'Je n'ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n'ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte'
Pascal, 1657.

COVID-19 and the Narrative Capacity of Governments: The Case of the UK

There has been increasing attention in the study of executive politics to the necessary administrative capacities of government to ensure a 'capable' or 'protective' state. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of trust and competence in government messaging for social adherence to unprecedented restrictions on personal freedoms. At the outset of the crisis the UK government enjoyed significant support for its clear message of 'Stay home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives'. By mid-May, even before the Dominic Cummings incident, confusion and questioning of the U.K. government strategy was rife, and was evident in polling and narrative diary sources. By contrast, polling suggested that the performance of the Welsh and Scottish governments rated more highly. Looking at the U.K. government's performance, this paper develops the concept of 'narrative capacity' as a necessary administrative capacity. The paper then examines the role of trust and competence in the development of effective narrative capacity.

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Introduction

Over the last year we have become accustomed to governments telling us what to do: to wash our hands, to stay at home, to keep apart. The pandemic has reminded us of a core responsibility of government, defined by Cicero 2000 years ago as 'salus populi lex eto' usually translated as 'the health of the people should be the supreme law', and apparently quoted by the Prime Minister to his advisers on his welcome return from intensive care (Payne, 2020). Mary Beard reminds us that 'salus publica' probably meant not the health of the people but the security of the people against terrorism (Beard, 2020), but the language of war and security has been everywhere in the pandemic, so who's quibbling?

Allied to this reassertion of this role of 'the protective state' (Ansell, 2019; Gray, 2020), has been a recognition of the importance of the government as a communicative actor. Widely recognised in literature on crisis management (Boin et al, 2017), there has been perhaps less of a focus on the state's 'central framing capacity' (Lodge and Wegrich, 2014) in the literature of executive governance but the pandemic has given us live contemporary – and comparative - examples to consider. In examining 'narrative capacity' (Andrews, 2021, forthcoming) , I will draw on the literature of narrative policy analysis and the literature of crisis leadership to frame a typology for the analysis of the deployment of the narrative capacity of the UK government, principally during the first UK lockdown, which I grandly call a Narrative Capacity Framework.

The paper will then sketch the UK government's narrative and its public reception over the period of the first lockdown (roughly 23 March to 30 June 2020), drawing on surveys, diary materials, speeches and statements by UK government ministers, particularly the Prime Minister, and documents from public health and scientific bodies. Subsequently, the arrival of the vaccines, and their effective roll-out, particularly in contrast to mainland Europe, has provided a platform for the UK Government's 'Global Britain' themes, derailed by the

pandemic, which are already in evidence in polling. Necessarily, conclusions drawn will be contingent. A public inquiry is promised (BBC, 2020e) in which issues of state capacity will indubitably be probed. Unsurprisingly, already key actors are seeking to frame their roles in respect of that, both anonymously (Kuenssberg, 2021; Telegraph, 2021) and publicly (House of Commons, 2021a). It is unlikely that we will have narrative closure any time soon, if at all – and previous public inquiries from Hutton to Chilcott suggest that narrative closure is never reached.

This paper does not try to reach a verdict on the UK Government' performance during the pandemic. Rather, it seeks to answer two questions: is the concept of narrative capacity a valid one for the study of executive governance; and is the framework outlined here a viable one for the analysis of governments narrative capacity at a time of crisis?

Narrative Capacity and Crises

Tony Blair's official spokesperson for the first six years of his time as Prime Minister, Alastair Campbell, explained during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic that he saw a 'crisis' as

> An event or situation that threatens to overwhelm and even destroy you or your organisation unless the right decisions are taken.

On that basis, he limited the number of true crises experienced by the Blair government during his time to just five: foot and mouth; fuel protests; Kosovo; 9/11; and the wars which followed that (Campbell, 2020a and b). Campbell's limitation is important – political commentary on governments is suffused with the language of crisis on often relatively minor matters which do not threaten 'to overwhelm and even destroy' governments or political leaders. Campbell oversaw the development of a strategic communications capability within the UK Government, subsequently institutionalised in the guidance on advice to ministers (Cabinet Office, 1997; Campbell, 2011: 220; Yeung, 2006).

In crises, governments can lose control of communications:

Authorities can easily lose control, even if temporarily, over the dramaturgy of political communication. Overtaken by events, they struggle to formulate a message that offers an authoritative definition of the situation, provides hope, shows empathy for victims, and gives assurances that authorities are doing their best to minimize the consequences of the threat (Boin et al, 2017: 79).

Governments therefore have to 'manage the meaning-making process' (Boin et al, 2017: 79). In crises, government must both formulate a persuasive narrative and deliver it with a deft and integrated strategy (Boin et al, 2017:80). That narrative needs to offer hope and a plausible route out of the crisis (81). The framing of a persuasive narrative or 'compelling storyline' (86) is a complex process happening in real time in a competitive environment with a media hungry for developments and a citizenry that has agency and access to alternative opinions, including on social media. For Kaplan (1986), the key characteristics of persuasive narratives such as stories – truth, richness, consistency, congruency, and unity – perform an integrative function, 'explaining the development of current dilemmas, and point the way to resolutions'. Boin et al (2017: 87) argue that effective framing involves at least five elements:

- A credible explanation
- Guidance
- Hope
- Empathy
- Suggesting that leaders are in control

These elements are inter-related, may be concurrent and repeated, and require a degree of untangling. There has to be a fit between the core message and the key values and state of mind of the recipients – and the leader has to play the role of the key projector, and in some situations 'mourner-in-chief' (89) – and their success at that will depend in part on how they are seen as credible and trustworthy (90). Past history of the leader, organisational reputation, and initial responses to a crisis, can make a difference (91-2).

More recently, using the model of the Narrative Policy Framework (Jones and McBeth, 2010:335), originally intended to enable 'narrative analysis in policy controversies', Mintrom and O'Connor (2020:209) suggest four factors to support effective crisis response in their analysis of the responses of US Governors:

1. Provide persuasive accounts of what is happening, why it is happening, and what can be done about it;
2. Create a broad coalition of support for policy actions to be taken, and minimize opportunities for conflict;
3. Encourage trust and cooperation among key actors and groups whose actions will be material to addressing the crisis;
4. Enable individuals and communities to make informed crisis response decisions within their respective domains of involvement.

