

# Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)  
is the institutional research repository for  
Goldsmiths, University of London*

## Citation

Garland, Ruth. 2021. How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence' to change its story: A discourse analysis of the No.10 daily news conferences. In: Stuart Price and Ben Harbisher, eds. Power, Media and the Covid-19 Pandemic Framing Public Discourse. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 206-219. ISBN 9780367706302 [Book Section]

## Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/31194/>

## Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk).

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk)

## **How the UK government ‘turned on a sixpence’ to change its story – a discourse analysis of the No.10 daily coronavirus news conferences**

Ruth Garland, Goldsmiths University of London

### **Introduction**

Boris Johnson, one of the least trusted Prime Ministers in recent history (Grieve, 2019; Curtis, 2019), led a nation which entered the Covid-19 crisis divided by a legacy of ten years of public sector cuts, nearly four years of conflict over the UK’s exit from the EU and a disruptive agenda that included Government attacks on the BBC and civil service (Shipman, 2020). Hostility to the freedom of the press and newsgathering was clearly evident within the new Conservative administration: certain journalists were excluded from Government Briefings and there was an embargo on Ministers appearing on the BBC’s prime morning news programme, *Today* (Mason and Sparrow, 2020; Mayhew, 2020). Johnson, however, had four important sources of political capital: in December 2019 he won the first decisive General Election victory in ten years; the UK finally left the EU on 31 January; he had consistently expressed support for the NHS; and he had committed his Government to increase public spending in order to ‘level up’ the poorest and most deprived areas of the UK, many of whose residents had voted Conservative in 2019 for the first time.

The first turnaround in the government’s attitude towards media accountability came on 16 March 2020, when the Prime Minister led the first live daily media Briefing session from No.10 Downing Street, in order to present the UK’s plan to tackle the new form of Coronavirus. The campaign focused on the need to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed. It began by launching the unambiguous slogan ‘Stay

How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

at Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives', while also announcing a nation-wide lockdown to commence one week later. This Chapter conducts a thematic and discourse analysis of the content and style of the 92 daily press conferences that ran until 23 June, placing the analysis within the context of a larger longitudinal study of UK government communications from 1979-2020 (Garland, 2021 forthcoming). After decades of toxic debate and political spin, what techniques did governing politicians deploy in the drive to persuade the public to consent to an unprecedented deprivation of liberty? How sustainable was this major departure from recent political norms?

### **The crisis in public communication**

After decades of contempt shown to the concept of public service, and a move towards selective and partisan media briefing on the part of governments, public trust in political institutions was low (Williams, 2020). From the mid-1980s, the development of 24/7 news had accompanied a more mediatised form of Government, where mediatisation is a process in which media increasingly determine "the deep ... shaping of government processes and hence outcomes" (Garland et al., 2018: 497). A steady transnational decline in public trust in democratic governments led to what Blumler and Gurevitch referred to in 1995 as a 'crisis in public communication' (Blumler and Gurevitch). Decades later, Blumler found a continuing "profound disconnect" between the concerns of ordinary citizens, and the discourses of politics as a game that preoccupies journalists and politicians (Blumler, 2018: 90). Yet, although trust in many establishment institutions continues to fall, there is evidence that citizens value sources of news they regard as impartial, such as the BBC (Mitchell, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020).

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

Political theorists and commentators argue that governments in many liberal democracies have downgraded or bypassed impartiality in favour of a form of neutrality that offers a blank slate upon which successive governments imprint their own ambitions and aspirations (Aucoin, 2012). Public servants are barred from expressing their views in public but, as concern at the declining quality of public debate increases, senior Civil Servants in the UK have occasionally broken cover to express concern at what they see as an unhealthy relationship between Ministers and the media (see Leveson Report, 2012). The most vocal resistance has come from Civil Servants' leadership roles in a series of critical Government and Parliamentary reviews of official communications from the late 1990s onwards. Since the 2019 election an unprecedented number of senior civil servants have resigned or been dismissed, including the Head of the Civil Service, the Cabinet Secretary. In November 2020 the Prime Minister's adviser on Ministerial Standards, Sir Alex Allan, resigned after Johnson failed to uphold charges of bullying against a senior minister. Some officials have taken the unique step of seeking redress through industrial tribunals, breaking the unwritten rule that civil servants are moved on quietly. In the face of such challenges to their autonomy and job security, civil servants continue to uphold a notion of impartiality that goes beyond mere neutrality; impartiality is seen as an active rather than passive value, as integral to the democratic process, and as a key ingredient in public trust.

