort of governance is needed to deal with the wicked complexity of events such as a pandemic which represents a threat to all aspects of life and challenges everything that would previously (often falsely) have been regarded as a certainty.

Crisis communication and wicked problems

The meaning of the words crisis and strategy in ancient Greek are closely related: crisis referring to a situation where a swift decision or judgement is required (Shaluf et al. 2003, p.29), and strategy describing the possession of the skills necessary (Heath 2004, p.823). Today, an entire inter- and cross-disciplinary field of research is devoted to decision-making under conditions of uncertainty (Mandel et al. 2019). The importance of this academic endeavour has been highlighted by the complex, interrelated and evolving nature of the pandemic which has required decision-making under continuously changing conditions of precarious knowledge (Koffman et al. 2020; Rutter et al. 2020). Swift decisions are needed, but information is fluid and everchanging, and those operating within health care systems require leadership. These characteristics of decision-making and leadership are often attributed to military contexts and especially warfare (Grint 2008), and it is no surprise that some of the most used metaphors in discussing COVID relate to warfare (Chapman and Miller 2020; Isaacs and Priesz 2020; Kohlt 2020).

Comparisons drawn between the 1918-19 Spanish Flu and COVID-19 pandemic concluded that today's inadequate and counterproductive responses, including pushback and resistance to directives, mismanagement of resources, a never-ending flood of mis- and disinformation (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021), "closely mirror those to the pandemic 102 years ago" (Nichols et al. 2020, p.642). Due to the steady evolution of the spread of communicable diseases alongside drivers towards the world being a global village (Huremović 2019; Tisdell 2020), such events are more predictable. Crises, in any area of life in which nations are interconnected, can quickly become large-scale and potentially global (Potrafke 2015).

The characteristic that ties all large-scale crises together is uncertainty. There is information, but it is incomplete and volatile, but decisions need to be taken with every path chosen having an element of risk. Analysing, managing and communicating about risk on a societal level became institutionalised in the 1970s as public concern about risk increased in the wake of growing awareness of environmental pollution as a result of industrial accidents. Fischhoff (1995), a leader in the risk management field, highlighted the importance of being open, transparent and persuasive arguing "One cannot expect to quiet a raging controversy with a few hastily prepared messages. One cannot assume that expensively produced communications will work without technically competent evaluations. Those who ignore these issues may be the problem, as much as the risk is. The price of their ignorance is borne by everyone concerned." (Fischhoff 1995, p.144)

Fischhoff builds on work showing poor decision-making can be explained by cognitive limitations and the ideological perspectives of individuals finding themselves confronted with situations of significant uncertainty (Fischhoff and Beyth-Marom 1976). The calm, curious, confident and considerate recognition of, and engagement with, uncertainty is thus a key requirement of effective leadership in times of crises.

Reflecting on the 1918-19 and COVID-19 pandemics Professor Nancy Bristow acknowledged "how little I understood about the overwhelming power of the uncertainty that comes with a pandemic born of a novel virus" (Nichols et al. 2020, p.643). She highlights COVID-19 is "a complex problem in a complex system" (Rutter et al. 2020), in other words, a wicked problem – typical of a VUCA world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Latemore 2020). Framing the leadership and decision-making challenges arising from COVID-19 as wicked problems brings to the fore unique characteristics beyond those of conventional problems and crises for which standard operating procedures, rules and regulations have been developed. These include the lack of a definitive problem formulation, the absence of a stopping rule, an inability to provide reliable quantitative measures of success, and the unreliability of trial-and-error learning because of the uniqueness and volatility of wicked problems (Zizka 2020). Grint allocates specific decision-making styles to types of problems arguing management is adequate for tame problems, but leadership is needed for wicked problems. When facing wicked problems, success comes from a situational understanding of problems and application of the appropriate style of decision-making (Grint 2008, 2014, 2020). That situational understanding needs to be paired with a high degree of flexibility in applying styles to changing conditions during a pandemic when "no-one knows what the end game is" (Lilleker et al. 2021a, p.333).

There is evidence that the existing crisis communication literature has not addressed issues raised by studies of wicked problems in a VUCA world, suggesting existing rulebooks may offer limited advice for dealing with these challenges. Defining crises "as risks that are manifested" (Heath and O'Hair 2010, p.1) conflates notions that risk communication deals with what could go wrong, whereas crisis communication deals with what has gone wrong. Risk communication considers scenarios, the

likelihood of longer-term outcomes, and the potential consequences of actions. Crisis communication considers immediate requirements, including decision-making without 'having the full picture'. However, risk and crisis communication are often treated as interchangeable concepts, with a focus on manageability. Uncertainty is taken as a given and acknowledged, yet "there is very little direction on handling crises where this knowledge is lacking including situations with a high degree of uncertainty" (Liu et al. 2016, p.479). The insufficient conceptual understanding of 'radical uncertainty' where "the decision-making context is equivocal and indeterminate" (Tuckett and Nikolic 2017, p.502) is at the heart of present and future wicked leadership challenges despite the difference between risk and uncertainty epistemically proven 100 years ago (Knight 1921).

