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The UK Covid Inquiry should examine the politics of fear

Meron Wondemaghen

Recently, the UK Covid Inquiry [heard testimony](#) that the BBC consistently misrepresented Covid risk in order to boost public support for lockdown. Yet, to date, the Inquiry has not asked vital questions about the practices of the British media during the crisis and breaches in journalist standards and ethics. The political lens of the media during Covid demands more public scrutiny.

As I illustrated in my [recently published article](#), *The Print Press and its Politicization of Public Health: The case of Covid-19*, the media reconfigured the British citizenry into conformists and deviants. But this categorization was not based on the lethality of the virus; rather, Covid scepticism and non-compliance was politicised, and became contingent on *who* the sceptics were, which was configured according to a selective moral universe.

So, those perceived to be right-leaning were “conspiracy theorists” peddling “misinformation”, but those who belonged to ethnic minority groups were provided a higher moral status, and deemed to be rightfully sceptical of, say the vaccine, because of the systemic racism they have experienced and due to the government’s lack of clarity when communicating the expected public health behaviours. The right was wrong and ethnic minorities were, societally, in the right.

The problem is that a biological entity is not in the least interested in the latest culture wars, historical wrongs, and virtue signals. We need more attention to why those perceived to be right-leaning were not afforded the same grace in the public sphere when questioning such consequential public policy and lockdown laws.

[The Institute of Government](#) outlines the UK Public Inquiry’s terms of reference: to examine the public health response, the response of the health and care sector, the economic response, and any lessons from these.

A missing term of reference is the role of the mainstream media: was it informing or reconfiguring British citizens into compliant and non-compliant? Did it question government policy? Was it biased? Did it allow sufficient room for critical public debate?

As [LSE researchers](#) show, the public are actually sceptical of the dominant narrative around mis/disinformation. Many people were not conspiratorial but simply confused by inconsistent government messaging about newly emerging rules and developments. But the emphasis on conspiracy means that space for scepticism is easily reduced. Indeed, [over 1,100 experts](#) expressed concerns in 2020 not only about the inaccurate media coverage but the lack of scrutiny of already ambiguous official messages.

We need to learn lessons from Covid for [future epidemics and pandemics](#): we need a media landscape that is less governed by partisan politics and the profit-motive. To do so, we urgently need more reflection on how journalistic standards and ethics suffered during the Covid crisis.

The role of the mainstream media should be to inform the public and platform all debate, as well as being fearless watchdogs of the powerful. Sadly, the mainstream media failed miserably during Covid. The UK Covid Inquiry should focus on this.

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