The publication in 2016 of the seven-year Chilcot inquiry into the 2003 Iraq War called for a clear distinction to be drawn between the political need to *argue for* particular policy actions, and the requirement on the part of officials to *present*

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

*evidence* (Chilcot, 2016b). The failure to observe the conventions aimed at maintaining such distinctions had led to “a damaging legacy, including undermining trust and confidence in government statements” that “may make it more difficult to secure support for government policy” (Chilcot 2016a: 131, 116). In other democratic jurisdictions, such as the US, which have taken an overtly populist turn, the outcomes are even starker. It is claimed, for example, that the Trump administration’s misuse of White House Press Briefings as “an instrument to promote the president and his agenda” rather than answering “to the American public on topics of their choosing,” had led to the discrediting and near-demise of such briefings (Yourish and Lee, 2019). These returned sporadically after March 2020 with the arrival of Covid-19, generating confusion and controversy rather than clarity.

After what is increasingly seen as an initially slow response to coronavirus (Calvert et al, 2020), the UK government began live daily news Briefings from Number 10 Downing Street (‘No.10’) on Monday 16 March, maintaining an unprecedented commitment to a structured form of accountability to the British media and public on the part of the Prime Minister, senior Ministers and their Chief scientific and medical advisers. The BBC played a decisive role in the sessions, broadcasting them live each day and increasing audiences in that slot by a quarter (Johnson, 2020). The broadcasts were archived both by the BBC and on the Government’s website gov.uk, which also featured transcripts of Ministerial statements, statistics, reports and selected deliberations of the scientific committees. Parallel sessions took place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, frequently departing in narrative from the Westminster Briefings. Across the UK, however, these sessions formed the backbone of a wider communication campaign through direct

How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

mail and billboard advertising, and within mainstream and social media. This represents a huge commitment of resources to public communication and provides researchers with a significant body of data that can assist in answering the main question of this chapter: what are the essential ingredients of public trust in Government communication?

### **An analysis of the UK Government daily Press Briefings**

The No.10 Briefings assumed a distinctive character from the beginning, remaining largely unchanged throughout: three wooden lecterns<sup>i</sup> in an elegant but unadorned wood-panelled room with the Prime Minister or senior Minister at the centre, flanked by two Union Jack flags, and a senior adviser on either side. Each 30 to 60-minute session began with a brief statement on the current situation, given by the Chair, followed by thanks and announcements. The most senior adviser on the panel presented the statistics, via a series of charts, and this was followed (from 27 April) by two questions from members of the public, then questions from journalists. BBC correspondents always asked the first question, followed by ITV News, the main commercial news channel. The panel was unaware of the questions in advance and the Westminster political lobby was allowed to select a proportion of the questioners (Crerar, 2020).

For a public habituated to an adversarial, even hostile, relationship between journalists and politicians (van Dalen et al., 2012; Curran, 2012), the tone and structure of the Briefings represented a dramatic 'pivot' in approach on the part of the Johnson government. Since becoming Prime Minister in July 2019, after the resignation of Theresa May, the previous Conservative Party leader, Johnson had

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

sought to avoid scrutiny. To avoid debate on the EU Withdrawal Bill, he had prorogued (suspended) Parliament (in a move that was later ruled illegal by the Supreme Court), had failed to take up invitations to join in TV debates, had turned down three consecutive requests to appear at Parliament's main scrutiny committee, the Liaison Committee, and had delivered important Government news largely through unattributable briefings, given by partisan advisers to friendly media outlets. One of his closest allies, the then Justice Secretary Michael Gove, had famously stated during the 2016 EU referendum campaign that "people in this country have had enough of experts" (Sky News, 2016). As leader of Vote Leave, Johnson had cemented his reputation for carelessness with the facts by plastering the claim 'We send the EU £350 million a week. Let's fund our NHS instead' on the side of the campaign bus. The Chair of the UK Statistics Authority Sir David Norgrove described this in a letter to Johnson as "a clear misuse of official statistics" (Norgrove, 2017).