Crisis communication, empathy and politics

Crisis communication scholarship has made highly valuable contributions to the theory and practice of crisis, disaster and risk management. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is an established and applied standard in the field which highlights the role of organisations in helping publics during crises by providing constantly updated instructions and information (Coombs and Holladay 2012). However, the affective consequences of being exposed to uncertainty are not sufficiently understood and "it is too soon to know exactly what role uncertainty plays in crisis communication" (Liu et al. 2016, p.485). It is a natural human urge to make uncertainty manageable and controllable. But when faced with wicked problems there are inherently unpredictable levels of uncertainty (Taleb 2007). Do governments simply apply a toolbox of solutions developed for tame problems? Grint (2014) highlights leaders must "be very wary of acting decisively precisely because we cannot know what to do". Hence, it is not surprising that established solutions fall short and leaders struggle to comprehend the scale of dilemma they face. Add to that the filter of mediated political communication, and it becomes clear that longstanding explanations for poor decision-making in politics remain salient (Fischhoff and Beyth-Marom 1976).

Yet, crisis and risk communication theory has not engaged with the concepts of radical uncertainty and they do not feature in some recent reflections on COVID-19 for crisis communication (Coombs 2020). Coombs finds "new concerns for public sector crisis communication and management efforts because of the unique crisis demands it created" (Coombs 2020, p.991), pointing to affective message characteristics such as anxiety, empathy and fatigue as key factors in public health communication. He argues effectiveness requires a deep understanding of audiences, as "a message cannot reduce anxiety if the crisis managers fail to realize what is driving the anxiety during the crisis" (Coombs 2020, p.999). Successful affective messaging in the face of wicked challenges requires cognitive and emotional empathy: to recognise others' emotions and to compassionately relate to them through building a shared identity (Jetten et al,(2020). Emotional intelligence and empathy are seen as key motivational effects of charismatic leadership (Choi, (2006) , which, according to Antonakis, is "well suited to solving problems in situations of ambiguity and crisis" (2021, p.210). Charismatic and empathic leadership provides the inclusivity and togetherness that are essential aspects of any behavioural change message with crisis managers representing us, doing it for us and understanding us at each stage (Jetten et al,(2020). Whilst Coombs points to resistance to pandemic messaging and calls for a better understanding of said resistance, he does not address specific drivers and trends such as the politicisation of health and science information, which has led to an erosion of trust in science, with a direct impact on the effectiveness of COVID-19 communication (Druckman et al. 2020; Pennycook et al. 2020). Jetten et al (2020) emphasise the need for a non-partisan approach which eschews any areas which might ignite societal polarisation; however they focus largely on adopting a paternalistic approach to managing behaviour which is only one aspect of the crisis and one on which there are multiple pressures.

Rather than a paternalistic approach, perhaps maternalism is more appropriate, as per assessments of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's empathetic and honest crisis leadership style (McGuire et al. 2020). As a model of political leadership in a public health crisis, Johnson and Williams (Johnson and Williams 2020) suggest citizens need to feel protected and cared for. During the COVID crisis, studies find female leaders by and large more successfully demonstrating an empathetic leadership style (Johnson 2020; Dada et al. 2021), although we acknowledge the point that selection bias and underlying factors bringing women into leadership roles in the first place play a role that needs further exploration (Windsor et al. 2020, p.2) (2020, p.2) We will return to this point in our conclusion.

Despite a plethora of empirical research in crisis leadership, dealing with the true complexity of a situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic remains largely uncharted territory. When we then consider the wider complexity of governance and the perspectives and approaches political leaders bring to crisis management, we add a further dimension of complexity. It is a paradox of wicked problems that successful navigation ought to be guided by precise instruments providing precise measurements, yet – robust, sophisticated and granular as the numbers may be, they cannot provide navigational certainty. David Spiegelhalter made this point quoting Silver “The numbers have no way of speaking for themselves. We speak for them. We imbue them with meaning.” (Silver 2012; Spiegelhalter 2019) and core to political communication is giving meaning.

Political communication

Health communication is normally handled by public health agencies and health communication specialists, not politicians (Parker and Thorson 2009). When health becomes politicised, such as contraception or abortion policies, polarisation between partisan stances can occur (Bessett et al. 2015). The norms of political communication, particularly permanent campaigning, means there is a constant blurring of information provision with image management (Joathan and Lilleker 2020), practices inappropriate for health crises. Health professionals tend to start from a basis of high credibility and public trust, politicians often do not (Cairney and Wellstead 2020). Extant levels of credibility and trust affect public responses to messages. As politicians may not enjoy the trust of the whole population, and their promotional style of political communication can distract the public from fully engaging with the message, health communication is best practiced outside the political realm.

Studies have highlighted the increasing professionalisation of the strategies and tactics of political parties and their leading spokespeople. Tenscher et al (2016) found priority was given to centralised command and control over communication, matching the spokesperson to the message, and developing a strategy informed by consultant input and insights into the psychology of citizens. Hence, communication has both a strategic and performative dimension and is designed to have maximum direct impact upon receivers while also gaining positive media coverage. While these rules seem appropriate for any context, political communication consultants tend to be schooled in delivering public support to their side, their role is to advise more on the performative aspects and the impact on public perceptions of the individual politician, party or government. Hence, the performative dimension is not simply about persuading receivers, it also communicates the brand identity of the politician and party. Serazio (2017) demonstrates how modern politicians seek to develop a brand which has emotional resonance and is perceived as having authenticity, living and projecting its values through communication and behaviour. The political imperatives of permanent campaigning drive politicians to continually attempt to shore up public support through their performances. Such promotional work can run counter to delivering a clear response during a health crisis as the information conveyed can become obscured by strategic image management. Permanent campaigning involves trying to instil confidence in a political project by communicating optimism and certainty around the party's program while raising concerns about opponents'

approaches. The resulting partisan battles and over-optimistic promises are inappropriate for wicked problem solving. The focus on brand coherence also limits adjusting to fluid situations where information is incomplete.