I only comment in passing in this paper on the interaction with other agencies (eg local government, devolved administrations) so I have not explored the Mintrom and O'Connor (2020) elements, which could separately be useful in a more detailed examination exploring UK Government interactions with other policy actors.

Recently, UK researchers identified key 'narrative moments' which affected the public's judgement of government performance. Public trust depends significantly on perceptions of empathy and competence: trust is key to adherence to guidance (Gaskell et al, 2020; Reicher 2020). Focus Group research by the Southampton University Trust in Government project, supported by the UK in a Changing Europe project, suggested that

> The public's judgement is being formed, our focus groups suggest, through the identification of narrative moments. In their retelling and sharing, these moments are framing an assessment of the government's performance that has a different quality to that of a forensic, formal public inquiry.

Further research by this group along with researchers in Oxford and Canberra Universities suggested, perhaps unsurprisingly, that perceptions of performance of political leaders around the world depended on how the crisis was perceived to have unfolded in each country, and that competence mattered, though there were partisan differences in most

countries surveyed, with the exception of Australia, on the performance of leaders and their engagement with experts and other stakeholders (IPSOS-MORI/TrustGov Project 2020). Underpinning the elements of effective framing, Boin et al argue there should be a coordinated, expert-informed, thorough, open approach across all media including social media. The Government Communication Service has explained (2021:11):

> At the heart of Government, GCS created a Communication Hub. It designed and delivered the main campaigns but also provided the research, behavioural insight, evaluation and international communication coordination.

That the UK Government had the technical facility to carry out its messaging is not in doubt, and this paper is not intended as an appraisal of its communications effectiveness in particular situations. Rather, I attempt here to create a Narrative Capacity Framework, against which the performance of governments can be mapped, building on the work of Boin et al (2017), and using the UK experience as a case study.

Boin et al also argue that key messages must be supported symbolically – or as I would prefer, following Craig (2016), performatively - by the key players through their visible presence in appropriate settings and their own performance of expected and congruent behaviours. But Governments cannot imagine that they can control everything in a crisis (93-8). There is a clear 'performative dimension' (Hajer, 2005). The performative qualities of politicians and public leaders are utilised to develop the narrative: speeches are a good example.

Elsewhere in their 2017 book Boin et al address the question of urgency, stating that we can only identify a 'crisis' when 'a salient threat generates a sense of *urgency'* (6) and where 'there is also a high degree of uncertainty'. They might profitably have integrated that into their summary of framing, since *signalling a crisis* is a clear role for leaders – indeed, in change management literature (Kotter, 1996; Barber, 2015) this is often identified as *the key role* for leaders. Signalling a crisis is about identifying a problem to be tackled.

They also examine how crises end, coining the concepts of the 'fast-burning' and 'long-shadow' crisis (Boin et al, 103). The Covid-19 pandemic will be a 'long-shadow' crisis: there

have been more excess deaths than at any time since the Second World War (BBC, 2021) and its consequences will be with us, in terms of lost economic growth, mental health impact, escalating hospital waiting lists, amongst others, for years to come. Covid is, in any case, a 'long shadow' illness (Goodman, 2020) Leaders have roles, Boin et al say (107) in determining the nature of 'a sense of normalcy'. Crises are seen to have ended when political, operational and societal definitions of crisis are in accordance that the crisis is over. Crises often require as part of their closure some accountability process (110) which involves a 'contest of explanations' (111). We are already seeing that play out in the UK (Kuenssberg, 2021; Rayner, 2021; House of Commons, 2021a), as 'the blame game' (Hood, 2011) commences.

The narrative capacity (Andrews, 2021, forthcoming) of governments, then, relates to their ability to intervene in 'the meaning-making process': how effectively they do it will attest to their 'narrative competence' (Borins, 2011). I will make use of an expanded version of the 2017 Boin et al typology of effective framing, in my analysis of the UK Government's performance in the first lockdown.

Table 1 about here: Tentative Narrative Capacity Framework

Narrative element	Timing element
Signalling a crisis	Outset
Credible explanation	Throughout
Guidance	Throughout, needed early
Hope	Glimpsed at beginning, progress measures needed
Empathy	Throughout
Leadership control	Requires constant evidence
Symbolic reinforcement or performative	Throughout as appropriate
Declaring end	Initial – end of first and other lockdowns; Ultimate - End of promised Inquiry

Narrative capacity is subject to the demands of 'contested logics' (Lodge and Wegrich, 2010) within government. Until the Covid-19 crisis, the most dominant driving logic in UK terms in recent years has been Brexit. For Rhodes (2018), 'policy narratives are non-fiction stories with characters and plots'. Johnson's plot was Brexit, and it has been the core of his political narrative for the last four years. At the beginning of the global Coronavirus crisis, Johnson was basking in Brexit euphoria, having won a general election with the slogan 'Get Brexit Done' and having delivered Brexit on 31 January. COVID-19 was not part of the Johnson's intended plot, and a narrative had to be retro-fitted to government actions rolling out at pace. Bevir and Rhodes (2010):67 ask us to consider interpretation of the behaviour of political actors, using 'data as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions'. In explaining the narrative construction of Boris Johnson's exit strategy from the COVID-19 lockdown, then, we need to consider Johnson's belief system and its impact on the approach to the first lockdown.