In contrast, the No.10 Briefings showed Ministers responding politely and with respect to journalists' questions, while deferring to the panel experts. A recurring refrain 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". What was immediately noticeable was the attempt to portray consensus across Party lines and to express gratitude towards 'partners' who had traditionally been portrayed as enemies or 'outsiders', such as the opposition Labour Party, migrant health and social care workers, the 'unskilled', local authorities, trade unionists, rough sleepers and the poor. As the pandemic developed three discernible phases in leadership, communication style and public and media response were

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

identified: the first led up to Johnson's absence with Covid-19 from 27 March, the second was a 'holding phase' during his absence, and the third was a 'bounceback' phase following his return on 27 April.

### Methodology

The dataset consists of 92 consecutive No.10 Briefings that took place from Monday 16 March to Thursday 23 June 2020. The Briefings were viewed live and contextualised by a timeline of media coverage, public events, health statistics and opinion surveys. A provisional coding exercise identified key themes that formed the initial topic guide. This was integrated into a larger guide that incorporated eight public communications norms identified in a previous study (Garland, 2016). This was augmented until all key data was accounted for within it. The final topic guide is presented below.

**Insert Table X.1 here**

### Findings

The Prime Minister chaired 16 (17%) of the 92 daily news conferences, with the rest delivered by one of 11 Cabinet Ministers, of whom 10 were male and one female. The Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, made the most appearances at 24 (26%), followed by the Foreign Secretary (and Deputy Prime Minister during Johnson's absence) Dominic Raab at 12 (13%). The only female Chair, Priti Patel, appeared three times (3%). Scientific and other advisers made 123 appearances, 41 of whom (33%) were female. Of these, 27 (22%) were scientific advisers, led by Patrick Vallance with 19 appearances; 62 (50%) were medical, including 16 appearances by

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

the Chief Medical Officer (England) Chris Whitty, and two by a GP, Nikki Kanani; nine were from Yvonne Doyle of Public Health England; and two from the Chief Nurse Ruth May. John Newton, who took charge of the testing programme, appeared 10 times and Dido Harding, Chair of NHS Test and Trace, appeared three times. Other officials made 10 further appearances including one from the newly appointed Chair of the National Covid Social Care Taskforce, David Pearson. Two stark issues emerge from an analysis of these briefings. First, there were just two appearances from a nursing representative, two from general practice and one from social care. Secondly, the Prime Minister's profile was relatively low, at 17% of all appearances, even taking into account his one-month absence with coronavirus. Here, I examine discourses in relation to four key themes: leadership, messaging, equality and national identity.

### Leadership

In mid-February 2020, Boris Johnson spent ten days at his country home and attracted criticism for not Chairing the Government's emergency planning meeting COBRA until 2 March, having missed four. At the weekly Prime Minister's Question Time on 26 February, Labour's outgoing leader Jeremy Corbyn called Johnson "a part-time Prime Minister" (Honeycombs-Foster, 2020). Between 2 and 20 March, as the spread of the virus in the UK accelerated, Johnson made ten consecutive media appearances: first, warning the public to "prepare against a possible very significant expansion of coronavirus in the UK population", and then launching a four-phase Action Plan, calling on the public to "pull together in a united and national effort". The UK was "extremely well prepared", the "brilliant" NHS was "revered around the world", British scientists were "world leading", and

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

the UK's testing and surveillance systems were "fantastic". But on 12 March, he stated: "I must level with the British public. Many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time". Flanked by the Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Medical Officer, he promised to protect the vulnerable, stating that "at all stages we are being guided by the science. We will do the right thing at the right time". On 19 March he said the UK would "turn the tide within the next 12 weeks" and "send coronavirus packing". The UK was locked down on 23 March, and on 27 March, Johnson began self-isolating after contracting Covid-19, returning to work a month later. It is increasingly apparent that the UK locked down at least one week too late, bringing the official death toll to more than 45,000 by the end of June 2020, the highest in Europe (BBC, 2020b).

