



The lockdown lobby

Description

How the pandemic exposed the conformism of our media.

This is Tom Slater's contribution to the People's Lockdown Inquiry, a report commissioned by the Reclaim Party and produced by the Academy of Ideas.

The pandemic has been a reminder of how essential a free media is in times of crisis. As lockdown began last spring, journalists were designated key workers and lent a renewed sense of moral mission. Many rose to the challenge as viewing figures and clicks soared. But the pandemic also exposed more malign trends in both the economics and practices of the UK media. This essay will address the latter, exploring how the pandemic exposed and exacerbated trends towards conformism and partisanship, and how this contributed to a narrowing of the debate on lockdown.

Undoubtedly, the immediate threat to journalism at this moment is economic. Print sales for the UK's biggest national newspapers slumped by 39 per cent in April 2020. A temporary surge in online traffic offered little relief to publications that had always struggled to make money from online and saw advertising budgets slashed. Some outlets have rebounded, but others have made brutal cuts. As Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, wrote in March 2020: 'To be brutally honest, I think a lot of news media won't make it.'

But as British journalism begins to recover, it needs to address the question of what it is for as well as how it might be funded. Public trust in journalists remains low. As Alan Rusbridger, former editor-in-chief of the *Guardian*, put it last spring: 'Nearly all surveys – pre-Covid and today – show a similar picture. A lot of people still rely on mainstream news, but consistently place journalists as the last people they would place their faith in.' A Sky News poll in April 2020 [found](#) that 64 per cent of the British public did not trust TV journalists and 72 per cent did not trust print journalists.

In the Downing Street press conferences in the run-up to 23 March, lobby journalists appeared to have

decided lockdown was the only option. That Dominic Cummings's drive to Durham became the defining scandal of the first wave also reflected a [media](#) with warped priorities. A pro-lockdown skew is unlikely to have put off audiences in itself, given the policy enjoyed overwhelming support in the polls. But the media's behaviour has nevertheless helped to undermine the principles on which their authority rests. Meanwhile, as I explore towards the end of this essay, more sceptical outlets bore the brunt of Big Tech censorship. Taken together, this worked to stifle democratic debate at a time when we needed it most.

'When will you bring in the police?'

Whatever one thinks about lockdown, it represented an unprecedented suspension of civil liberties and economic life. Leading epidemiologist Neil Ferguson has admitted that it took Italy following authoritarian China into lockdown for him and his colleagues to feel they could ['get away with it'](#) in Europe. Looking back on the daily No10 press conferences in March 2020, it is hard not to conclude that the media also helped to shift the dial. The media seemed to cross the line from challenging the government on its more voluntary approach to demanding to know when it would go further – from playing devil's advocate to becoming advocates for lockdown.

In the week before Boris Johnson issued his 'stay at home' order on 23 March, the press conferences were dominated by the potential need for more restrictions. On [17 March](#), the BBC's Laura Kuenssberg asked chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance if he had 'any regrets about not taking more draconian measures sooner'. In the same session, ITV's Robert Peston asked the prime minister if there is 'ever an urgent reason to go to the pub' (at that point the government was urging the public to avoid going out, but had stopped short of forcing venues to close).

As the days went on, leading questions morphed into something more like demands. On [18 March](#), when Johnson announced the closure of schools, Beth Rigby of Sky News said: 'Prime minister, just in terms of further measures, a third of the deaths are now in the capital of London. Buses are still full, the Tubes are full, bars are full. London is not listening to your advice. You've shut the schools today. When will we see wider enforcement to shut down London properly?' She continued in this vein the following [day](#), asking 'on behalf of Londoners' if Johnson thought 'it is now right to move to a more substantial lockdown of the capital like they have done in Italy and Spain and France'.

This idea that people were not adhering to government guidance was asserted on the basis of mere anecdotes. 'At the moment though you're still advising people to follow these measures rather than imposing them, and I just wondered what evidence you're basing that on given that it's clear that some people aren't listening?', asked the BBC's Vicki Young on [22 March](#). This point was picked up more pointedly by the *Daily Mail's* Larisa Brown. 'Prime Minister, people aren't acting responsibly. So, when are you going to get tougher and bring in the police?', she asked.

Before Covid, British news audiences were largely spared the tedium of press conferences. As we saw at the height of the crisis, journalists are sometimes given to asking the same questions in them, one after another, in order to push on an obvious weak spot or address what is perceived to be the key

question of the day. But even so, the one-dimensional nature of the questioning in those feverish early days was particularly striking – not to mention unedifying – given the gravity of the situation. The government was contemplating stripping us of our most fundamental liberties, and all a fearful, conformist media did was egg it on.

Dominic Cummings' drive to Durham

There were plenty of scandals in the government's early handling of the pandemic that might have caused heads to roll. The failure to protect care homes during the first wave and the initial decision to discharge patients into care homes without the need for a negative test come to mind. But in the end, the central media scandal of those early months focused on Dominic Cummings, the prime minister's then chief adviser, and his now notorious drive to Durham.