These phenomena can be explained through the metaphor of the personality traits of hedgehogs and foxes. In *The Signal and the Noise*, Nate Silver describes the contrasting prediction and decision-making cognitive styles of the confident, close-minded hedgehog, and the cautious, open-minded fox. Silver concludes foxes make better forecasters, but hedgehogs better talk show guests (Silver 2012, p.55f.). The juxtaposition of the intellectually curious, empirical forecaster and the ideological talk show host, ready to express and defend a set opinion, has more than a fleeting similarity with leading UK statisticians on the one hand, and a Prime Minister with a long career as a newspaper columnist and editor of opinion journalism (Purnell 2011; Bower 2020) on the other. In Waylen's analysis of political leadership during COVID-19 (2021), Boris Johnson's "hypermasculinity" (p.1159) is characterised as "top-down, monolithic, over-confident" (p.1165) – all traits of the incurious hedgehog. Silver advises those who strive to make better predictions and decisions under conditions of uncertainty: "be foxy" (Silver 2012, p.53). During crises, communicators need to connect dots, navigate positions and build holistic understandings of the facts in order to make good decisions and reach optimal outcomes. They must also learn to navigate the advice from experts who have more of a hedgehog personality, narrowly focused on one specific goal. They need to be constantly curious and sceptical. The challenge is that political leaders can be hedgehog-like focused on their own image and brand; experts meanwhile are solely focused on their own narrow remit. If all those central to decision-making adopt a narrow perspective it is highly unlikely these contrasting foci can be combined to meet wicked problems.

Some analyses of pandemic responses provide evidence for this point, although the hedgehog/fox framework remains underexplored with regard to wicked problems generally or the pandemic. Morson and Schapiro's (2021) discussion of the "new fundamentalism" links hedgehog traits to poor pandemic decision-making in politics, as well as poor application of models and communication of findings in science. Leadership scholar Grint's (2020) critical analysis of the UK government's COVID response does not explicitly mention hedgehog and fox traits, unlike some of his previous work (Grint 2008, 2014), but focuses instead on the wicked problem framework. Giustiniano et al. (2020) propose the concept of "resilient leadership" as an amalgam of hedgehog and fox traits (p.972), and with regard to COVID-19, advocate "the value of mastering paradox in resilient leadership" (p.975).

Political communication has long practiced the art of navigating complexities and synthesising policies to simple soundbites that are reassuring, persuasive, on-brand and on-message (Cwalina and Falkowski 2018). However, such instances require emotional and attitudinal appeals only, health communication requires immediate behavioural change requiring high trust, credibility and empathetic communication (Jetten et al. 2020). Achieving these are problematic when governed by political communication norms. The drive to stay on message, appear certain, avoiding answering difficult questions, refusing to admit a lack of certainty may not be ideal for economic policy but the outcomes are long term and as the public agenda shifts the inconsistencies between claims and outcomes can go unnoticed. Outcomes during a crisis can be immediate and inconsistencies, when easily exposed, damage credibility. The maintenance of trust is even more challenging for politicians who polarise opinion, do not command high levels of trust, who face strong opposition to measures or are forced to perform U-turns when their rhetoric does not match reality (Garland and Lilleker 2021; Lilleker et al. 2021b). Hence crises are not simply a test of government but also stern tests of the competence of the communication strategists who have to navigate their specific political context in order to mitigate the socio-political impact of the health crisis.

COVID-19 and the UK government

The Johnson majority government won the snap 12 December 2019 election on a platform of delivering Brexit and 'unleashing the potential' of the UK in international trade. Brexit had proved

divisive, not least because the overall 51.9% victory for Leave masked regional differences, in particular 62% of Scottish voters supporting remaining in the EU, exacerbating calls for independence (McEwen 2018). Johnson's cabinet was formed on 13 February 2020, Health Secretary Matt Hancock was the longest serving Minister to remain in post. Hancock's survival alongside two other anti-Brexit ministers was claimed by Alexiadou (2020) to be because "they have either performed sufficiently well and have avoided scandals.¹ Or... because the prime minister considers their areas to be low priority". Alexiadou suggests the Cabinet as well as the strategic team of Dominic Cummings and Lee Cain, veterans of the Leave campaign in 2016, was formed to drive through Johnson's Brexit agenda. When the pandemic struck, Johnson's team and the priorities of the government had to shift focus dramatically. It is not the purpose of this paper to chronicle and critique the UK government's policy-making and communication throughout the evolving – and at the time of writing this, in July 2021, still unfinished – COVID-19 pandemic. Our attention focuses on the style and substance of political communication from the comparative perspective of public health communication versus permanent campaigning.

On 3rd February, ahead of post-Brexit trade talks and at a time when the government's initial COVID-19 response strategy appeared to focus on reassuring the public and carrying on as normal, , Boris Johnson gave a speech at the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich – symbol of a long-lost era of British expansionist glory – which demonstrated a performative, metaphorical conflation of Brexit and the pandemic (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021, p.73f.; Waylen 2021, p.1163) that would prove characteristic of his government's early response.² Seven weeks before imposing a nationwide lockdown, Johnson stated COVID-19 would "trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation" that would go beyond "what is medically rational to the point of doing real and unnecessary economic damage" and "at that moment humanity needs some Government somewhere that is willing at least to make the case powerfully for freedom of exchange". He went on to proclaim the UK would be "ready to take off its Clark Kent spectacles" to become the Superman of the free global market.