During this first phase, Johnson led from the front, chairing seven of the ten daily broadcasts (70%), four with Patrick Vallance and three with Chris Whitty. During his illness his continuing leadership role was consistently reinforced by his Cabinet colleagues, even to the extent of the claim on 6 April that Johnson "continues to lead the Government," on the same day that he was admitted to intensive care. After his return on 27 April, Johnson led nine of the 54 (17%) remaining broadcasts. Two of these were almost wholly concerned with the defence of his chief political adviser, Dominic Cummings, who defied instructions to 'Stay At Home' by travelling 264 miles from London to Durham at the height of the pandemic. Of Johnson's 16 appearances at the daily conferences, he was accompanied on 12 (75%) occasions by Vallance and ten (63%) by Whitty, to whom he frequently deferred on factual matters. The experts' increasingly cautious approach as lockdown eased seemed to curb Johnson's more optimistic

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

pronouncements, while offering a symbolically authoritative shoulder upon which to lean. At an ad hoc Briefing on 17 July Johnson appeared alone, praising “the massive common sense of the British people” and, in a statement aimed at newspaper headline writers, said he looked forward to “a more significant return to normality ... possibly in time for Christmas”. His promise “if we continue to pull together, I know we can beat this virus,” echoed his earlier insistence that “we will get through this. We will beat it and we will beat it together” (Johnson, 2020).

## Messaging

Despite Johnson’s illness, and the sharing of the Chairing role with 11 ministers, the joint messaging was remarkably consistent. Apart from an occasional difference in tone, consensus between politicians, officials and experts at the briefings was largely sustained. However, this was seriously undermined during the Cummings controversy. The Chief Nursing Officer, Ruth May, made just two appearances. Newspapers from across the political spectrum reported that she had been dropped for refusing to endorse Cummings’ behaviour, a claim she appeared to back (Syal, 2020). The Deputy Chief Medical Officer Jonathan Van-Tam made no further appearances at the daily briefings after his comment on 30 May that “The rules are clear and have always been clear – they are to the benefit of all and apply to all”. Cummings resigned (or was sacked) on 13 November and Van-Tam was brought back the same month to add his persuasive voice to the campaign to encourage people to take up the new vaccine.

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

From the first Daily Briefing on 16 March until the launch of the 'roadmap' for easing lockdown on 10 May, the slogan *Stay at Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives*, appeared on the lecterns and was repeated verbally by each Chair.

Instructions to wash one's hands, stay at home and isolate if symptoms appeared, were consistently endorsed. The commitment to protect the NHS, together with regular thanks to 'heroic' frontline health workers, and later social care workers, drew on the widespread public sympathy, even love for the NHS, as evidenced by rainbow posters in many windows and the weekly 'clap for carers' between 26 March and 28 May. The concern for the clinically extremely vulnerable (known as the 'shielded' group) was first raised at the Briefing on 22 March, when it was announced that the NHS would write to 1.5m people telling them to isolate for at least 12 weeks. The NHS brand was also enshrined in the launch of *NHS Test and Trace* on 28 May – a service largely built from scratch and described by Johnson a week before its launch as "world beating".

The growing public and media concern at a lack of PPE and testing capacity, and the alarming epidemic in care homes, were countered by claims that testing was being "massively ramped up", that ministers and civil servants were "straining every sinew," working "around the clock" as part of the "action plan" to procure supplies in the face of a global shortage. A "five pillar" testing strategy was launched on 2 April with the ambitious target to conduct 100,000 tests per day by the end of the month. The care home controversy was harder to counter, and it was left to the Health Secretary to set out "the next steps in our social care action plan" on 15 April, reassuring viewers that "we've known that some of the most vulnerable to this disease are in social care and we've been taking action right from the start".

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

He repeated this on 28 April, adding on 15 May that the government had “tried to throw a protective ring around care homes”. Hints that all was not well had appeared in Public Health England’s medical director Stephen Powis’ comment on 8 May that infection control in care homes needed to improve. The next day the more plain speaking Jonathan Van-Tam was the only official to apologise, saying: “There is a difficult situation in care homes ... and I’m extremely sorry for the deaths that have occurred”. Powis’ claims were contradicted by the Transport Secretary who said on 14 May that care homes were specialists in infection control. In July the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that about half of care homes had been affected by coronavirus and 20,000 residents had died (ONS, 2020). The Government announced that day that care home staff and residents would have access to regular testing.