A joint investigation by the *Daily Mirror* and the *Guardian*, published on 22 May, revealed that Cummings had driven from London to Durham after his wife had come down with Covid at the end of March. They spent their period of isolation on his parents' property, in a separate dwelling. The *Mirror* headline declared that Cummings had been 'investigated by police after breaking coronavirus lockdown rules'. A [follow-up story](#), published a day later, revealed that Cummings had also been spotted at Barnard Castle, 30 miles away from his parents' home. It was also claimed that he made a second trip up to Durham after he had returned to London.

This dominated the agenda for more than a week, leading to calls for Cummings' resignation and culminating in a bizarre rose-garden press conference watched live by [5.5million people](#). But key aspects of the story fell apart. Durham Constabulary said they attended the property, but only to advise on security issues, at the [request](#) of Cummings' father. Police later issued a statement clarifying that they did not consider Cummings' drive from London to Durham a breach of law. (The drive to Barnard Castle, which Cummings claimed was to test his eyesight before the drive back to London, 'might have been a minor breach'.) Meanwhile, the explosive 'second trip to Durham' claim appeared to have been based solely on one couple's uncorroborated account; police said they had 'seen insufficient evidence to support this allegation'.

This unravelling revealed how partisanship can warp journalistic practice. Supposedly impartial broadcasters also let their distaste for Cummings, the mastermind of the Vote Leave campaign who often expressed contempt for the lobby, get the better of them. A few days before Durham police issued their statement, *Newsnight* presenter Emily Maitlis [declared](#) him guilty in an opening monologue: 'Dominic Cummings broke the rules. The country can see that, and it's shocked the government cannot.' She went further: 'He was the man, remember, who always got the public mood. He tagged the lazy label of "elite" on those who disagreed. He should understand that public mood now.' After a wave of complaints, the BBC issued a [statement](#) saying the monologue 'did not meet our standards of due impartiality'.

Of course Cummings should have been criticised for his conduct. The fact that he (at best) bent the very lockdown rules he had a hand in writing struck many as unfair. Parts of his explanation,

particularly the Barnard Castle eye test, stretched credibility, to put it lightly. But the ensuing media circus revealed the myopia of many journalists, and their desperation to get a 'scalp' at the expense of what really matters. The media appeared more enraged by potential breaches of lockdown than they were by the deadly consequences of government policy. That, for instance, health secretary Matt Hancock has never faced anything like the same level of pressure to resign over the deaths in care homes he presided over is revealing.

Big Tech vs media freedom

During the pandemic, internal trends within the media towards groupthink and bias afflicted even those journalists and outlets who pride themselves on impartiality and independent thought. But to make matters worse, some of those who took a more sceptical line found themselves falling foul of social-media giants. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook have become essential to the modern media, and the decision of these firms to clamp down on what they judged to be misinformation about Covid had a significant chilling effect on discussion.

In April 2020, YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki [said](#) her platform would remove 'anything that is medically unsubstantiated' as well as 'anything that would go against World Health Organisation recommendations' in relation to Covid and lockdown. This led to the censorship not only of conspiracy theorists, but also of dissenting experts and journalists. In May 2020, an interview by the online publication *UnHerd* with Karol Sikora, a former adviser to the WHO no less, was [taken down](#). More alarming still, in January 2021, British radio station talkRADIO, which platformed various lockdown sceptics, had its channel deleted. talkRADIO was reinstated by YouTube following the [intervention of the British government](#). But this case revealed the alarming power of corporate giants to deprive even an Ofcom-regulated, mainstream media outlet of a key way in which it reached its audience and generated revenue.

Facebook's attempts to suppress Covid misinformation also impacted upon more lockdown-sceptical voices in the media. In November, Facebook labelled an article in the *Spectator* about the efficacy of masks, penned by Carl Heneghan and Tom Jefferson of Oxford University's Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine, as '[false information](#)'. In all this, we saw the power of social-media oligarchs, whose content policies have become [increasingly censorious](#) in recent years, to extend their writ over more traditional forms of media that are increasingly reliant on them. This bodes ill for the future of media freedom, and must be tackled as a matter of urgency.

The gramophone mind

The point here is not that the media should have campaigned against lockdown. The point here is that there was a clear collective failure, influenced by internal and external forces, to subject the lockdown policy to the level of scrutiny such unprecedented measures demanded. This contributed to a shutting down of discussion of potential alternatives. And it stifled a media debate that, if nothing else, might have better exposed the costs and trade-offs involved in locking down society. As George Orwell wrote in his [preface to *Animal Farm*](#), discussing the scourge of self-censorship during the Second World War: 'The enemy is the gramophone mind, whether or not one agrees with the record that is being played at the moment.' In times of crisis, conformism can cost lives.

by Tom Slater

Date Created
06/19/2021