This betrays Johnson as promoting the Brexit brand of Britain and with a hedgehog mindset focused on reaffirmed Britain's economic global prowess. It also set the scene for weeks of low engagement with the evolving pandemic, with the virus claimed to pose minimal risks (Garland and Lilleker 2021, p.172). His sanguine approach is captured in a Downing Street press conference of March 3. Flanked by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor, Johnson launched the "contain, delay, research, mitigate" strategy arguing "this will be a mild disease from which they [the majority infected] will speedily and fully recover as we've already seen"³. Despite evidence from outbreaks linked to European ski resorts and the virus spreading seemingly out of control in parts of Italy, a nation on a similar timeline and trajectory, Johnson's speech reflected a reluctance to impose any restrictions on public freedom that would impinge on the brand of Johnson's Britain as the post-Brexit economic superman (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021, p.74). The period of mid-Feb to mid-March was thus a wasted period, reflecting a Cabinet wishing to retain focus on the platform on which they were elected. Reliance on WHO advise that COVID-19 was similar to SARS and MERS, which effected a small number of countries (Gregor and Lilleker 2021), , which rapidly proved inaccurate, suggests a

¹ In the case of Matt Hancock, as of June 2021, the argument of avoiding scandal no longer holds. After his affair with adviser Gina Coladangelo become public, he resigned on 27th June, succeeded by Sajid Javid (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2021/jun/27/matt-hancock-resigns-sajid-javid-health-secretary-politics-live-latest-news-updates>)

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-in-greenwich-3-february-2020>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-coronavirus-press-conference-3-march-2020>

single-mindedness at the heart of government which meant contrasting arguments were marginalised.

But, Johnson exuded a sense of confidence and optimism, downplaying the severity of the virus invoking a patriotic belief the UK was able to withstand any challenge and so he appeared to focus purely on evidence supportive of his ideological opposition to tighter restrictions on the society and economy. The evidence of ideological continuity is within Conservative party 2019 election manifesto, which focused on unleashing the potential of the British people⁴. Implicit in the language was the libertarian philosophy which underpinned the Leave side of the Brexit debate, and we suggest this was the sole focus of government with the emerging pandemic seen as an opportunity to live the brand as opposed to being a threat. Restrictive measures were anathema to the Johnson-led brand of Conservatism and the spirit of post-Brexit Britain, freedom outside of the EU's restrictions could not be replaced by new, tighter regulations and restrictions. The confirmation bias allowed by a belief in preparedness, in the UK's indomitable spirit and strength and the narrow focus on evidence from the SARS and MERS epidemics may have led to a situation of unprecedented uncertainty being communicated with a high degree of certainty and confidence (Avery et al, 2020). The public largely supported Johnson's line, despite debates about the consequences for public health, as well as the change in tack when lockdown was introduced, he also enjoyed high sympathy when hospitalised with the virus (Garland & Lilleker, 2021b). The media did criticise the initial vacillation, particularly keeping shops and hospitality open and giving citizens a choice over whether to self-isolate or go about their ordinary lives, but largely lockdown was seen as necessary, at the right time and was adhered to in the spirit of the slogan "stay home, protect the NHS, save lives.

Support for Johnson began to unravel as strict lockdown measures were eased, not only due to the revelations Cummings had breached lockdown rules⁵ and Johnson standing by his special adviser. The partial removal of restrictions saw a return to the ebullience and over-confidence at the core of the Johnson brand, but were largely seen as a communication failure. The revised restrictions were seen as confusing and were accompanied by bold claims to put in place systems and processes that would eradicate the need for those restrictions. The revised slogan 'stay alert, control the virus, save lives' lacked resonance and simplicity. The images of crowds flocking to beaches and the re-opening of hospitality accompanied by the financial incentive 'eat out to help out' led to a divided society, some acting complacently despite the virus remaining prevalent and others, both young⁶ and old⁷, feeling vulnerable and nervous even to leave their homes. The major failure was to build an inclusive and empathetic approach that the whole nation could be comfortable with. Opinion polls showed splits between people who wished to return to a situation closer to normality pitted against those who preferred tighter restrictions until the virus was eradicated or a vaccine was developed. The latter's feelings jarred with Johnson's optimistic certainty of the correctness of his government's approach. The easing of restrictions also saw the start of divergent approaches across the devolved administrations, Scotland's first minister Nicola Sturgeon in particular employed a different slogan, terminology and rules while also being formally in control of all communication (Garland & Lilleker, 2021b). Scotland's more cautious approach represented an internal challenge to Johnson, heightening the sense his government's approach was too cavalier. Johnson attempted to assuage public anxiety through the introduction of a test, track and trace system requiring those who

⁴ <https://www.conservatives.com/our-plan>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/04/durham-police-dominic-cummings-nazir-ifzal-dossier>

⁶ <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/coping-with-anxiety-about-leaving-the-house/>

⁷ <https://www.which.co.uk/news/2020/10/coronavirus-has-left-many-older-people-too-afraid-to-leave-the-house/>

contracted COVID-19 to self-isolate. Johnson's claim that this would be world-beating⁸ was soon revealed to be severely detached from reality and this, alongside further U-turns over the summer of 2020, saw the government's competence and Johnson's approval ratings precipitously decline (Garland & Lilleker, 2021b).