The appearance of logical forward planning was established at the Press Briefings from the start with the use of official-sounding terms such as “taskforce”, “step by step action plan”, “roadmap”, and numerical nomenclature such as the “five pillar testing strategy” and “a new system of five alert levels”. Scientific endorsement was regularly signaled by the repeated phrase from Ministers that they were “guided by the science”. A “Joint Biosecurity Centre” was announced on 12 May to collate and interpret data on the impact of easing lockdown. As the number of cases and deaths started to fall ministers remained cautious in their terminology, talking about “making progress” but not yet being “out of the woods”, slowly “turning the tide”, and finding “a glimmer of hope” and “light at the end of the tunnel.” Positive announcements were saved for Johnson. On 30 April he said, “For the first time we are past the peak and we are on a downward slope”. A month later, on 28 May, he announced, “the five tests (of Covid-19 reduction) are being met”. For the first time people will be

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

able to meet outside for that “long awaited, joyful reunion”. At the neighbouring lectern, Patrick Vallance urged caution warning that 8,000 cases a day “is not a low number”.

The first major change in messaging came on 10 May, with a selectively-trailed Sunday evening BBC broadcast by Boris Johnson to explain the ‘roadmap’ for easing lockdown and launch the new slogan *Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives*. Schools would start phased opening from 1 June and people who couldn’t work from home “would be actively encouraged to go to work.” At this point messaging in the devolved regions began to diverge. Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon described the slogan as “vague and imprecise,” expressing anger that she had found out about the change from the newspapers. In Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, the message remained *Stay at Home*. Labour’s new leader Keir Starmer said Johnson’s statement “raises more questions than it answers” and that it lacked clarity and had not achieved consensus (Labour Party, 2020). The following day, media outlets were critical of Johnson’s statement for sending out confused messages, especially on schools and returning to workplaces. Disagreement between teachers, teaching unions, parents and the Department for Education continued for four weeks, culminating in an embarrassing U-turn on 9 June when the Education Secretary had to tell MPs that his own school reopening plan was unworkable.

The most dramatic discontinuity in messaging came on 23 May with the revelation that the Prime Minister’s chief political adviser Dominic Cummings had driven to his parents’ dwelling in Durham on 27 March with his young son and his wife - who showed symptoms of Covid-19 - during the week when the infection was doubling

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

every three days and the public were being instructed to stay at home. No.10 stated that the trip was “in line” with Government advice, but Johnson did not appear at that evening’s Briefing. Grant Shapps, who chaired the session, asked viewers to “put yourself in his position,” adding “you have to lock down in a way that suits you”. Professor Stephen Reicher, a behavioural scientist advising the government, tweeted that “in a few short minutes tonight Boris Johnson has trashed all the advice we have given on how to build trust and secure adherence to the measures necessary to control COVID-19” (Reicher, 2020). On 24 May the Prime Minister made a televised statement defending his adviser and next day gave Cummings access to No.10’s Rose Garden to answer journalists’ questions himself. Within a week 180,000 constituents had complained to Conservative MPs about Cummings (Procter et al., 2020), more than 40 Conservative MPs had called on him to go, a Junior Minister resigned in protest, a million people signed a petition calling for Cummings’ dismissal and an explosion of negative coverage dominated headlines and social media for at least five days.

## Equality

One of the most striking departures from the norm in Conservative political discourse concerned the themes of equality and the role of the Government in protecting the vulnerable. As early as 17 March, Johnson committed the “government machine” to supporting businesses, families and individuals. Two days later he told businesses to “stand by your workers because we will stand by you”. The Chancellor Rishi Sunak reinforced this on 20 March when he stated “you will not face this alone, ” adding, “when this is over we want to look back at this moment and remember the many small acts of kindness that were done for us and to us”. Among those he thanked was

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

the Trades Union Congress (TUC), a body that had been disdained and largely ignored in presentation terms since Margaret Thatcher challenged union power in the 1980s. Two days later, Johnson stated, “We are standing behind British businesses and British workers”. The term ‘worker’, like ‘trade unions’, had been excised from the Conservative lexicon for decades unless used pejoratively as in ‘migrant worker’. It now appeared regularly.

