

# Media North

CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM (NORTH) • May 2020



How tabloids  
deflected  
attention from  
Tory Covid-19  
failings

Nicholas Jones reports – Pages 4-6

## Editorial

# Tory media strategy: Deny a problem, then deflect blame

By Granville Williams

BORIS JOHNSON'S long-awaited plan for dealing with COVID-19, outlined last Sunday, was utterly confusing. That is because government ministers, civil servants, advisers and Tory MPs are themselves confused and divided about the next steps.

One group wants a speedy end to the lock-down, and a series of wildly speculative newspaper reports appeared suggesting Johnson was set to announce a much more dramatic lifting of lockdown measures. They wanted to push Johnson into adopting their position via the media.

The anti-lockdown coverage in Tory-supporting papers can be explained by their proprietors also wanting the government to lift restrictions amid concerns that if people continue to stay at home then newspaper sales and ad revenue will plummet even more.

What emerged when Johnson spoke – significantly avoiding the involvement of any public



The Metro (11 May) poked fun at Boris Johnson's habit of quoting Greek.

service broadcasters, and instead using the in-house team he assembled after the election victory to produce the film and the clunky graphics – was not clarity but confusion.

Coverage in the papers the next day was withering. Even Murdoch's mouthpiece the *Sun* had the headline 'Lockdown's been a terrible mistake', with columnist Trevor Kavanagh describing Boris Johnson's message of 'stay alert, control the virus,

save lives' as 'feeble'.

'This is a prime minister paralysed by indecision,' he wrote, 'kicking himself for unforced errors, terrified of being blamed for every new death.'

## Tory failures

This confusion follows in the wake of a string of other failures by the government in its handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Two things are clear now in terms of its strategy to deal with the media.

The first is to deny there is any problem, whether with PPE provision, testing or deaths in care homes, through the manipulation of statistics and facts. The government has form on this. The team in Downing Street is essentially the same as the one which shaped the Brexit referendum and the 2019 election campaigns.

The second is to deflect blame. The public gets blamed for not following its contradictory advice but the media is the main target. The attack takes two forms: direct challenges to

reports which have appeared in papers like the *Sunday Times* and *The Guardian* or on BBC's *Panorama*.

The second is reliance on pliable newspaper columnists in the Tory press who, instead of supporting critical coverage of the government for its failures, attack such reports as sabotage or unpatriotic.

Those who thought the COVID-19 pandemic would neuter this government's hostility towards journalists who hold ministers to account or question its use of empty phrases and slogans will be disappointed. We are seeing the return of the populist tactic used during the 2019 election: spread disinformation to discredit facts.

## Let us know

This is the third special issue of *MediaNorth* on the impact of COVID-19 on the media. We welcome your comments. The next issue of *MediaNorth* will be the regular quarterly issue which we plan to publish in mid-June.

## Survey shows financial impact on journalists

TWO-THIRDS of UK media workers have suffered financially because of the coronavirus pandemic, with freelancers the hardest hit of all, an NUJ survey carried out from 24 April-10 May 2020 has found.

More than 1,200 members responded to the survey. 18% of members had lost 80 to 100% of their income and 84% feared the crisis would lead to redundancies at their workplace. A third thought their income would not improve until 2021.

39% said they did not expect work opportunities to improve for three to six months, while 16% said they do not expect to make a living at all following the pandemic.

NUJ general secretary Michelle Stanistreet said: "For many...it feels like the eye of the storm, with more pain to come unless meaningful and urgent intervention is secured to support our industry and the journalists and media workers carrying out a vital public service."

## ITV furloughs 800 as ad revenue slumps

ITV, the UK's dominant commercial broadcaster, has reported a 7 per cent fall in revenue as the Covid-19 pandemic hit demand for advertising between January and March and continued into April, with advertising down 42 per cent for the month.

In the first week in May the broadcaster furloughed 15 per cent of its UK workforce, amounting to some 800 employees.

Most were staff in the ITV Studios business, which produc-

es programmes such as *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street*.