The political events of Summer 2020 also offer evidence that the complexity of the situation had not been fully considered by government and that policies had not been fully risk assessed. Although within government there must have been ongoing vigilance across all areas of policy, government attention seemed to be event driven. Minor U-turns on whether poorer families should be given free meals for children when schools were closed were damaging, particular as it was a high profile intervention from a footballer that led to a change of policy. More damaging was the U-turn over using algorithms to calculate exit awards for students which were criticised as unfair, defended wholeheartedly by government and then within a week the system was abandoned. These examples, alongside unsatisfactory justifications for certain restrictions that were put in place at different points, and vacillation over whether face-mask wearing was advisory or mandatory contributed to the decline of public confidence. The government seemed trapped in a cycle of making a decision, facing criticism within the media, from the opposition or public, aggressive entrenchment from government ministers in defence of their position and then reversal. This is indicative of a 'hedgehog approach' that is led by public and media opinion, rather than the complexity of scientific evidence and subsequent coherent, evidence-based policy-making (Hartwell and McKee 2021) A combination of partisan negation of oppositional positions, populist appeals to bolster the case for not introducing restrictions and claims to be science led when at minimum scientific data suggests an opposing course showed the Johnson government's strategy ran counter to even the basic rules of crisis communication.

The most damaging aspect here is the claim of being correct and claims of certainty regarding the evidence-based case and robustness of the measures. When the truth is exposed as hollow the case falls apart, but so does the ability to make future believable claims of truth and certainty. The deeper issue is that the rules of political communication, where claims are made about a policy that cannot later be scrutinised easily (such as economic reforms which take years to incubate), were easily stress tested during the pandemic and usually exposed as hollow, for example the fact that severe failings in the test, track and trace have dogged the system throughout and, despite strong defences, policies have had to be reversed. Johnson attempted to capitalise on his personal brand strength of being the optimistic, strong and authentic man of the people (Yates 2018; Waylen 2021) making his approach to the pandemic an extension of his approach to politics more generally. Under normal circumstances it is difficult to assess the extent that confidence in one's own approach is well founded. Due to the examples above, and other claims about being back to normality by Easter, summer and later Christmas, what made for a successful brand in politics as usual made for a failed brand in the context of a complex crisis.

The success of the UK's vaccination programme should not go unmentioned (Harris and Moss 2021). Key drivers behind the vaccine rollout success according to the British Medical Journal were a head start in developing and approving a vaccine, focused work by the vaccines taskforce, widely available vaccination centres, and a dedicated effort by the NHS (Baraniuk 2021). There was some indication that the government "learnt the lessons of test and trace" (Haddon 2021, p.5), however the ending of restrictions on 19th July 2021, 'freedom day', seems a return to bold, and widely criticised, optimism. The UK Health Secretary tested positive for COVID-19, and both Chancellor and Prime

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-52745202>

Minister are self-isolating after initially trying to avoid the nationally recommended steps, and then having to perform another U-turn.⁹ Scientists warned against the risks of a “significant third wave of hospitalisations and deaths” following the lifting of all regulations (Iacobucci 2021), and a letter to The Lancet signed by more 1,200 scientists came out strongly against the political decision by the UK government (Gurdasani et al. 2021). At the point of writing, it is not yet clear if a further U-turn and lockdown may be required as a result of this decision.

Analysis & Conclusion

The context for the UK government’s handling of the pandemic thus was:

- the government was elected in December 2019 with a solid 80 seats majority, had the main focus of “getting Brexit done” and a leader whose brand is a blend of optimism and nationalism
- a National Health Service operating under the strains of a decade of austerity policies¹⁰
- a public health communication protocol based on “known knowns” and “known unknowns” (Bammer and Smithson 2012, p.xiv), where crisis communication is understood as a tame management problem
- a political communication protocol that follows permanent campaigning principles (Joathan and Lilleker 2020)

As the pandemic started to take hold, a fluid set of events and a steady but unpredictable trickle of information required the government to act and respond on a number of levels and in a number of ways to try to keep the country safe. This scenario played out in countries around the globe, and when we consider the evidence from other nations and governments – COVID-19 infection rates and death tolls, social and economic impact – we see differences in outcomes, and commonalities based on political leadership, decision-making and communication. This is not a black and white picture, however: Lilleker et al. (2021a, p.336) found that “some authoritarian and conservative administrations demonstrated a greater tendency to underestimate the pandemic ... [but] there is not a simple correlation between the style and ideology of a government and the impact experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic”. There is evidence that “hypermasculine leadership”, not least the UK version of “overweening self-confidence and groupthink” (Gaskell et al. 2020; Waylen 2021, p.1169) led to failures in public policy not experienced in other contexts. Some raise this as a problem with the masculine style of leadership suggesting female leaders offer more effective leadership although we recognise the selection bias in the choices of examples, and underlying factors bringing women into leadership roles in the first place (Windsor et al. 2020). Scandinavian Prime Ministers, Mette Fredriksen of Denmark, Sanna Marin of Finland and Erna Solberg of Norway are highlighted as leaders who “went to great efforts both to bind their societies together and to be seen to stand with them” (Jetten et al. 2020, p.29f). The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are singled out as examples for “compassion and evidence-based thinking and decision making as solid foundations for responsible leadership” (Maak et al. 2021, p.4). Similarly, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon demonstrated greater oversight of the details of policy as well as developing an inclusive Scottish approach that she frequently contrasted with the “shambolic decision-making process” of Westminster (Garland & Lilleker, 2021b). Whether these are questions of gender or style is a moot point. However, we can