Data Sources

This paper is a mixed-methods study. It is based upon an empirical, qualitative and interpretive study of UK and devolved government public statements, including official documentation such as the SAGE committee minutes, press conference materials, social media posts, government advertising, speeches, relevant writings, media reporting, statements and speeches by government ministers including the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and parliamentary select committee hearings. It draws on a number of other primary and secondary sources, including opinion polling, consumer research, and personal diary projects, and reports by the Independent Sage Committee. It is informed by a selective overview of three months media coverage of the COVID-19 crisis in the UK, from lockdown on 23 March to the Prime Minister's statement in the House of Commons on 23 June. Judgement has been applied to identify particularly well-sourced journalistic accounts, such as those by D'Ancona (2020a) and Shipman (2020). Like everyone else, I have been embedded in this crisis for over twelve months, and the whole is informed by my own embedded autoethnography. There has, in this instance, been no shortage of published

data sources: indeed, they threaten to overwhelm. This is necessarily a preliminary overview.

Lockdown and the UK Government's Pandemic Narrative

Examining the eight elements of crisis leadership communications identified in the literature review as a tentative Narrative Capacity Framework, and seeking to disentangle them, even for the period of the UK's first lockdown, is not a simple process, as each element is nuanced and subject to changes over time, and new information is coming to light even at the time of writing, one year after the formal announcement of the lockdown. What follows in this section is an interpretation of the evidence available, ranging across the key themes, drawing on data from the period January to July 2020. Subsequent sections will comment briefly on the UK Government's subsequent narrative relating to the September 2020 to March 2021 period.

Signalling a crisis

If we begin with the UK Government's initial attempts to frame the emergence of Covid-19, it is evident that the sense of imminent threat and urgency isn't present, and a 'crisis', in Boin et al's 2017 terms, is not therefore being signalled by key ministers in the government. The initial statement by the Health Secretary to the House of Commons (Hansard, 2020a) indicates confidence in the ability of the NHS to cope. This was just over a week before the UK left the European Union on 31 January 2020, and the government's focus at this point of Brexit Euphoria was the projection of Global Britain, now free to stand alone, and the Prime Minister as the man who had delivered that. To illustrate how that played out in the context of the progression of the virus, Johnson made a speech on 3 February declaring that the world needed a country to stand up against unprecedented prohibitions against freedom being contemplated by other countries in reaction of the virus (Johnson, 2020a).

Following that, Johnson himself infamously took a ten-day holiday from public life at the Foreign Secretary's country residence, Chevening (Shipman et al, 2020). We now know that his partner Carrie Symonds was pregnant; his divorce proceedings were being completed,

and she held her 'baby shower' at Chequers (Wilcock, 2020). We also now know that the Prime Minister missed five COBR meetings in this period (Calvert et al, 2020).

Alastair Campbell has written of the complacency of this period (Campbell, 2020a and b):

> Just as Tony Blair, when fighting the election in 2001 on the prosaic slogan "Schools and Hospitals First", did not expect his second term to be defined by 11 September and its consequences, so Boris Johnson did not imagine his "Get Brexit Done" election would be followed so soon after by a pandemic. Part of crisis management is adapting quickly and effectively to new, unexpected realities.

A sense of crisis begins to emerge on 12 March when the Prime Minister told people 'I must level with you, many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time' (Johnson, 2020b), although it is then that herd immunity stories emerge. The next day the football authorities suspended professional football in England, Scotland and Wales for an initial three weeks (FA, FAW, SFA, 2020). France, Germany and Ireland closed schools. Yet testing and tracing had stopped on 12 March and on 13 March restrictions on those flying in from Covid hotspots were lifted. That day the World Health Organisation declared Europe was now the epicentre of the crisis. The public was seeing images from Italy that showed how the crisis was unfolding in a familiar country, with a total of 1800 deaths and 25,000 cases reported on 15 March. Signals of urgency intensified from the UK Government from then on, with the first daily Downing St. press conference on 16 March, where the Prime Minister urged people to avoid non-essential contact (Johnson, 2020c), the publication of Imperial College estimates that 500,000 could die, the cancellation of mass gatherings, the postponement of non-urgent operations in England, indications that schools might shut, indications that all who are advised to have the flu jab would be asked to shield, news that British manufacturers had been sent blueprints to build 20,000 ventilators, and news that MPs and Peers over 70 would be asked to stay away from Parliament (Sparrow, 2020).

The strongest signal of urgency was of course given when the Prime Minister gave his 'clear instruction' to 'Stay home, protect the NHS, Save Lives' on 23 March (Johnson, 2020d), a

broadcast watched by 27 million people on the BBC (BBC, 2020a). A government advertising campaign reinforced the message. Government press conferences was deliberately emblazoned with hazard-style 'emergency tape' in red and yellow. One specific aspect of the 'Stay Home' campaign was found to be extraordinarily successful: "If you go out, you can spread it. People will die," (Lee and Spanier, 2020).

A credible explanation

The government's initial attempts to explain its strategy were over-complicated. The *Coronavirus: action plan,* endorsed by all four governments in the UK, set out a series of elements: contain; delay; research; mitigate. These were useful explanations for professional operational audiences within the public sector in particular, but unclear in relation to the wider public, and even informed observers were sometimes puzzled. The published documentation also reinforces how much was being done according to the previously devised pandemic influenza playbook, as will no doubt become clear in the eventual inquiry (UK Government, 2020).

The Vote Leave team which had come to dominate No 10 communications was famously obsessive about 'message discipline', absorbed from the 1992 Clinton Presidential campaign (Waterhouse, 2016). Behind the scenes, however, this approach suffered serious challenges, as leaks suggested that the government appeared seriously to be considering a strategy of 'herd immunity' for addressing the virus's progression. This was initially leaked to the media (Peston, 2020; Titheradge and Kirkland, 2020; Reynolds, 2020; Freedman 2020a,b,c; Kuenssberg, 2021; Rayner, 2021), while alongside that seeking to 'flatten the curve' – or as Johnson put it, 'squash the sombrero' - and contain pressure on the health service (Titheradge and Kirkland, 2020). Even as late as April a Home Office scientist told workers at the UK Passport Office that the government was working on the assumption that 80% of the population would get the virus (Symonds, 2020); the Observer's Andrew Rawnsley was told by someone 'at the heart of government decision-making' 'we are all going to get it' (Rawnsley, 2020). At its heart, these narrative conflicts reflect a real divide over strategy.