This pattern continued throughout the initial containment phase of the Coronavirus that ended with Johnson’s ‘roadmap’ announcements on 10 May, although there was a further flurry of references to ‘unions’ from mid-May as school reopening met with opposition. Positive references to ‘workers’ and ‘unions’ appeared at least 19 times, including the claim by Michael Gove that he had been speaking to “my friends in the trade union movement” (4 April). Johnson called on employers to ensure the safety of their workers (11 May), and said we are “wrapping our arms around every worker” (25 May). Togetherness and the theme of looking after the vulnerable continued to appear throughout the Briefings, as did ideas about equality. Sunak especially used phrases like “we’re all in this together,” “we stand shoulder to shoulder” and “must all pay equally.” Shapps even wanted to “stamp out racism” and reduce health inequalities (12 June). Ministers also sought common cause with viewers. Hancock referred to being “a father of three” with “personal experience of the virus”, and family members who had died or were shielding. Oliver Dowden (sport and culture minister) twice mentioned his two daughters, one of whom was “back at her state school”. Johnson, who experienced serious illness, divorce and the birth of a son during the crisis, said little or nothing about his personal life.

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

### National identity

The complexities of an increasingly politically fragmented UK, and the devolution of powers to the three of the four nations, were glossed over by representing the UK, Britain and England, or England and Wales, as largely synonymous. Scotland or Northern Ireland were mentioned only in response to journalists' questions, where the response invariably invoked the "united national effort" in which "all parts of our country are coming together". Raab insisted on 5 May, "we want to keep the single nation approach going" and "have good cooperation with all the devolved administrations". The Prime Minister, he said, was committed to the "one-UK" approach despite "small differences" in response. 'Britain' or 'the British' were referred to regularly with little reference to other countries apart from statistical comparisons with France, Spain and Italy, that ended after 12 May. Johnson frequently used the idea of 'Britishness', for example, praising "fantastic British workers" and "freedom loving Britons" (20 March), and "our world leading scientists," who dispensed "the best scientific advice in the world" (25 March).

Despite evidence to the contrary, the UK's approach was eulogised. On 28 March, the Business Secretary claimed, "Britain is meeting the challenge". Two days later the Communities Secretary praised Britain as the world's leading country to support vaccine research. It was claimed that the UK had the strongest supply chains and PPE guidelines in the world (3 March and 2 April). Gove (Cabinet Office minister) said on 4 April that, "all parts of the country are coming together to fight this invisible enemy" in "a shared spirit of national endeavour". There were regular references to Britain's love of liberty, while Raab spoke on 22 April of how in many countries people fear the sight of the military, while in Britain they provide reassurance. As

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

deaths in the UK passed 20,000, the Home Secretary Priti Patel described “a tragic and terrible milestone” for which “the entire nation is grieving” (25 April). In a Ministerial address on his return to work on 27 April Johnson invoked the nation constantly, praising our “collective national resolve,” and “all the effort and sacrifice of the British people,” committing himself to leading a national consensus across party lines, and promising, “the UK will emerge stronger than ever before”. On 30 April he repeated his pledge to build political consensus. Whether this ambition was genuine or achievable is beyond the scope of this Chapter, but less than a month later there were complaints from NHS Providers and the NHS Confederation about the failure to consult on issues relating to facemasks, and the devolved nations took every opportunity to criticise the Johnson government for easing lockdown too quickly. In early June the Labour leader Keir Starmer criticised Johnson for failing to respond to a letter he'd sent two weeks previously in which he offered to help build a national consensus on the reopening of schools (Devlin, 2020).

## Conclusion

After the turning point on 16 March, this study found several radical discontinuities from the norm at the No.10 Briefings. These included an adherence to official statistics; a display of respect for journalists and experts; support for the vulnerable; praise for workers, trade unions and local government; and commitments to equality and state intervention. Leadership was initially firmly located in the Prime Minister but over time was distributed among Cabinet members, with Johnson returning to deliver positive messages. Presentation was overwhelmingly male, with expertise focused on science and hospital medicine at the expense of nursing, General Practice and social care. Messaging remained largely consistent albeit built on contested

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

notions of 'Britishness', although Johnson's support of his controversial adviser seriously undermined key messages. Political consensus was promised but once lockdown eased became increasingly frayed as partisan considerations resurfaced. This demonstrates that even populist Governments that previously demonstrated a relaxed attitude to the existence of objective facts can respond strategically to citizens' expectations of impartial public information at times of emergency, by shifting to discourses of transparency and public good but this may be short-lived. The launch of an interventionist anti-obesity government campaign in July 2020 appeared to renege on decades of neoliberal critique of the so-called 'nanny state' but within weeks the campaign had been delegated to local government. The question as to whether daily broadcasts unfairly privilege incumbent Governments at the expense of opposition voices was raised further by the Government's announcement in July 2020 to start televising the daily Westminster media Briefings that had previously taken place behind closed doors from January 2021 (Gaber, 2020).