⁹ <https://news.sky.com/story/pm-and-sunak-not-isolating-despite-being-pinged-after-javids-positive-covid-test-12358198>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/31/how-a-decade-of-privatisation-and-cuts-exposed-england-to-coronavirus>

argue that the leadership qualities required when faced with wicked problems include “confidence and humility, decisiveness and fairness, empathy and courage” (Karelaia and Van der Heyden 2020, p.1). Whilst not exclusively praising women for their COVID-19 leadership, researchers do point to “persuasive examples of women leaders such as Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel, or [Michigan governor] Gretchen Whitmer” (Karelaia and Van der Heyden 2020, p.10). Another notable example of successful COVID-19 leadership is South Korea, the “agile-adaptive approach, a policy of transparency in communicating risk, and citizens’ voluntary cooperation are critical factors” (Moon 2020, p.651). While Sturgeon’s approach linked to her longer-term agenda of promoting Scottish independence, her approach to communication during the pandemic reinforces the argument that female leaders adopted a better tone for building a consensus and giving confidence in the administration’s oversight (Dada et al. 2021).

Transparency, agile-adaptive management and broad citizen compliance are not evident in our analysis of the Johnson government’s response. Rather than binding the society together and demonstrating that ‘we’re all in this together’, studies found blame-shifting and scapegoating from the government towards experts (Pearse 2020) and towards the public (Morgan 2020) at key points, in particular as the easing of restrictions resulted in spikes in infection and death rates. In analysing differing aspects of government policy aiming at restricting the spread of COVID-19 using his tame/wicked/critical problem framework, Grint puts COVID-19 testing in the manageable tame category, self-isolation in the mobilising, trust requiring wicked category, and the lockdown of schools and businesses in the command and coerce, critical category (Grint 2020, p.2). Against such a taxonomy of tame, wicked and critical problems, a challenge such as COVID-19 means that “all three modes of decision-making (Leadership, Management and Command) are necessary because of the complex and complicated nature of the problem” (Grint 2020, p.1). Where a “judicious combination of manager, commander and leader” is needed. Our analysis agrees that Johnson was found wanting: “a man hitherto famous for the attributions of a clown rather than a commander, we British have a leader who has had great difficulty becoming the commander.” (Grint 2020, p.5) Going beyond attacks on the performance of Johnson, we found all three levels of decision-making – leadership, management and command – suffered from the communication of over-confidence and performative certainty. Throughout 2020, and at the time of unlocking society fully in July 2021, the government narrative is backed by claims of being ‘right’ in their assessments. The strategy is consistent with a permanent campaigning mode of government communication that is only successful when there is no counter-evidence. However, past failings have exposed government decisions for their fallibility.

The tame – wicked – critical taxonomy provides a flexible framework that allows integration of the elements of a multidisciplinary approach to communication and decision-making under radical uncertainty, across political communication, crisis and public health communication, but also leadership theory. As Grint highlights, none of these concepts, frameworks and theories are substitutes for the role of those responsible for decision-making, which is to address problems with the appropriate questions, answers and processes. An open-minded, curious fox mindset is better suited to non-tame problems, than the close-mindedness of the hedgehog – and this is true not just for the image-focused politician, but also for experts with on single area of focus, irrespective of how sophisticated and scientifically advanced their information processing may be.

Lessons to be learned

What lessons can be learned for governments facing wicked problems and situations of radical uncertainty, and what sort of governance, leadership and communication style is needed? Bringing together multiple theoretical strands from risk and crisis management and communication, political

communication, leadership and decision theory, we make some recommendations regarding the handling of wicked and critical problems and VUCA events:

- de-politicize decision-making contexts,
- invite diverse expertise,
- take an empathetic, non-partisan approach,
- publicly acknowledge the radical uncertainty of problems,
- make wicked problem thinking the new behavioural economics, and
- put processes in place that help avoid category errors with regard to the nature of problems and solutions.

In the UK, throughout 2020 Prime Minister Johnson stayed on brand, communicating COVID-19 as a tame problem even though scientific evidence indicated otherwise. He did not adjust his approach to problem solving to a more integrated and inclusive approach where examples from other countries showed this to be a more successful tactic under the given circumstances. Perhaps this contributed to not only his own dip in support over the year, but also to the UK being the 5th worst effected nation, in terms of cases and deaths, and the worst effected economy in the G7. Further research within this area is required, in particularly focusing on the correlation between leadership style, rhetoric and communication and the national outcome as globally the evidence is at best mixed and at worst patchy. However, we assert, that analyses of leadership style, and the exploration of the mindset of leaders is crucial for understanding how they approach a crisis and their capacity to perform the roles of leader, manager and commander.