At the outset of the crisis the Government's communications were concerned with obtaining 'the trust and confidence the Government needs in the population at this time to get them to comply' at a time when the Government itself was 'learning in real time'. (House of Commons, 2020a). The government explained constantly that they were and would be 'following the science' (Johnson, 2020i). The imposition of daily press conferences was an attempt to take control of the message. The government began to publish more data at its daily press conferences, with slides summarising the case, death and hospitalization rates, and for a period, international comparisons. These were available on the government's website. Minutes of the government advisory committee, SAGE, began to be published, albeit with a delay. However, that didn't stop a variety of other government sources leaking material to favoured outlets suggesting that there were Cabinet 'hawks' and 'doves' over lockdown (Calvert et al, 2020; Elliott et al, 2020; Proctor and Mason, 2020; Wickham, 2020)..

The government 'Stay home, protect the NHS, Save Lives' campaign is widely agreed to have been hugely successful with spontaneous and prompted recall of the messaging significantly high (Lee and Spanier, 2020). There was considerable consensus on the necessity of lockdown and UK Government poll ratings were unprecedentedly high (Opinium, 2020a). By the end of March, almost all of the UK population were accessing information about Covid-19 at least once a day, with BBC services the most used. Almost all respondents said they were adopting recommended preventative measures such as socially distancing (98%), only going out for essentials (97%), and washing hands regularly (96%). The most trusted sources were official ones – the NHS, WHO, local health services, official scientists, and the government (Ofcom, 2020a). There was little change in those following preventive measures by mid-April (Ofcom, 2020b). In the days following lockdown, seven in ten (72%) said the Government was handling the pandemic fairly or very well (YouGov, 2020).

The government's performance in this of course exists in a media and social media environment where the contrasting approaches of governments both overseas and in the devolved nations received extensive comparative attention. These real-time existing narratives at times provided a sharp contrast, but these are beyond the scope of this paper.

Guidance

If we turn now to government guidance, it is significant how mixed messages from the government dominated through the first few weeks. We now know that the Prime Minister's preferred option had been to play down the threat posed by the virus (Kuenssberg, 2021, Rayner, 2021). The government was still giving mixed messages on the urgency of the crisis well into the second week of March, with the Prime Minister stating that he went round a hospital shaking hands with everyone on the very day that SAGE advised such contact should cease, stating in a TV interview that it should be business as usual, attending a Six Nations rugby international at Twickenham, and holding back on telling pubs and entertainment facilities to close (Cabinet Office, 2020). There is considerable evidence that the public, watching images from Italy and Spain on their televisions, was ahead of the government in wanting a lockdown. A week after formal lockdown, 56% of the public believed the Government had been too slow to lock down ((Ipsos-Mori, 2020a). YouGov's moodtracker noted how public emotions changed significantly in the first two weeks of lockdown, with a slump in happiness and an increase in stress (Smith, 2020a).

On April 16, the Government set out its five tests for judging when the pandemic lockdown could be ended (Raab, 2020). Subsequent statements, culminating in the Prime Minister's statement on 23 June, sought to explore how the performance against the tests was being achieved (Johnson, 2020h), as different steps were taken at different points. How useful these tests were in explaining to the public why certain sectors were being opened up is unclear: the opening of specific sectors did however, have the effect of providing hope.

The wearing of masks was one area where the Government's advice changed significantly. It was not until 11 May that the UK Government recommended that people wear masks in public settings such as shops and public transport if social distancing was not possible. A YouGov poll three weeks later showed that the UK public was far less likely than people in comparable European countries, the United States and Asia, to adopt mask-wearing in public (Smith, 2020cb. The deputy chief medical officer for England had told a press conference prior to lockdown, on 12 March, that mask-wearing could trap the virus and

increase the risk of infection (Gibbons, 2020). The UK government advisers, including SAGE, continued to advise against mask-wearing until 11 May (Cabinet Office/DHSC, 2020). This will no doubt be explored further in any inquiry, but it has been suggested that there were concerns that encouragement to wear masks would have caused mask stockpiling by individuals and also might have undermined the social distancing message. The possibility of people wearing 'face-coverings' as distinct from medical quality masks was mentioned for the first time at a Government press conference on 30 April (So and Baker, 2020).

Hope

Leaders, say Boin et al (2017), need to signal hope. Johnson said on 19 March he expected the country would be able to 'send the coronavirus packing' in twelve weeks (Johnson, 2020f). The next day, he 'set out the ambition of this government to turn the tide against coronavirus within 3 months', claiming that the government's aim was to eliminate the virus, 'to stamp it out' (Johnson, 2020g). Minutes of the Government's scientific advisory body, SAGE, on 5 March, suggest that measures designed to suppress the virus, including isolating elderly people and 'those with underlying conditions' should not be lifted, depending on 'epidemiological evidence' was 'likely to be at least 12 weeks after initial implementation' (SAGE, 2020a). It seems clear that 12 weeks was fixed in the minds of policy-makers at an early stage.

There were, however, a number of false dawns. Although the country came out of lockdown at the end of June as promised, the government had clearly not sent the coronavirus packing and there were local lockdowns in place in a number of parts of the country. The Prime Minister declared that the crisis would be over by Christmas, and then had to impose late restrictions on Christmas gatherings. Schools in England were sent back in January and then the same day told to close again.

There were clearly tensions within government between what Cabinet leaks dubbed 'hawks' and 'doves', the personnel of which changed according to the time of the briefing, with arguments over whether the government should focus more on the economy or on health – the lives versus livelihoods argument. (Elliott et al, 2020; Rayner, 2021; Kuenssberg, 2021). Polling suggested that the public wanted the emphasis to be on the health issues rather

than the economic issues (IPSOS-MORI, 2020d), and a variety of public health experts stressed that public health was an economic issue: that locking down successfully in an attempt to eliminate – or eradicate – the virus, was the only sensible economic choice (Eaton, 2020;Proctor, 2020) The Chancellor was said to have brought in more lockdown-sceptic scientists and advisers from Sweden (*Sunday Times Insight*,2020), but the admissions that Sweden had failed in its response in the autumn of 2021, ended the 'Swedish option' as a serious contender (Gill, 2020).