Carolyn McCall, ITV Chief Executive, said:

"ITV has taken swift and decisive action to manage and mitigate the impact of Covid-19, by focusing on our people and their safety, and by continuing to reduce costs and tightly manage our cashflow and liquidity. We are also ensuring that we continue to inform and entertain our viewers and stay close to our advertisers."

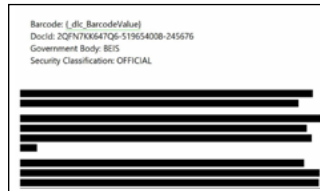
SAGE report black-out like Stalin's Russia, says angry professor

# UK scientists furious over censored report

It began with *The Guardian* publishing the names of people on the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) followed by criticism of a lack of transparency and a growing demand for the minutes of SAGE meetings to be published.

Finally when one report from 1 April of SP1-B (the SAGE sub-committee providing advice from behavioural scientists on how the public might respond to lockdown) was published, large blocks of text were blanked out.

This clumsy action provoked criticism from members of the



**'STALINESQUE': Large blocks of text were blanked out of report.**

committee who complained about 'a lack of respect' and a 'lack of consultation' over the decision to redact the document.

One member of the government's advisory committee took to Twitter to complain of what he said was 'Stalinist' censorship:

"Personally, I am more bemused than furious," said Stephen Reicher, a professor of social psychology at the University of St Andrews. "The greatest asset we have in this crisis is the trust and adherence of the public. You want trust? You need to be open with people. This isn't open. It is reminiscent of Stalinist Russia. Not a good look."

And while we're on the subject of reports, where's the one on Russian interference in UK politics which was blocked from publication by Boris Johnson in the run-up to the recent general election?



**Hugh Laurie.**

## Will we ever see *Roadkill* on the BBC?

BACK in August 2019 the BBC announced 'Award-winning actor Hugh Laurie will play a Conservative minister in a major new political thriller for BBC One written by David Hare and produced by The Forge'.

This is the plot summary for what the BBC Controller of Drama, Piers Wenger, described as a 'brilliantly sharp and funny drama':

"*Roadkill* is a four-part fictional thriller about a self-made, forceful and charismatic politician called Peter Laurence (Hugh Laurie). Peter's public and private life seems to be falling apart - or rather is being picked apart by his enemies. As the personal revelations spiral, he is shamelessly untroubled by guilt or remorse, expertly walking a high wire between glory and catastrophe as he seeks to further his own agenda whilst others plot to bring him down".

Who could David Hare have been thinking about?

However the BBC DG, Tony Hall, has announced that cuts of £125m are needed this year as a result of the increased COVID-19 expenditure, reduced licence fee income and postponing the 450 BBC News job cuts. He warned there were unlikely to be any 'big new drama commissions'. It'll be a great shame if *Roadkill* is one of the victims of the cuts.

# Tory MPs slam BBC over Panorama's 'shameful bias'

A BBC *Panorama* programme 'Has the government failed the NHS?' broadcast on 27 April exposed shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) among healthcare workers.

The programme reported that the Tories ignored warnings about vital equipment - with no gowns, visors, swabs or body bags in the government's stockpile when it was set up in 2009.

The UK government subsequently ignored warnings from its own advisers to buy missing equipment. It meant that the Tory government was woefully ill-prepared for the coronavirus outbreak.

The programme was attacked by the usual suspects, with the *Daily Mail* (29/04/20) alleging the programme had been 'infiltrated by the Left' citing interviews with five NHS workers who all had Labour links.

Rather than respond to the facts presented in the pro-

gramme Tory MPs went into attack mode. Andrew Griffith said, "The taxpayer-funded BBC has real questions about its role here." Another, Andrew Holden, added, "The level of bias being allowed at a time of national crisis is shameful."

The BBC strongly defended the programme, pointing out that, as NHS trusts discouraged healthcare workers from discussing the state of PPE, it wasn't surprising that those willing to speak out were more involved with campaigning around the NHS.