References

- Alexiadou, D., 2020 Boris Johnson's cabinet reshuffle: what you need to know. *The Conversation* [online].
- Alford, J. and Head, B. W., 2017. Wicked and less wicked problems: a typology and a contingency framework. *Policy and Society*, 36 (3), 397-413.
- Antonakis, J., 2021. Leadership to defeat COVID-19. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 24 (2), 210-215.
- Bammer, G. and Smithson, M., 2012. *Uncertainty and Risk: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Earthscan.
- Baraniuk, C., 2021. Covid-19: How the UK vaccine rollout delivered success, so far. *BMJ*, 372 (n421), 1-3.
- Bessett, D., Gerdtz, C., Littman, L. L., Kavanaugh, M. L. and Norris, A., 2015. Does state-level context matter for individuals' knowledge about abortion, legality and health? Challenging the 'red states v. blue states' hypothesis. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 17 (6), 733-746.
- Bower, T., 2020. *Boris Johnson: The Gambler*. London: Random House.
- Cairney, P. and Wellstead, A., 2020. COVID-19: effective policymaking depends on trust in experts, politicians, and the public. *Policy Design and Practice*, 1-14.
- Calvert, J. and Arbuthnott, G., 2021. *Failures of State: The Inside Story of Britain's Battle with Coronavirus*. London: Mudlark.
- Chapman, C. M. and Miller, D. S., 2020. From metaphor to militarized response: the social implications of "we are at war with COVID-19" – crisis, disasters, and pandemics yet to come. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 40 (9-10), 1107-1124.
- Choi, J., 2006. A Motivational Theory of Charismatic Leadership: Envisioning, Empathy, and Empowerment. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 13 (1), 24-43.
- Coombs, T., 2020. Public Sector Crises: Realizations from Covid-19 for Crisis Communication. *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 13 (2), 990-1001.

- Coombs, W. T. and Holladay, S. J., 2012. *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cwalina, W. and Falkowski, A., 2018. Crisis Management: Government Strategy in Framing Reform Proposals and Communications. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 17 (2), 122-136.
- Dada, S., Ashworth, H. C., Bewa, M. J. and Dhatt, R., 2021. Words matter: Political and gender analysis of speeches made by heads of government during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMJ Global Health*, 6 (1), 1-17.
- Druckman, J., Klar, S., Kkrupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M. and Ryan, J. B., 2020. The Political Impact of Affective Polarization: How Partisan Animus Shapes COVID-19 Attitudes.
- Fischhoff, B., 1995. RISK PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION UNPLUGGED - 20 YEARS OF PROCESS. *Risk Analysis*, 15 (2), 137-145.
- Fischhoff, B. and Beyth-Marom, R., 1976. Failure Has Many Fathers. *Policy Sciences*, 7 (3), 388-393.
- Garland, R. and Lilleker, D. G., 2021. The UK: From Consensus to Confusion. In: Lilleker, D. G., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M. and Novelli, E., eds. *Political Communication and COVID-19: Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis*. London & New York: Routledge, 165-176.
- Gaskell, J., Stoker, G., Jennings, W. and Devine, D., 2020. Covid-19 and the Blunders of our Governments: Long-run System Failings Aggravated by Political Choices. *The Political Quarterly*, 91 (3), 523-533.
- Giustiniano, L., e Cunha, M. P., Simpson, A. V., Rego, A. and Clegg, S., 2020. Resilient leadership as paradox work: Notes from COVID-19. *Management and Organization Review*, 16 (5), 971-975.
- Gregor, M. and Lilleker, D. G., 2021. World Health Organisation: The challenges of providing global leadership. In: Lilleker, D. G., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M. and Novelli, E., eds. *Political Communication and COVID-19: Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis*. London & New York: Routledge, 19-33.
- Grint, K., 2008. *Leadership, Management and Command: Rethinking D-Day*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grint, K., 2014. The Hedgehog and the Fox: Leadership lessons from D-Day. *Leadership*, 10 (2), 240-260.
- Grint, K., 2020. Leadership, Management and Command in the time of the Coronavirus. *Leadership*, 16 (3), 314-319.
- Gurdasani, D., Drury, J., Greenhalgh, T., Griffin, S., Haque, Z., Hyde, Z., Katzourakis, A., McKee, M., Michie, S. and Pagel, C., 2021. Mass infection is not an option: we must do more to protect our young. *The Lancet*, published online July 07.
- Haddon, C., 2021. Lessons Learned? Britain's COVID Response. *Political Insight*, 12 (1), 4-7.
- Harris, P. and Moss, D., 2021. Public affairs and communicating coronavirus vaccine risk: The role of government in maintaining public trust. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 21 (2), 1-2.
- Hartwell, G. and McKee, M., 2021. U-turns or no turns? Charting a safer course in health policy. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 114 (5), 237-239.
- Heath, R. L., 2004. *Encyclopedia of Public Relations*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Heath, R. L. and O'Hair, H. D., 2010. *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication*. Taylor & Francis.
- Huremović, D., 2019. Brief History of Pandemics (Pandemics Throughout History). In: Huremović, D., ed. *Psychiatry of Pandemics*. Cham: Springer, 7-35.
- Iacobucci, G., 2021. Covid-19: "Freedom day" in England could lead to "significant third wave of hospitalisations and deaths," modelling predicts. *BMJ*, 374 (1789).
- Isaacs, D. and Priesz, A., 2020. Editorial: COVID-19 and the metaphor of war. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 57, 6-8.
- Jetten, J., Reicher, S. D., Haslam, S. A. and Cruwys, T., 2020. *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19*. London: Sage.
- Joathan, I. and Lilleker, D. G., 2020. Permanent Campaigning: A Meta-Analysis and Framework for Measurement. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 1-42.