There were also repeated examples of missed expectations. Test, trace and isolate was an explicit example of this. The Health Secretary told the Commons on 23 January 'The UK is one of the first countries to develop a world-leading test for the coronavirus' (Hansard, 2020a). A week after the suspension of contact-tracing, which we now know to have been because of capacity fears (House of Commons, 2020b), the Prime Minister promised the government would be 'massively ramping up' testing to 5000, to 10,000 and then 250,000 a day (Johnson 2020f). A mass testing plan announced on 2 April promised 100,000 tests by end of the month (DHSC, 2020). This was achieved on the basis of tests dispatched to people's homes rather than tests carried out. A promised UK testing app was postponed, revised, launched on the Isle of Wight, delayed again until September (Hughes and Warrell, 2020). The design of NHS Test and Trace, as it was called in England, involving public and substantial private sector engagement, appeared to depend on 'an almost religious belief that *big private sector solutions* are better than fragmented public services' (D'Ancona, 2020). This was a highly centralised system using private sector companies alongside the Public Health England system which was performing better (Pollock, 2020; Ham, 2020). Local authorities in England started to put in place their own localised systems (Williams, J. 2020; Wright, 2020). Meanwhile in Wales, for example, locally run public sector testing and tracing was working with very high numbers of cases and contacts traced (Allen-Mills, 2020; Bounds and Neville, 2020; Welsh Government, 2021). Yet for the Prime Minister in July 'Our test and trace system is as good as or better than any other system anywhere in the world' (Hansard, 2020b). By September, he was promising 'literally millions of tests' would be rolled out daily (Hansard, 2020c). The test and trace system in England has had its shortcomings publicly documented in audit and Commons reports (NAO, 2020; House of Commons, 2021b).

Empathy

Early on in the crisis, Alastair Campbell wrote twenty suggestions for government communications, which he shared with government insiders (Campbell, 2020a and b). He wrote 'Empathy matters, and make sure it is not formulaic.' In terms of *empathy,* ministers in the UK Government shared in the general experience of the lockdown and some, notably of course the Prime Minister, caught the virus and suffered seriously from it. The Prime Minister was later to quip that he had never been so popular as when he was seriously ill (Swinford and Elliott, 2020). The specific, all-inclusive nature of the crisis, said researchers from Southampton University, meant that the public was forming its judgements in real time:

> The pandemic – with its lockdowns, furloughing, clapping for the NHS, government briefings, wall-to-wall media coverage, social and economic disruption and those we lost too soon – is a genuinely shared experience. This makes it open to immediate public assessment and judgement, unlike other more focused objectives of formal investigation and judgement such as the Iraq War, Grenfell, child protection, and NHS treatment failures, for example (Gaskell et al, 2020).

The government's strategy sought to position itself closely with public experience and the efforts of the NHS. The Prime Minister endorsed the clap for carers and joined in the first clap despite his illness (Williams, T-A, 2020). The Government was swift to praise and endorse the efforts of Captain Tom Moore, who raised millions for the NHS in a sponsored walk of his garden. The government sought the halo effect of endorsement through identification.

The range of emergency measures announced by the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, to support business and individuals through the crisis, was perhaps the most concrete demonstration of government empathy. The Chancellor promised 'to do whatever it takes' in his emergency grant package on 17 March (Stewart, 2020). Sunak's assumed ideology-neutral performance, 'unencumbered by dogma', as he put it, and carefully-cultivated brand, meant that he was widely tipped as a possible next Prime Minister (Hooker and Espiner, 2020).

When Johnson himself contracted the virus, was hospitalised, moved to intensive care, recovered, and not long after became a father, his personal narrative became an emblematic, iconic and *affective* representation of the national crisis and the possibility for brighter days ahead: it was a blending of the classic heroic quest and restitution narratives (Andrews, forthcoming; Frank, 1998), in which Johnson had, in the words of his former communications adviser 'become a one-man metaphor for the nation's battle with Covid-19' (Harri, 2020). However, this began to be seen to be excessive by some diary respondents who said that instead of personality-driven news, they would prefer to hear more from scientific experts (Cushion et al, 2020a).

However, public endorsement of the government's efforts had fallen significantly at the point of the Prime Minister's return to work at the end of April, whereas at this point, support for the Scottish Government, the London Mayor and the Northern Ireland executive, though not the Welsh Government, was in positive territory (Opinium, 2020b).

There were discordant notes. Matt Hancock showed a lack of empathy with NHS workers hit by Covid early on (Campbell, 2020c); he caused a storm when he told the Labour MP Rosena Allin-Khan, and A and E doctor, to 'watch her tone' (Iqbal, 2020); the Home Secretary Priti Patel repeatedly refused to apologise to NHS workers for a lack of PPE (Speare-Cole, 2020) and the Prime Minister blamed care homes for not following the rules (BBC, 2020d, Oliver, 2020).

But the most egregious example of a failure of empathy only surfaced late in May 2020 when the Guardian and Daily Mirror uncovered the news of Dominic Cummings 'flit' to Durham while suffering from the virus. This was not the start of the fall in the government's poll rating, the change in government messaging led to a clear sense of loss of control. However, psychologists who study public adherence to health rules stress the importance of trust and a sense of community and solidarity, and warned that Johnson's defence of Cummings had 'turned an issue of communal responsibility into an issue of individual preference' (Reicher, 2020). Diarists for the research company Britain Thinks indicated that the Cummings flit was 'a lightning rod for wider frustrations with Government': the mood

turned to anger 'for the first time'. Johnson was 'increasingly seen as a disappointment' (Britain Thinks, 2020a). There was real cut-through with the Cummings story. Over half of Britain Thinks' diarists mentioned it in the reports up to May 29th: 87% said they had heard 'a great deal/fair amount' about the story. For most it was the only story they recalled. (Britain Thinks, 2020a). 51% trusted govt to control spread, down from 69% in early April: 59% agreed Govt had been confused and inconsistent, up from 42% in early April. YouGov polling showed Con lead over Labour had been cut by 9% in a week. Only half of Cardiff University diary participants were following the news less closely by the time of the Cummings incident, but the Cummings story cut through and 'exacerbated anger towards the government': Cardiff diary participants wanted Cummings to be held accountable and some suggested that it had influenced local community behaviour on social distancing in a negative way (Cushion et al, 2020b).