This in turn led to the Culture Secretary, Oliver Dowden, writing a formal complaint to the BBC Director General, Tony Hall, about 'a disproportionate number of those interviewed in the programme' being linked to a political party.

It's the old, familiar tactic: attack the messenger to undermine the unpalatable message.

Photos: Wikipedia.com



**Andrew Griffith: "real questions."**



**Oliver Dowden: Formal complaint.**

# Tabloids deflect attention from Tory failings

By Nicholas Jones

RARELY has a peacetime Prime Minister struggling with a national emergency been as fortunate as Boris Johnson in being spared the broad sweep of hostile coverage that proved so debilitating to his predecessors.

Johnson has been blessed with a personal storyline tailor-made for the popular press – ‘From death to paternity’ (*Daily Mail*, 30.4.2020) – and Conservative newspapers have remained his stalwart cheerleaders.

In the months ahead, as he tries to steer the country out of lockdown, the shielding that he has enjoyed might well be at risk amid the chaos and contradictions that have bedevilled the country since the start of the pandemic.

Even when the government’s failings in tackling the coronavirus pandemic were glaringly obvious – and should have demanded the full focus of the news media – his ardent admirers in the tabloid press have stood by loyally, resorting to a variety of ploys to deflect attention and entertain readers.



On the day, the UK's death rate exceeded that of Italy – and there was a dire need for diversionary tactics – there was no contest when selecting the front-page splash for the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*.

They both took full advantage of the *Daily Telegraph's* exclusive and well trailed revelations about the personal life of leading epidemiologist Professor Neil Ferguson.

There could hardly have been a more telling juxtaposition of

**A telling juxtaposition of headlines from Tory-supporting tabloid newspapers.**

headlines: 'UK coronavirus death toll is now the worst in Europe' (*Guardian*, 6.5.2020) was in sharp contrast to 'Prof lockdown broke lockdown to get his trousers down' (*Sun*) and 'Professor Lockdown quits over trysts with married lover' (*Daily Mail*).

When interviewed on *Today* on Radio Four (6.5.2020), the *Telegraph's* associate editor, Camilla Tominey, defended the paper's decision to publish high-

**Sun** Friday, May 1, 2020

**COVID-19 CRISIS** **RAF IN SPECIAL DISPLAY FOR £32M NHS ACE**

**WHO CARES WINS APPEAL**

**GAME ON TO RAISE TIDY SUM**

**Vintage fighter flyby for Col Tom** **War vet hails 'awesome' show** **Queen's wishes as hero turns 100**

**WE SALUTE YOU**

**UK CLAPS ITS CARERS**

**HELP NOT COSMETIC**

**COLONEL BLANK**

**We salute you Captain Tom!**

**HAPPY BIRTHDAYS**

**GOOD NEWS AT LAST FOR BRITAIN**

**IT'S A BOY FOR BORIS & CARRIE**

**TOM'S 100 AND MADE COLONEL**

**As NHS hero hits £32m on 100th birthday, Hurricane and Spitfire join tributes**

**... and why his first taste of fame was [blankety blank]**

**Heartwarming storylines that were pushed to the limit.**

not only directly involved readers but generated stirring headlines. In the lead-up to the 100th birthday of World War Two veteran, Captain Tom Moore, there was blanket coverage of his daily walk to raise money for the NHS. Once he had been hailed a hero by the popular press, his fund-raising appeal snowballed, and the tabloids had a heartwarming storyline that could be pushed to the limit:

'We Salute You' chorused the Sun and Daily Mail (1.5.2020) for an RAF display celebrating an appeal that by then had topped £32 million. The day before the Sun's front page - 'Happy birthdays' - had declared there was 'Good news at last for Britain' (30.4.2020) as Captain Tom reached his centenary and Johnson's fiancée Carrie Symonds gave birth to a son.

Ms Symonds' subsequent release of the first pictures of their baby, which was accompanied by an exclusive interview with the Prime Minister for the Sun on Sunday, were two astutely timed

ly personal information about two visits made to Professor Ferguson's home by his girlfriend in late March and early April.

