



Figuring Covid:

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A Note on Media Flows

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and ‘Statisticality’

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Abstract

This note examines the ways in which statistics have been an important and controversial aspect of public information concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. The profile has varied internationally but some schematic observations about lines of flow, the distinctive role played by figures and the patterns of debate surrounding them can be made. Issues of comprehension and contestability are foregrounded in ways which, while they have their precedents, indicate broader issues for the character and direction of public communication.

Keywords

News Flows, Statistics, Disinformation, Public Sphere, Pandemic

The aim of this brief commentary is to explore a central feature of public communication about the Covid pandemic internationally – statistics. The broadening literature on media and the pandemic, a literature growing rapidly and one which will surely extend for years ahead, is variously required to connect with flows of quantitative material. Such material – on infection rates, testing regimes, hospitalizations, death rates, the profile of variants, the efficiency of vaccines and other related markers – has

formed a key element both of official pronouncements and media coverage. The focus here is on making a provisional analytic engagement – using only an indicative referencing – with the ways in which figures have featured in the flows of public knowledge, in the process setting up various patterns of alignment, confusion, doubt, disagreement and, sometimes, vigorous denial and opposition. These patterns have their precedent in relation to previous periods of intensified ‘crisis’ coverage, nationally and internationally, including previous health alerts and the more long-term example of climate change (from a large literature, see for instance Bruggemann and Engesser, 2017 and Van Witsen, 2019). However, Covid-19 can be seen to have brought about a situation of intensified ‘statisticality’ – a situation in which the density, variety and regularity of change of numerical indicators often dominate media flows rather than simply feature within them (Nguyen et al, 2021 report valuably on a recent symposium on the then-current UK situation, one which had contributions both by statisticians and journalists). With strong variations internationally, this has occurred across all flows concerning the pandemic, from research institutions and governmental statements, through the spectrum of journalism to the vast range of social media comment (where the idea of ‘infodemic’ has been applied to the misinformational dimension seen to be at work – for instance in the influential statement of WHO, 2020).

Statistics are of course a necessity of modern public and political order, their indication of broader patterns of condition and change within populations central to oversight and policy. At the same time, their openness to dispute at the level of primary data, mode of collection and analysis and then of use within acts of claims-making has surrounded them with suspicion as perhaps one of the core forms of disinformation in modernity. Mark Twain’s remark about ‘lies, damned lies and statistics’ (Twain, [1907] 2010: 228) has had regular citation in the literature. There is now a huge range of critical commentary, varying in its analytic focus and perspective (recent examples giving attention to media flows are Nguyen and Lugo-Ocando, 2015 and Martini and Lugo-Ocando, 2020 while Lawson and Lovatt, 2020 have explored in detail the rhetorical deployment of statistics in the media by use of a health service case-study, an analysis referred to below).

Within different national systems, media flows have positioned statistical findings in ways which range from highly selective and perhaps strategically distorted renderings

of the original material through to attempts to present something close to the full complexity of available data and the reservations that might be had about their strength and usefulness. Clearly, questions of available space and time and the orientations and capacities of primary audiences/users are important here. Journalism's frequent inclination towards optimal dramatic impact has not surprisingly played a part in the flow pattern. Health statistics originating largely from independent medical research organizations might be considered to have a level of relative freedom from the politicizing frameworks active in the production of figures in many other areas; for instance, economic performance, where government interests frequently become influential at an early stage. However, the Covid pandemic has often placed scientific medical inquiry (particularly epidemiology) within crosscurrents of political and economic dispute of a strong and direct kind, sometimes rendering the borders between science and politics less clear-cut than many established perspectives have often assumed. In particular, differences not only over the effectiveness of kinds of 'lockdown' measure as a response to the pandemic but, more broadly, over the acceptable grounds for imposing kinds of restriction on individual freedoms in public and private spaces and on economic activity have been expressed in many countries, albeit in different articulations with dominant politico-economic structures and norms (Nguyen and Catalan (eds.), 2020 bring together work on Europe, Africa and Asia). Consensus has been fragile, both in relation to primary data and its interpretation. Within the UK, for instance, the regular use of the formula 'we have been guided by the science' (as in Johnson, 2020) soon became subject to questioning. This happened not only in respect of the science/politics relationship but in relation to the suggestion that 'the science' was a singular, unified body of evidence and prediction rather than the highly pluralized and sometimes polemically divided range of perspectives and judgments, framed by uncertainties, which it quickly showed itself to be.