Showing that the Government is in control

The four phases set out in the original coronavirus action plan – contain, delay, research, mitigate - were quickly overtaken by events, and early decisions on border controls and testing and tracing appeared to be contrary to the objectives of the 'contain' phase which was effectively abandoned early. The government's move to daily press conferences in mid-March signalled an attempt to demonstrate not only seriousness but clarity and control, following the rash of leaked briefings and mixed messages around 'herd immunity' (Schofield and Johnstone, 2020). The Prime Minister's illness and move to hospital required new steps to make clear who, precisely, was in control (Elliott et al, 2020a), though insider-briefed media stories suggest the process was somewhat more chaotic (D'Ancona, 2020a; Shipman, 2020; Kuenssberg, 2021; Rayner, 2021).

Johnson felt able to declare at the end of April, that the country was 'past the peak' of the virus (Johnson, 2020g). The easing of lockdown was signalled. There were a series of optimistic, indeed, boosterish, newspaper front pages looking forward to the end of lockdown in the next week, clearly briefed from within government. Diary reports indicated disquiet and confusion about the change in strategy and messaging was widely shared (Kyriakidou et al, 2020). The Number Ten press operation had to undertake a further briefing session to

make it clear that there would not be an instant exit, amid fears that the weekend would bring widespread breaches of the rules. The mixed messages were clearly reflective of divisions within the Cabinet as to the pace of exit from lockdown (Mason and Sample, 2020). The build-up to the Prime Minister's 10 May speech was polarising, with support beginning to split along political lines amongst the *Britain Thinks* diarists, with headlines in tabloid newspapers on 7 May suggesting the end of lockdown the following Monday. The different approaches of the devolved administrations, and their criticisms of the UK Government's likely proposals, were being noticed (Britain Thinks, 2020a).

The broadcast to the nation on 10 May by the Prime Minister, announcing a change in messaging, from Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives, to Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives, and some lockdown easing, was felt by many to be confusing. Following the Prime Minister's announcement on lockdown easing, a majority of Cardiff University diary participants were confused about whether the new 'Stay Alert' message applied to the UK or just to England: broadcasters were clear in the distinction, but national newspapers less so (Cushion et al, 2020c). A higher proportion of adults (26%) was beginning to report confusion about what was expected of them up from 17% in March (Ofcom, 2020b).

The decline in the Conservative Party's and the Prime Minister's ratings commenced at this time (Smith, 2020c; IPSOS-Mori, 2020a). Trust in the Government as a source of information about coronavirus had declined substantially since April from 67% to 48% and that decline in trust had occurred across the political spectrum. When the speech was made, the Prime Minister's caution was welcomed by Britain Thinks diarists, and the contrast with the tabloid headlines was noticed, but diarists expressed significant confusion about what was being proposed, particularly those who were politically critical of the government. A strong sense of right (sticking to the rules, supporting the vulnerable) and wrong (taking risks with social distancing, visiting second homes) was evident. The UK having a higher death rate than other countries was being noticed. YouGov tracker polling reported by Britain Thinks indicated a fall in support for the government. Some indications that the death rate was starting to come down contributed to more positive feelings (Britain Thinks 2020a).

In the days following Johnson's speech, the UK Government had dropped the reporting of international comparisons of deaths in its daily briefings, just as diary research suggested that far more of the UK public had come to appreciate that the UK death rate was one of the

highest in the world compared to a similar survey a month before: many participants also felt that the death rates had not been accurately reported (Cushion et al, 2020ad. Surveys indicated that the public wanted the government to concentrate on health issues rather than the economy (IPSOS-MORI, 2020d). So the government was losing its 'narrative competence' (Borins, 2011) by the time the Cummings flit became public. There was clear evidence of people feeling nervous about a return to normal (IPSOS-MORE, 2020e). Communications were increasingly seen to lack clarity (IPSOS-MORI, 2020f-h).

A significant range of opinion surveys indicated that the proportion of the public that felt that the government was handling the pandemic well had declined and the proportion feeling that is was handling the pandemic badly had grown (YouGov, 2020; Opinium, 2020b; Survation, 2020; Savanta, 2020).

Declaring an end to the crisis
Boris Johnson's term for the easing of lockdown was 'unlockdown' (Hansard, 2020). Three months to the day after his instruction to the people to stay at home, on 23 June, Johnson announced in a press conference and parliamentary statement that the end of lockdown would take place on (US) Independence Day, 4 July, saying in the House of Commons: 'our long national hibernation is beginning to come to an end' (Hansard, 2020b). The devolved administrations took different approaches: again, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into detail on this, but the clear and phased planning of the more cautious approach in Wales and Scotland in particular (Brooks, 2020; ITV Wales, 2020), served as a counterpoint to the UK Government's action in England. Within 24 hours, the local council in Bournemouth had to declare a major incident as its beaches were overwhelmed in searing temperatures (BBC, 2020f). In the days before 4 July, the Treasury promoted videos on Twitter and Facebook celebrating the pubs opening (Rawlinson, 2020; HM Treasury, 2020).

After lockdown was conceded, and the relevant support mechanisms put in place, then leaving lockdown and limiting the costs – both financial and in terms of human life – became key drivers of policy. A narrative had to be constructed to enable the lifting of lockdown.

The lockdown exit narrative contained a number of specific elements. Success – victory over the virus - was redefined not as eliminating Covid-19, but as avoiding the number of cases being so large that the NHS was overwhelmed, avoiding the 500,000 deaths that the modellers had suggested back in March would happen without mitigation measures and avoiding a second peak (Johnson, 2020j, 2020k, 2020g, 2020h). Hopes of a vaccine and new treatments, based on British research, were elevated as examples of British scientific genius as part of the 'Global Britain' narrative (BEIS, 2020).