On being 'confronted with the facts', she said he had admitted an error of judgement, acknowledged the guidance on social distancing was unequivocal, and made clear he would be standing down from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

Ms Tominey was not challenged on either the source or timing of the story, which was published almost a month after the second visit to his home.

Despite her paper's more restrained headline, 'Lockdown

professor steps down after breaking rules to meet married lover', she couldn't resist a nod to the Sun's front page by reminding listeners, 'yes, he has been caught with his pants down'.

Telegraph readers had to turn to page seven to find the headline 'UK death toll now highest in Europe' above 17 paragraphs of text.

Cheerleading for Boris Johnson has continued apace since his near-death experience and release from intensive care, often sidelining attention from the unfolding calamity in abandoned care homes and the woeful record on testing and the supply of protective equipment.

Tabloid editors defend their

wish to engage and amuse readers, to lift the spirits of a nation worried and worn down by endless statistics about infection rates, hospital admissions and mounting death toll.

Johnson and his media advisers have many allies in the newspaper industry and together they form a formidable alliance with unquestioned expertise in delivering exclusives and in creating narratives that build up a momentum of their own.

The Daily Mail backed a charity to raise money to buy protective overalls and masks for hospitals and care homes. The launch of its appeal - 'Mail's £1m airlift for NHS heroes' (29.4.2020) - was the start of a campaign that

news lines that again succeeded in downplaying the government's failures and deflecting damaging headlines.

The day after *The Guardian* led on the stark finding that people living in the poorest areas were dying at twice the rate of those in richest areas – 'UK's corona divide' (2.5.2020) – much of the Sundays' coverage was devoted to uplifting stories about the Prime Minister's expanding family.

'He's got daddy's hair' (*Mail on Sunday*, 3.5.2020) was the headline over the first picture of Wilfred Lawrie Nicholas Johnson.

The *Sun on Sunday* used the 'Bojo baby' photo in one corner of a front page devoted to the 'full amazing story' of Johnson's fight for life: 'Docs were ready for



Bad news squeezed out for headlines about the Prime Minister's expanding family.

me to die'.

Monday's *Sun* exploited Johnson's 'only interview' to the full: 'Baby gave me will to live' (4.5.2020).

Yet another weekend of grim headlines had been successfully

avoided by a Prime Minister eager and adept at taking full advantage of a personal and family storyline that has strengthened his popularity ratings and that he hopes can be exploited still further in the weeks ahead.



Nicholas Jones was a BBC Industrial and Political Correspondent for 30 years.

# Grabbing the Coronavirus agenda

By Nicholas Jones

AMID the devastation of the coronavirus crisis and a looming economic catastrophe, Boris Johnson and his communication advisers remain wedded to media routines ill-suited to a national emergency.

Deeply entrenched in the Downing Street psyche is an addiction to manipulating the news agenda, a determination come what may to trail announcements in advance and grab the news agenda.

Instead of the well-timed release of clear-cut advice and information, the British public have been left ill-informed and confused by newspaper coverage heavily influenced by Conservative-supporting commentators, columnists and letter writers pushing the business case for the fastest possible easing of lockdown safeguards.

Johnson is as much to blame as his media team because he cannot resist drip feeding news lines that he knows will delight the Tory tabloids but which all too often tend to disrupt effective management of public messaging.

At Wednesday's Prime Min-



**Manipulating news is deeply entrenched in the Downing Street psyche.**

ister's question time he revealed that in a televised broadcast the following Sunday he would announce a roadmap for exiting lockdown and that the government intended to "get going with some of these measures on Monday".

After seven weeks of lockdown his bald statement cried out for amplification and his media team – who operate collectively under the catch-all guise of 'Downing Street/government sources' – couldn't resist giving journalists every encouragement to nudge the story along at breakneck speed.

One vital 'fact' was confirmed in this anonymous Downing Street briefing: the government would be abandoning the 'Stay Home' slogan on which it had spent millions of pounds promoting through press and television advertising.