## References

- Aucoin, P. (2012) 'New Political Governance in Westminster Systems: Impartial Public Administration and Management Performance at Risk'. *Governance*, Vol. 25, Issue: 2, pp. 177-199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2012.01569.x>
- BBC (2020) 'Why did the UK have such a bad Covid-19 epidemic?' *More or Less*. BBC Radio 4. 1 July. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000kfpj> [accessed 3 July]
- BBC News (2020) 'Coronavirus: "Earlier lockdown would have halved death toll"'. 10 June. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52995064> [accessed 11 June]
- Blumler, J.G. and Gurevitch, M. (1995) 'The Crisis of Public Communication'. New York: Routledge.
- Blumler, J.G. (2018) 'The Crisis of Public Communication, 1995–2017,' *Javnost - The Public*, Vol. 25, Issue: 1-2, pp. 83-92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1418799>

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

- Calvert, J, Arbuthnot, G, Leake, J. (2020) '38 Days when Britain Sleepwalked into Disaster'. The Sunday Times. 19 April.  
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-38-days-when-britain-sleepwalked-into-disaster-hq3b9tlgh> [accessed 7 December]
- Chilcot, J. (2016a) *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, London: House of Commons.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry> [accessed 20 July]
- Chilcot, J. (2016b) 'Sir John Chilcot's public statement', 6 July 2016 (Press release)  
<http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-inquiry/sir-john-chilcots-public-statement/> [accessed 21 July]
- Crerar, P. (2020) 'Journalism, Power and Pandemic: How effectively are news organizations covering the COVID-19 crisis?' LSE event, 15 July. London School of Economics. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2020/07/17/journalism-power-and-pandemic-how-effectively-are-new-organisations-covering-the-covid-19-crisis/> [accessed 7 December].
- Curran, J. (2012) *Witness statement to the Leveson Inquiry*. 15 May 2012.  
<http://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Curran-statement-to-Leveson-Inquiry.pdf> [accessed January 2017]
- Curtis, C. (2019) 'Everything we know about what the public think of Boris Johnson'. YouGov. 23 July. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/07/23/everything-we-know-about-what-public-think-boris-j> [accessed 26 July]
- Devlin, K. (2020) 'Keir Starmer says Boris Johnson ignored his offer to work together on reopening schools'. The Independent. 3 June.  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/keir-starmer-boris-johnson-schools-reopen-coronavirus-pmqs-a9546661.html> [accessed 3 June]
- Gaber, I. (2020) 'Why the press is right to be suspicious of the UK government's new lobby arrangements.' The Conversation. 9 July.  
<https://theconversation.com/why-the-press-is-right-to-be-suspicious-of-the-uk-governments-new-lobby-arrangements-142208> [accessed 30 July]
- Garland, R. (2016) *Between Media and Politics: can government press officers hold the line in the age of political spin?* PhD thesis. London School of Economics. <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3463/>
- Garland, R. (2021 forthcoming) *Government Communication and the Crisis of Trust: from political spin to post-truth*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garland, R., Tambini, D. and Couldry, N., (2018) 'Has Government Been Mediatized? A UK perspective'. *Media, Culture and Society*. Vol. 40, Issue: 4, pp. 496-513. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0163443717713261>