However, the government also took steps to align itself with the efforts of the public, launching an advertising campaign under the slogan #EnjoySummerSafely, stressing the sense of communal shared sacrifice solidarity, that we had all been in this together:

> 'Thanks to all these personal sacrifices, this national effort, we have passed the peak.
> 'Now we must continue to protect lives and restore livelihoods' (UK Government, 2020)

Step by step the government was urging people to return to the pubs, to work, to the shops, underpinning its message with extensive Facebook advertising. The UK was moving out of lockdown with death rates and cases at much higher levels than other countries which had exited lockdown, and opinion polling suggested that people lacked confidence in the return to pre-lockdown activities (IPSOS-MORI, 2020c).

A search for people to blame also commenced. The Prime Minister criticised 'the parts of government that seemed to respond so sluggishly' (Johnson, 2020j). Questions were raised over scientific advice and the functioning of Public Health England (Campbell and Walker, 2020), the NHS in England (Campbell, 2020) and the civil service (Haddon, 2020). Finally a public inquiry was conceded (BBC, 2020e).

Symbolic or performative reinforcement

The seriousness of the government's message was reinforced through the presence of government medical and scientific advisers at the press conferences from March onwards. Steps were taken to ensure that press conference participants were appropriately socially distanced. The early decision to take questions remotely from journalists reinforced the

social distancing messages. Coverage of the socially distanced UK Parliament, Welsh Senedd and Scottish Parliament reinforced this, as did events at hospitals, ventilation and vaccine manufacturers, and later in the day, the decision to require mask-wearing in shops and on public transport was generally reinforced in subsequent television footage. The clap for carers, immediately adopted by the Prime Minister, despite his illness, was a powerful and communally-shared experience across the four nations, which reiterated the message in a highly personal, performative fashion, of the need to 'protect the NHS'.

There were discordant elements, however. The return of Parliament in May and the Prime Minister's first outings against the new leader of the opposition, Keir Starmer, brought a combative element that was widely felt to be out of kilter with the moment, particularly when it came from the Prime Minister, who was seen to be partisan rather than statesman-like in his criticisms ('Captain Hindsight). Occasional errors in social distancing and major lockdown breaches were called out and spotlighted by the media, undermining the sense of solidarity (Reicher, 2020).

Vaccine nationalism and the return to Global Britain

A week before lockdown, the Prime Minister declared 'the UK is now leading a growing global campaign amongst all our friends and allies....to fight back against this disease' (Johnson,2020c). In a speech on the economy in June Johnson had praised the UK's 'World-leading services', (Johnson, 2020j). At the core of these boasts were hopes of a vaccine and new treatments, based on British research, elevated as examples of British scientific genius as part of the 'Global Britain' narrative (BEIS, 2020).

Throughout the autumn and winter of 2020-1, the government had to face other setbacks which challenged its claim to be in control of the crisis. Further restrictive measures were announced by the Prime Minister in a broadcast in September, where he used Churchillian language to emphasise the importance of personal responsibility: polling showed the public was not convinced his announced measures went far enough (Stewart and Elgot, 2020, Swinford, 2020). In a hastily-assembled, repeatedly-delayed press conference on 19 December, the Prime Minister had to backtrack on his earlier plans for people's Christmas

holidays (Craig, 2020) limiting the ability of people to travel to see relatives and keep to plans they had made. After allowing schools in England back on 4 January, the Prime Minister said that they needed to close the following day as lockdown re-commenced (Staton et al, 2020)). The UK passed 100,000 deaths on 26 January, the first country in Europe to hit that figure – 50,000 of these deaths had occurred since November, raising further questions about the delay in locking down in the autumn. (BBC, 2021a)

However, the vaccine rollout has been a clear success across the UK and has led to a significant recovery in the government's position (Savage, 2021). Missteps by the EU have also enabled government ministers to make a virtue of Brexit in comparison (BBC, 2021b). The success of the vaccine rollout has even been used by the Prime Minister as underpinning the case for the Union (Dickie, 2021; ITV Wales, 2021).

The vaccine rollout has enabled the UK government to return to the Global Britain themes that the Prime Minister had emphasised in his Greenwich speech on 3 February 2020, using the success of British science in creating the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine and its marketing around the world to demonstrate 'to inspire a new global hope'
(Johnson, 2021). Along with the roll-out of the 'high-risk, high-reward' science research agency ARIA (Parker, 2021), the new Foreign and Defence strategy rests on 'the principle of enlightened self-interest' (Jonson, 2021)
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Discussion

From mid-March until July 2020 the rhythm of the day was set by the release of data on cases, hospitalizations and deaths and by press briefings by the UK and devolved governments, with the latter sometimes making the UK news bulletins in their own right, particularly when their positions were interpreted as calling into question decisions by the UK Government. It is rare, outside wartime, for government briefings to play such a role in people's lives on a daily basis. The government used its narrative capacity to deploy its messages across all media, including social media in 'battle rhythm', as military planners

would describe it. This narrative capacity, then, is real and meaningful and worthy of study in its own right.

Table 2 makes some broader assessment of the way in which the key elements of the tentative Narrative Capacity Framework played out in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. This is NOT a comprehensive assessment and this is specifically NOT an attempt to reach judgements on the effectiveness of the UK Government's overall strategic communications, or the success of specific elements at specific times. To do so would require access to considerably more material than is currently available, such as detailed understanding of specific aspects of each campaign, including intentions and expectations, data on the response of the broader public and specific target audiences, information on shifts in messaging in response to feedback, and many other factors. Clearly, there were some elements of the UK Government's narrative which worked well, not least the initial 'Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives' campaign. Some on the libertarian right even argued that this worked too well, making people hesitant to return to work and town and city centres. 'Eat out to help out' may also have worked well in its specific and limited context, although others may have questions about the strategic sense of such a campaign when Covid-19 infection rates still remained relatively high.