In the Fleet Street terminology of yesteryear, by changing the slogan to 'Stay Alert', the Downing Street spin doctors had given the story ample 'legs' to run with.

'Hurrah! Lockdown Freedom Beckons' was the bold claim of the *Daily Mail* (7.5.2020) only to be bettered by the *Sun*'s 'Happy Monday' front page.

## New freedoms

The new freedoms that were being trailed on the back of the Prime Minister's initial steer – unlimited exercise and picnics in the park – were subsequently confirmed.

But for health authorities and police forces – and especially for the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – anonymously-sourced press reports that the 'Stay Home' message was being abandoned caused consternation ahead of a bank holiday weekend and fore-

casts of fine weather.

In pre-empting Monday's House of Commons statement with his Sunday televised address, Johnson went for the mass audience – attracting over 27 million viewers – but again there was mixed messaging.

He suggested workers could start returning on Monday morning, even before Parliament had been informed or any safety advice had been published.

A combination of confusion and anger among employers, trade unions and transport undertakings was par for the course for the media team's mantra of driving the news agenda whatever the cost.

Johnson and his aides were relaxed, safe in the knowledge that the bulk of the Conservative Party was on his side and that *The Guardian*'s headline – 'PM's lockdown release leaves Britain confused and divided' (11.5.2020) – would be swamped by the uplifting coverage of Johnson's tabloid cheerleaders.

'We are going to meet again' (*Daily Mail*, 12.5.2020) and 'Gran day out' (*Sun*) were the 'good news' front pages that mattered most of all to the Downing Street spin machine.

Tony Harcup considers news coverage of Covid-19 pandemic

# We don't just have to wait for a public enquiry

AS *Guardian* columnist Marina Hyde observed when the UK government finally began to take coronavirus seriously: “You’ve heard of straight-to-DVD; for far too much of the past month, it has felt as though some with power have been governing in a way we might call straight-to-public-inquiry.”

A public inquiry there must eventually be: not just into the current government’s response to Covid-19 but also into what damage Boris Johnson’s predecessors inflicted on the public health and care sectors. However, we are already getting glimpses of the damning evidence virtually every day, thanks to the many journalists who are doing their job of holding power to account.

I am not referring to the televised Downing Street briefings at which ministers blather non-answers, but to many examples of diligent reporting, such as:

- The *Sunday Times* charting the 38 days ‘when Britain sleepwalked into disaster’, during which time the Prime Minister skipped no fewer than five emergency Cobra meetings;

- *Guardian* journalists producing a string of disturbing revelations, including the presence of Johnson’s non-scientific adviser Dominic Cummings at meetings of the official scientific advisory group SAGE, and the secret Exercise Cygnus report which warned three years ago how ill-prepared the UK was for a pandemic;

- The *Huffington Post* reporting on working conditions at a giant Asos warehouse in South Yorkshire, where staff complained of profit being put before safety due to difficulties in maintaining the recommended two-metres of physical distancing;

- The *Health Service Journal* revealing how the government



Telling the human stories of those who have died can have a powerful impact.

altered the way it counted Covid-19 tests to allow health secretary Matt Hancock to claim to have hit his 100,000-a-day target by the end of April;

- The *Financial Times*’ economics editor Chris Giles regularly crunching the grim numbers to give a more realistic tally of Covid-19 deaths in the UK;

- *Channel 4 News* consistently reporting in-depth and at the top of its bulletins on the crisis in care homes, the scandalous shortage of effective personal protective equipment and the disproportionate death toll among members of black and ethnic minority communities;

- Local and regional radio, TV, print and online media informing communities about developments close to home, from closed cafes delivering free meals to NHS staff to warnings about anti-social behaviour in particular locations.

News matters; not just what is reported, but how it is presented, how much context is provided and whose voices we get to hear.

When a newspaper splashes with the faces of victims, as both the *Mirror* and *The Guardian* have done, for example, it turns the dry numbers given at the government briefings into real lives.