For clarity of discussion, this note will examine briefly and schematically the variety of media flows at work internationally, framed as they are by very different national political and media systems. It will then consider further the interlinked dimensions of comprehensibility and contestability and finally reflect, in what can only be a preliminary way at this early stage of international research engagement, on what the future implications might be for public communications in which the regular updating of figures within a 'crisis' frame is central.

Lines of statistical flow: A schema

A first kind of flow-line is essentially a single stage process occurring between scientific and medical institutions and the public directly, using institutional websites. The information provided here may simply indicate national patterns and tendencies or it may aim for much broader coverage (like the sites of the World Health Organization or the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington). Such sites will vary in their regularity of update and offer only a minimum of interpretative help in understanding the graphs, indicators and predictions made available to users, who will include, but mostly not be, members of the general public. Clearly, in the majority of cases what they present are not ‘official’ accounts and frequently their figures and interpretations will vary between institutions, sometimes radically, in the indications of past, current and possible future circumstances.

The second kind of line is that between scientific and medical institutions and news outlets and then out to various readerships and audiences. This is therefore a two-stage process involving a number of variables. First of all there is the difference between news outlets simply reporting on the basis of press-releases from the institutions, however selectively, and the far more active model of news outlets and journalists themselves contacting particular institutional personnel for interviews and follow-up comments, a standard practice in many countries. In the latter case, specific news angles and priorities, relating to broad political alignments and relationships to governments (including those of direct control as well as propagandist support) will be active right from the start. The sections of the public to whom the subsequent accounts are relayed will clearly vary across national and regional patterns of readerships and audiences.

A third flow-line, in many settings a major one, is generated when a government’s own scientific and medical advisers inform relevant government figures of the data and directions which they consider to be most accurate and pertinent. Following this, government spokespersons, perhaps at the most senior level, provide information to the media with some contextual explanation, often using formal press conferences to do so. In conjunction with this, official websites may give more detailed accounts and indicators. As well as publics being in many cases able to access the conferences directly, they will also variously have access to the mediation of them and the comments upon them carried in the various news outlets. The tendency to see ‘bad

news’ as the strongest kind of news to offer is likely to show itself in these mediations, as it will in the second flow-line, employing a language and an emphasis that departs from the preferred markers and tones both of the scientific-advisory briefings and of government accounts.

Depending on the precise nature and scale of these flow-lines of accorded metrical significance as they work both vertically but also laterally within different national systems of public communication, it is clear that a number of points of potential dispute as well as of confusion are likely to emerge. In particular, informational streams coming from direct contact with research institutions and their personnel can conflict not only with each other but with the accounts issuing from government and official sources and then with the ‘counter-flows’ to these coming from outside the official medical and political mainstream (see below). They can do this both in relation to statistics, to interpretation and to recommended responses.

Comprehension and contestability

As suggested above, a challenge to public comprehension has come from the sheer density, inter-relationship and frequency of numerical indicators offered, together with what has been in many countries the increasing disputes between various kinds of ‘expertise’ using divergent bodies of data and perspectives. Not surprisingly, governments have variously attempted to gain narrative clarity and limit the impact of divergence by offering strong versions of their preferred account of the situation and by presenting a sense of continuity of approach even against a record of policy shifts. In relation to these strategies, counter-flows (often involving counter-statistics) have varied across a spectrum of ‘scepticism’ about dominant accounts and policy. This spectrum runs from the questioning of specific data and modes of response, an activity often justified by the level of public information management at work in dominant narratives, through to far more generalized critical perspectives (for analysis of these in different national settings see, for example, Noar and Austin, 2020 on the USA, Rossini and Kalogeropoulos, 2020 on Brazil and Van Dijck and Alinejad, 2020 on the Netherlands). At points, these latter merge with forms of ‘denial’, sometimes involving ideas of conspiracy, in which disbelief in the ‘officially’ claimed level of health risk connects with accounts of the lines of hidden power seen to be controlling what is

regarded as essentially an exercise in mass deception. The organization and scale of counter-flows, along with their reach and ‘misinformational’ character, has varied along with the kinds of economic and political orientation they display and the broader support, both online and offline, they can draw upon, including from organizations, political parties and economic elites (Stecula and Pickup, 2021 examine some of the relationships active here). A complex ‘Politics of Covid’ emerges within national systems, connected to the pattern of dominant and contesting ideas of public and economic order and capable of producing instability and civic unrest (Afsahi et al, 2020 bring a number of international critical accounts together; see also Pleyers, 2020 on issues of civil liberty, Young and Bleakley, 2020 on the dynamics of polarization and Harsin, 2021 on factors of gender and race). As research is beginning to show, the management of public expectations has often required, and is still requiring, attempts at forms of strategic balance (Milutinovic, 2021 gives a detailed account of tensions in Serbian media and government). This, across a variety of political and economic settings, is essentially a balance between, on the one hand, promoting the degree of anxiety/fear necessary to encourage conformity with socially restrictive guidelines for behavior (Constantinou, 2020 assesses this in relation to a changing idea of ‘risk society’) and, on the other, promoting sufficient confidence in the effectiveness of the official measures to support positive public morale against a backdrop of social and economic disruption.