Table 2 about here

Rather, this is an attempt to prompt thinking and debate about the nature of government narrative capacity, using the example of a specific crisis. Covid-19 is a unique occurrence, certainly in modern Western societies, and one for which many advanced states were significantly under-prepared. Government 'narrative capacity' in this specific context should not be studied as an exemplar for every situation. But the extent of the pandemic, its duration and intensity, its universality, its requirement for governments to act in a protective fashion towards their citizens and their entire population, allows us to focus on specific elements of narrative framing in order to think more critically about narrative capacity rather than simply write it all off as so much 'spin'. The evidence suggests that narrative capacity is real and matters in its impact on citizens' behaviour and mood:

meanwhile, the typology set out at the beginning offers a reasonable framework for analysis.

The framing of success in the pandemic gives us some pointers to the deployment of narrative capacity, and the way in which 'events' can overtake initial objectives, and then an explanation retrofitted as a success measurement. At the outset, the Prime Minister spoke of eliminating the virus (Johnson, 2020l). When he praised the UK's 'apparent success' in April, he was referring to the fact that the NHS had not been overwhelmed (Johnson, 2020k). When he, relatively late in the day, began to suggest there might be a case for an inquiry, he couched it in terms of criticising 'the parts of government that seemed to respond so sluggishly' (Johnson, 2020j).

It is clear that elements such as the style of communication mattered. Reports occasionally surfaced, for example, that Professor Jonathan Van Tam - 'JVT'- polled well as an effective communicator (Bland, 2020). It was obvious, and borne out by the judgements of his colleagues and party members, that the Prime Minister found it hard to deliver bad news and that his natural frame was to be upbeat, jocular or to go on the attack, a style that was too often discordant: he was well-suited to promoting the success of the vaccine roll-out, less suited to presenting difficult or nuanced messages. In terms of overall strategy, the vaccination roll-out allowed the UK Government to return to its preferred 'Global Britain' narrative, which had had to be put on ice for the best part of a year. The vaccination programme, and the slowing of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, has now become the story, rather than the extent of the UK's Covid crisis with its staggering number of excess deaths, each one a tragedy.

It should be stressed at this point that this is a contingent assessment. The Covid-19 narrative at present remains open-ended. It may always be so. Narrative closure may be achieved with the final Covid-19 review or inquiry. It seems more likely at the time of writing, with rival interpretations already surfacing (Kuenssberg, 2021; Telegraph, 2021; House of Commons, 2021a; Nelson, 2021), that there will be no pandemic narrative closure. Paradoxically, however, it may be when the country feels free of the pandemic crisis, that people may wish to turn their focus on what went wrong.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to argue that the narrative capacity of governments is a legitimate area for study within the field of executive governance. It is not a second-order matter. Indeed, there is a strong argument for saying that it has become a strategic aspect of government in the UK since 1997.

The pandemic has elevated the role of government as a communicator of public health and related messages. It provides a jumping-off point for the examination of key elements of a government's narrative capacity. From the literature of crisis leadership, we can identify a key number of elements essential to effective framing, which have been summarised and supplemented in this paper. Some might argue that by their very nature, crises are not appropriate moments by which to judge narrative capacity, and that the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, is a unique non-recurrent experience. I would argue to the contrary, following the example of Bevir and Rhodes (2010), that crises pose dilemmas which bring the very workings of government to the fore, and that the Covid-19 pandemic has shown these dilemmas play out in real-time on a particularly intensive basis in a unique way which has entailed extensive scrutiny by legislators, the media, professionals and the public.

The deployment of narrative capacity by governments seeks to mobilise support for their core arguments and policies. Governments depend upon the trust of the public, and trust depends on the impression of competence which a government can demonstrate. In a pandemic, trust is essential for adherence to public health guidance. Governments, through their strategic deployment of their narrative capacity, can build and lose trust and their reputation for competence.

There are of course limitations to this paper. The very wide-ranging sustained nature of the Covid-19 crisis over the past twelve months has meant that necessarily this can only be a sketch of the issues. The conclusions, in the absence of a formal documented inquiry, must necessarily be contingent. This is a study of the UK response and more comparative work would be valuable. The study of government actions in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic is however likely to be here with us for years to come. For the individuals and families who have suffered deaths and long-term trauma, it is only right that academic work engages with the governmental strategies that will have been a factor in the personal tragedies that they have experienced.

Acknowledgements

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Narrative element	Timing element	Covid-19 Examples	Effective/congruent	Ineffective/discordant
Signalling a crisis	• Outset	• Lockdown 23 March	• 'Clear instruction'	• Late
Credible explanation	• Throughout	• Following the science	• Scientists at press conferences	• Science isn't static • Modelling changed
Guidance	• Throughout, needed early	• Successful from 23 March	• Reinforcement through social media and ads	• Stay Alert confusing • Mask advice changed
Hope	• Glimpsed at beginning, progress measures needed	• Send packing in 12 weeks • Over by Christmas • Normal by Easter • Vaccinations	• Over-optimistic throughout • Growing success in 2021	• Mixed messages in tabloids • Hawks and Doves leaks
Empathy	• Throughout	• Clap for Carers • Captain Tom • PM illness	• PM joins clap • Natural sympathy	• Dominic Cummings • Excessive coverage?
Leadership control/Authority	• Requires constant evidence	• Ramping up of testing • Vaccination programme	• Expansion over time • Clear timetable set	• Over-promising • Timetable beaten on whole
Symbolic reinforcement or performative	• Throughout as appropriate	• Elbow bumping • Distanced press conferences • Mask adoption • Zoom Cabinet • Remote Parliament	• ? • Effective throughout • Adopted • General Zoom experience • Ditto	• Self-conscious • Suggestion of evading scrutiny
Declaring end	• Initial – end of first and other lockdowns; • Ultimate - End of promised Inquiry	• Stay Alert • Enjoy Christmas • Schools back January • Enquiry	• ? • ? • ? • ? • Enquiry promised	• Confused. • Christmas rule change • Schools back for one day • Enquiry pre-emption

Table Two: Illustrated elements of narrative capacity