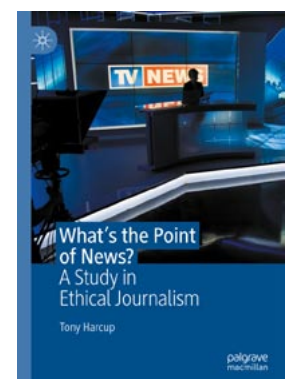
## Human stories

That’s what journalists do, as the *Yorkshire Post*’s Susie Beever pointed out when tweeting an image of her newspaper’s ‘Human stories behind the crisis’ page, adding: “I worked over three hours last night to ensure this was the best it could be, and that it didn’t go to print with misspellings of names or wrongly-placed pictures. Hopefully, I did it justice. But it’s not about me, it’s about the people and families affected by this awful virus.”

Telling such human stories is as much a point of the news as is telling us what those in positions of power get up to. Certainly, there has also been far too much ill-informed, triumphalist and frankly embarrassing coverage in parts of the media, but we would know an awful lot less about this

crisis without our news industry, notwithstanding its many faults.

News is often described as the first draft of history. Perhaps, in this case, it is also the first draft of the public inquiry.



Tony Harcup teaches journalism at Sheffield University and is author of *What’s the Point of News? (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)*. Readers of *MediaNorth* can get 20% off with the code THARCUP2020 at: <https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783030399467> (alternatively, ask your library to order it).

# Reasons to be hopeful

## Part 1: social media

By **Tim Gopsill**

ON May 10 Boris Johnson re-launched class war. That's what the *Financial Times* and the *Mirror* said as manual workers were told to go back without proper protection, while the middle class are safe at home. All the rest of them had to face the fact that the government had thrown the biggest risks of covid-19 onto the poorest-paid people. Johnson has managed to turn the best possible start – the reluctant covid hero who faced down death for his people – to catastrophe.

But he couldn't have done it without social media. This is one of the pluses among a pile of negatives. During these two months the sharing and messaging platforms have been teeming with facts and commentary at odds with the mainstream narrative.

This in itself is a challenge to the given perspective. There are continual accusations that social media are a pack of lies, crawling with malign falsehoods planted by foreign dictatorships and the ravings of cranks, fascists and worse.

The tiresome “fake news” hype has been propagated by governments and corporate media for years, not to alert the citizens to danger but basically to discredit everything on the internet, their commercial rivals. It is a mechanism to nullify alternative voices, but those voices are getting stronger.

### Major stories

These are some of the major stories that have circulated and debated online sometimes for weeks before commercial media

dared raise them:

- The lack of testing at UK airports while thousands flew in from countries with major covid outbreaks
- Government's blatant lies about the way it dropped out from the EU medical equipment scheme
- The value of face coverings as protection
- The importance of the viral load in becoming infected
- The fiddled figures on fatalities; there are in fact official sources for more reliable figures, from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). The *Financial Times* uses these for its running tally – its total on May 13 was 60,000, just short of double the government's – and other media are aware of it; the BBC has reported the ONS figures and then reverted to the government's fake figures in headline and bulletins!
- The catastrophic effects of NHS privatisation, notably the



Art: Ralph Underhill / The Canary

outsourcing of the NHS Supply Chain to Unipart, the former motor industry supplier. A google search reveals no reference to Unipart and the NHS in any mainstream publication this year. Plus the giant management contractors such as Serco and Deloitte wrecking the testing programmes.

• And the fact that the dreaded lockdown, which the papers sought to undermine and get lifted at every opportunity, wasn't a lockdown at all, compared with what other European states imposed.

Much of the material came from doctors and scientists – independent ones, not those hired by government to take the blame for the consequences of their compromised advice.

There have always been radical sources of alternative information and politics, but they never before reached millions. The mainstream have had to run to catch up.

Public opinion has likewise moved miles ahead of them. The reviled Piers Morgan has become a national hero on social media with his fierce denunciations of Tory indolence; on the day he ranted at Dominic Raab, *Good Morning Britain* had its highest ever audience.