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

- Grieve, D. (2019) Former Attorney General interviewed on LBC Radio, cited in *The New European*, 14 November 2019 <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/top-stories/dominic-grieve-who-would-he-vote-for-1-6375244> [Accessed 20 March]
- Honeycombe-Foster, M. (2020) Jeremy Corbyn brands Boris Johnson 'part-time prime minister' as he blasts floods response. Politics Home. 26 February. <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/jeremy-corbyn-brands-boris-johnson-parttime-prime-minister-as-he-blasts-floods-response> [accessed 7 December 2020].
- Johnson, B. (2020). Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 17 July 2020. The Prime Ministers Office. [accessed 7 November] <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-17-july-2020>
- Johnson, C. (2020) 'TV viewing has surged during lockdown but has it become too technical for some?' The Conversation. 4 May. <https://theconversation.com/tv-viewing-has-surged-during-lockdown-but-has-become-too-technical-for-some-new-research-136441> [accessed 21 June].
- Labour Party (2020) 'Keir Starmer response to the Prime Minister's Statement'. 10 May. <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-response-to-the-prime-ministers-statement/> [accessed 20 July]
- Leveson, B (2012) 'An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press' London: The Stationary Office (TSO). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/leveson-inquiry-report-into-the-culture-practices-and-ethics-of-the-press>
- Mason, R. and Sparrow, A., (2020) 'Political journalists boycott No 10 briefings after reporter ban'. The Guardian. 3 February. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/03/political-journalists-boycott-no-10-briefing-after-reporter-ban> [accessed 23 May]
- Mayhew, F. (2020) 'Lobby journalists in walkout over 'selective' government briefings barring some titles'. Press Gazette. 3 February. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/lobby-journalists-walkout-selective-government-briefings-barred-titles/> [accessed 16 May]
- Mitchell, A (2018) Publics globally want unbiased news coverage but are divided on whether their news media deliver. New York: Pew Research Center. 11 January. <https://www.pewresearch.org/globally-want-unbiased-news-coverage-but-are-divided-on-whether-their-news-media-deliver/> (accessed 12 January)
- Norgrove, D. (2017) 'Letter to Boris Johnson, Foreign Secretary'. 17 September 2017. London: UK Statistics Authority. <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Letter-from-Sir-David-Norgrove-to-Foreign-Secretary.pdf>

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

- ONS (2020) 'Deaths involving COVID-19 in the care sector, England and Wales'. London: Office for National Statistics. 3 July.  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/deathsinvolvingcovid19inthecaresectorenglandandwales/deathsoccurringupto12june2020andregisteredupto20june2020provisional>
- Procter, K., Murray, J., Brooks L (2020) 'Constituents bombard MPs with thousands of emails over Dominic Cummings'. The Guardian. 29 June.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/may/29/constituents-bombard-mps-with-180000-emails-about-dominic-cummings> [accessed 30 June]
- Reicher, S (2020) Tweet sent 24 May  
<https://twitter.com/ReicherStephen/status/1264606173212409857> [accessed 28 July]
- Shipman, T., (2020) 'No 10 tells BBC licence fee will be scrapped'. The Times. 16 February. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/no-10-tells-bbc-licence-fee-will-be-scrapped-hzwb9bzsx> [accessed 10 March 2020].
- Sky News (2016) 'Gove: "Britons have had enough of experts"', on EU: In or Out? 12 June. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGtJk7MA> [accessed 28 June]
- Syal, R. (2020) 'Chief nurse was dropped from briefings after refusing to back Cummings'. The Guardian. 20 July.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jul/20/englands-chief-nurse-dropped-from-covid-19-briefing-after-refusing-to-back-cummings-ruth-may> [accessed 20 July]
- Thomas, R., Lewis, J. and Komorowski, M. (2020) 'BBC emerges as the UK's clear favourite information source in new audience survey'. The Conversation. 2 July. <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-bbc-emerges-as-the-uks-clear-favourite-information-source-in-new-audience-survey-141808> [accessed 4 July]
- Van Dalen, A., de Vreese, C.H. and Albaek, E. (2012) 'Different roles, different content? A four-country comparison of the role conceptions and reporting style of political journalists'. Journalism. Vol. 13, Issue: 7, pp. 903-922.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1464884911431538>
- Williams, E., (2020) 'The UK: A Parable of Distrust'. Edelman Trust Barometer 2020. 19 January. <https://www.edelman.com/research/uk-parable-distrust> [accessed 3 February].
- Yourish, K and Lee, J.C. (2019) 'The Demise of the White House Press Briefing Under Trump'. New York Times. 28 January.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/01/22/us/politics/white-house-press-briefing.html> [accessed 28 January]

## How the UK government 'turned on a sixpence'

---

<sup>i</sup> These lecterns were not height adjustable, meaning that shorter (usually female) panelists had to stand on a box.