- Johnson, C., 2020. Gender, emotion and political discourse: masculinity, femininity and populism. *In: Feldman, O., ed. The Rhetoric of Political Leadership*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 16-33.
- Johnson, C. and Williams, B., 2020. Gender and Political Leadership in a Time of COVID. *Politics & Gender*, 16 (4), 943-950.
- Karellaia, N. and Van der Heyden, L., 2020. Leading in Wicked Times: A Radical Shift to Inquiry, Humility, and Fairness, *INSEAD Working Paper 2020/34/DSC/TOM* (pp. 25): INSEAD.
- Knight, F. H., 1921. *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Koffman, J., Gross, J., Etkind, S. N. and Selman, L., 2020. Uncertainty and COVID-19: how are we to respond? *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 113 (6), 211-216.
- Kohlt, F., 2020. "Over by Christmas": The impact of war-metaphors and other science-religion narratives on science communication environments during the Covid-19 crisis. *SocArXiv*.
- Latemore, G., 2020. COVID and the Common Good. *Philosophy of Management*, early access, 1-13.
- Lilleker, D. G., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M. and Novelli, E., 2021a. Governance and rhetoric in global comparative perspective. *In: Lilleker, D. G., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M. and Novelli, E., eds. Political Communication and COVID-19: Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis*. London & New York: Routledge, 333-350.
- Lilleker, D. G., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M. and Novelli, E., 2021b. *Political Communication and COVID-19: Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Liu, B. F., Bartz, L. and Duke, N., 2016. Communicating crisis uncertainty: A review of the knowledge gaps. *Public Relations Review*, 42 (3), 479-487.
- Maak, T., Pless, N. M. and Wohlgezogen, F., 2021. The Fault Lines of Leadership: Lessons from the Global Covid-19 Crisis. *Journal of Change Management*, 1-21.
- Mandel, D. R., Navarrete, G., Dieckmann, N. and Nelson, J., 2019. Editorial: Judgment and Decision Making Under Uncertainty: Descriptive, Normative, and Prescriptive Perspectives. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10:1506, 1-3.
- McEwen, N., 2018. Brexit and Scotland: between two unions. *British Politics*, 13 (1), 65-78.
- McGuire, D., Cunningham, J. E., Reynolds, K. and Matthews-Smith, G., 2020. Beating the virus: an examination of the crisis communication approach taken by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International*, 23 (4), 361-379.
- Moon, M. J., 2020. Fighting COVID-19 with Agility, Transparency, and Participation: Wicked Policy Problems and New Governance Challenges. *Public Administration Review*, 80 (4), 651-656.
- Morgan, M., 2020. Why meaning-making matters: the case of the UK Government's COVID-19 response. *Am J Cult Sociol*, 1-54.
- Nichols, C. M., Bristow, N., Ewing, E. T., Gabriel, J. M., Montoya, B. C. and Outka, E., 2020. Reconsidering the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic in the Age of COVID-19. *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 19 (4), 642-672.
- Örtenblad, A., 2021. *Debating Bad Leadership: Reasons and Remedies*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Parker, J. C. and Thorson, E., 2009. *Health communication in the new media landscape*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Pearse, H., 2020. Deliberation, citizen science and covid-19. *The Political Quarterly*, 91 (3), 571-577.
- Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Bago, B. and Rand, D. G., 2020. Attitudes about COVID-19 in Canada, the UK, and the USA: A novel test of political polarization and motivated reasoning.
- Potrafke, N., 2015. The evidence on globalisation. *The World Economy*, 38 (3), 509-552.
- Purnell, S., 2011. *Just Boris: The Irresistible Rise of a Political Celebrity*. London: Aurum.
- Rittel, H. W. J. and Webber, M. M., 1973. Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4 (2), 155-169.
- Rutter, H., Wolpert, M. and Greenhalgh, T., 2020. Managing uncertainty in the covid-19 era. *BMJ-British Medical Journal*, 370, 1-2.

- Serazio, M., 2017. Branding politics: Emotion, authenticity, and the marketing culture of American political communication. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 17 (2), 225-241.
- Shaluf, I., Fakhru'l-Razi, A. and mat said, A., 2003. A Review of Disaster and Crisis. *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 12, 24-32.
- Silver, N., 2012. *The Signal and the Noise: The Art and Science of Prediction*. London: Penguin.
- Spiegelhalter, D., 2019. *The Art of Statistics: Learning from Data*. London: Penguin Books Limited.
- Taleb, N. N., 2007. *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. London: Allen Lane.
- Tenscher, J., Koc-Michalska, K., Lilleker, D. G., Mykkänen, J., Walter, A. S., Findor, A., Jalali, C. and Róka, J., 2016. The professionals speak: Practitioners' perspectives on professional election campaigning. *European Journal of Communication*, 31 (2), 95-119.
- Tisdell, C. A., 2020. Economic, social and political issues raised by the COVID-19 pandemic. *Economic Analysis and Policy*, 68, 17-28.
- Tuckett, D. and Nikolic, M., 2017. The role of conviction and narrative in decision-making under radical uncertainty. *Theory & Psychology*, 27 (4), 501 - 523.
- Waylen, G., 2021. Gendering political leadership: hypermasculine leadership and Covid-19. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28 (8), 1153-1173.
- Windsor, L. C., Reinhardt, G. Y., Windsor, A. J., Ostergard, R., Allen, S., Burns, C., Giger, J. and Wood, R., 2020. Gender in the time of COVID-19: Evaluating national leadership and COVID-19 fatalities. *Plos One*, 15 (12), 1-26.
- Yates, C., 2018. On the psychodynamics of Boris Johnson and Brexit. *New Associations*, (25), 4-5.
- Zizka, L., 2020. Coronavirus Crisis Communication: a Wicked Problem. *HospitalityNet* [online]. 15 April. Available from: <https://www.hospitalitynet.org/opinion/4098112.html> [Accessed 12 February 2021].