I noted how Lawson and Lovatt (2020) have recently explored through closely analyzed examples the way in which various rhetorical strategies are often employed alongside health statistics in ways which can significantly alter the magnitude and significance of the figures presented, ‘managing’ them into a more positive or more negative implication. Their account builds on previous critical studies of statistical flows but develops a strongly aesthetic dimension in a way which opens up original perspectives on public story-telling. The management they examine is inevitably to be found in official statements internationally, if with marked variations, as well as being more freely and openly used in the accounts offered by news outlets, where ‘hidden’ shifts from the descriptive to the evaluative are a standard discursive move. These practices essentially involve an interplay, sometimes crude, sometimes subtle, between ‘numbers’ and ‘story’, in which there is the potential for mutual shaping. Numbers can determine narrative structure, including headline statements, but just what numbers are used and

what are left out, what are emphasized and what not and how they are placed in relation to other numbers to achieve their projected significance will be determined by the pattern and rhetorical deployment of pre-existing narrative flows. These flows include both those currently dominant and those emerging as strong ‘counter’ framings (where a strategic play-off between figures and preferred narrative is likely to have already formed part of the bid for stronger public visibility). Such rhetorical management and contestation not only occurs in flows about regional and national situations, of course; it also appears in the way in which governments position national accounts within versions of the international picture. Here, statistics become the means by which ‘league tables’ are established, first in respect of the levels of ‘success’ of initial responses but then in relation to the roll-out of vaccination programs. Such management compounds the problem of the extensive divergence, noted earlier, between different ‘core’ accounts resulting from different data, methodologies and modeling schemes— a divergence which can be regarded as largely ‘pre-rhetorical’, whatever its contingent, discursive constitution.

The Pandemic and the future of Public Information Flows

Already, a number of commentators on the pandemic have called for improved levels of statistical literacy to be fostered among publics as one way of increasing greater clarity and critical engagement with the intensified flows of a ‘crisis’ (e.g. Aula, 2020). However, the difficulties of actually achieving significant improvement here, outside the frameworks of formal education, are obvious and in some countries are clearly such as to render any scheme of this kind wholly impractical. Undoubtedly, some media organizations, particularly those in upmarket sectors and in public service systems, have improved their critical handling of statistical material (see Nguyen et al, 2021 for suggested guidelines and Perreault and Perreault, 2020 for an analysis of the shifting communication ecology within which U.S journalists worked.) However, extension more broadly is unlikely, not least for the costs in money and time it would bring.

The continuing belief in the potential of statistics as an aid in grounding accounts of the world remains well founded, since while statistics need critical use and are not, by themselves, enough, they are clearly the basis for any serious claims-making about situations past and present and about future tendencies and possibilities. Ignoring them has often been a key factor in policy errors internationally (with the ignoring and denial of climate change data an outstanding example). However, during the Covid pandemic

quantitative materials have entered media flows with a new variety and volume, especially allowing for the relatively short time-frame of the crisis to date. The diversity, inter-connectedness and rate of update has led to a condition ('statisticality') in which figures not only dominate the patterns of information in circulation but serve (intentionally and otherwise) to confuse and deceive across a wide section of national populations. Such prominence and impact invites connection with Foucault's ideas of governmentality and the emphasis they place on protocols of conduct (see, for instance, Burchell, et al 1991) and also with his long-standing and related interest in 'technologies of power'. Emerging research on the variety of flows, their origins, pathways and, crucially, their uptakes within what are often very different publics will help clarify what has been happening and its broader theoretical linkages. Here, the kind of engagement activated across diverse media usage, its affective drivers and its outcomes (Dahlgren and Hill, 2020) will be important.

Although the scale of its numerical accounting is without precedent, bringing crossconnections and antagonism between medical, economic and political fields, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted challenges for the future of figures in public information flows across a range of settings. In bringing about an intensified relationship between the ideological and the quantitative, its legacy will have to be added to that wider range of factors – structural and discursive – determining the direction and strength of flow patterns. These factors have, of course, long been a key focus of international theory and debate, with recent examples from a vast literature being Trivundza et al (2018) on the changing patterns of media power and Schlesinger (2020) on the emerging terms of the post-public sphere.

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