### Tame questions

Eyes are opening on how national media work. The most pertinent information to be gleaned from the excruciating press conferences at Downing Street every afternoon is the chummy manner they are conducted: the first-name-terms relationships and the tame questions posed in fake-assertive tones.

On the day after the BBC's hard-hitting *Panorama* programme on the government's unpreparedness, the BBC's own health correspondent Hugh Pym asked not a single tough question about its content; instead he asked Matt Hancock, could he “give assurances that PPE will be available when needed”.

You bet he could. The relief was visible on the Health Secretary's face. He leapt instead at the opportunity to bash the programme, and Pym declined to defend it.



**The stark evidence of tabloid front pages which distracted from the bad news**



# Reasons to be hopeful

## Part 2: unions return

By **Tim Gopsill**

FOR the first time in decades, trade unions have risen to the top of the media agenda. This is largely thanks to Boris Johnson's irresponsibility: in driving the return to work without protection he put workers' rights at the top of the political agenda.

But workers had got there first. The uncertainty and the threat of job losses had already led to a surge in union memberships: Unite has put on 'tens of thousands' according to its Head of Communications, Pauline

Doyle. Unions have 'broken the generational divide', she said, with young workers, especially women, overcoming old prejudices to sign up.

Union leaders are back in at national level, called into Downing Street to negotiate safety conditions and given time on national media to put their case. Johnson made concessions on his original plans – not enough, but he did – after talking to Unite's Len McCluskey. "They had to listen to us," said Pauline Doyle. "It took Theresa May three years to contact us over Brexit."



Photo: Wikimedia

**TUC leader, Frances O'Grady, has become a national figure in the media**

She said they had seen a big rise in media enquiries. Many of these were requests to find individual workers for interview on particular employment matters such as health protection, but more important to her were those asking about the union's work. "After all, that is what people want to know."

She added that government departments contacted by journalists for stories on the return

to work were referred on to union press offices. "I have never known that before," she said.

TUC leader Frances O'Grady has become a national figure, and even non-TUC syndicalist unions like the International Workers of Great Britain are getting airtime. The IWGB led BBC bulletins with its demands for legal parity on health and safety for casual gig economy workers with those employed full time.

## Confused yet? You will be!

By **Sue Williams**

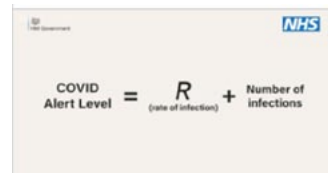
THE Prime Minister's speech to the nation on Sunday 10 May outlining the 'the first careful steps to modify measures' was dishonest, worrying and confusing. Even his MPs were confused, with media appearances by Dominic Raab and Andrew Bridgen revealing how little they knew of the new rules, and embarrassingly finding themselves contradicting their great leader. It can't be easy to devise a simple message that encapsulates what is a complicated way forward. But surely the Government has had ample time to come up with something better than the major mash-up that Johnson presented us with.

And then there were the slides, proof that the time Boris spent with his IT guru, Ms Arcuri, had not been wasted!

The first, showing the new

simple, mostly understandable 5 level alert system by which progress can be measured was acceptable. He should have left it at that.

But sadly he didn't. He went on to introduce this:



-where he seems to have forgotten that 'R' is actually the reproduction number, not the infection rate, and is itself worked out by looking at the number of new infections.

The FT bravely took on the maths and found the answer is around 219,183.7 (R being currently between 0.5 and 0.9, and confirmed cases in the UK to date

being 219,183) thus exposing the full idiocy of this equation.

In this extraordinary time we need more than ever to be able to trust our leaders to take sensible decisions in a timely manner and to clearly signal how we can all play our part in making things better. Instead, after Sunday's blather, I was left feeling confused and anxious and in a far worse position than I had been at 6.59pm – along, no doubt, with all those people who were left wondering whether to set their alarm clocks for work that night.

Is there any wonder that Bojo and his much-trumpeted speech have been the brunt of so much heavy criticism and ridicule?

One message was clear - we need to 'stay alert'. And I agree - we must stay alert to the lies that are endlessly being spun and then hold the Government to account.

## MediaNorth

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Editor: **Granville Williams**

Design and Production: **Tony Sutton**, [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)

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# And along came an app

By Gary Herman

AFTER all the self-congratulatory posturing, the UK appears to have among the worst Covid-19 outcomes in Europe. And now our leaders are going hi-tech in order to redeem themselves from their failure to do proper, human-based tracing and isolating. They're testing an app!

But this contact-tracing app seems to be another failure in the making.

At the beginning of May, the app began a trial in the Isle of Wight. The plan was to roll it out across the UK where it would help win the war against the virus. But despite the usual devious Tory tub-thumping, the app is probably doomed to failure. Within days of the trial beginning, the Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick suggested that the app might need a rethink. "If we need to change our app," Jenrick told Andrew Marr less than a week after the launch of the pilot, "we will."

If Jenrick expressed doubt, others began talking up the app. Geraint Lewis, NHS England's chief data officer and a great believer in exploiting patient data, told the Isle of Wight County Press that he was 'overwhelmed' by the Island's response to the app. In less than a week, appar-

## Big questions about privacy and reliability

ently, more than 55,000 Islanders had downloaded it. Local Tory MP Bob Seely decided that the app was even more important than lifting lockdown. "On the Island we all still need to download the app," said Seely, "so that we can lead the country."

Despite this, Covid-19 cases continue to rise on the Island and a rough calculation suggests that 55,000 is about the size of the working age population there. The main targets for the app are 'key workers' who number about 12,000 people, which leaves something about the app or the numbers smelling bad.

This is only the beginning of its problems.

The app relies on the short range communications technology called Bluetooth to communicate between mobile phones. The app uses a low-energy version of Bluetooth, BLE, to save batteries, but it is a relatively new technology and may not be included in older smartphones. Neither is BLE the easiest technology to get working, or the most reliable, or the most secure. It has a maximum range of 100

metres, but in practice may only work over 10 metres. Contact tracing may turn out to be a technological non-starter.

### Privacy and security

Perhaps more significant will be the issues of privacy and security. The app (developed under the aegis of NHSX, the UK's new central digital unit for the NHS) allows users to upload contact data to an NHS database. The data is stored centrally, not, as with all other significant tracing apps, on each user's phone. The decentralised model used by Google and Apple and by the EU's Pan-European Privacy-Preserving Proximity Tracing (PEPP-PT) consortium is becoming a standard, and the UK's resolutely non-standard approach undermines a declared goal of 'tracing infection chains across national borders'. The British app will not work abroad. All part of getting Brexit done, no doubt.

The UK's Information Commissioner, Elizabeth Denham, has expressed disquiet over the centralisation of personal data, and told a meeting of the Parlia-

mentary Human Rights Committee on 4 May that her office 'was not signing off on an app'.

According to IT journal *The Register*, once uploaded to the NHS database personal data cannot be deleted. *The Register* also notes that the pseudonymisation of personal data intended to underwrite privacy has proved to be unsafe.

Security concerns may have led to Robert Jenrick's surprise admission that maybe the NHS would need to think again about the app. But why?

Well, Matthew Gould, who runs NHSX, used to work with Matt Hancock at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), where the two of them seem to have hatched plans for a digital revolution.

At the Tory party conference in 2018, a few weeks after Hancock had moved from DCMS to Health, he said, "One of the major reforms we need to see is bringing new technology across the health and care system." He and his old pal from DCMS might have been waiting for Coronavirus.

Before lockdown, Gould told an audience of health technologists that Coronavirus was a top priority 'and will be the first call on everything we do'. And along came an app.

## It's time to buy *It's the Media, Stupid!*



IT'S the Media, Stupid! The Media, the 2019 Election and the Aftermath is now on sale. Sincere thanks to Steve Bell, The Guardian cartoonist, for the pungent cover cartoon.

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