

Populism, Anti-System Politics and the Media: A spotlight on Covid-19

Anti-system politicians in positions of power and influence and a compliant legacy and digital media have created a climate of disinformation and uncertainty for ordinary citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic, argues Professor Robert Dover.

Early in the first term of David Cameron's coalition government, the radicals within the Conservative side of the government were described as having Maoist tendencies: this term was used to describe their ambition to rip down established institutions and processes. The usually sober Financial Times ran a recurring item assessing Conservative policy initiatives on a Mao-meter (The Financial Times 2010). The jollity of the Financial Times' pastiche was replaced with clearer critiques around the radical policies that starkly reduced the size of the state between 2010 and 2020. The radical redrawing of the state and the stretching of political norms and conventions set the stage for the pandemic. Despite having a world class virology research base (within universities, industry and defence), and strong doctrine around epidemics the health of the public had been allowed to become very poor (ensuring poorer outcomes from Covid than was experienced by countries with healthier populations), the health service was precariously positioned with reduced capacity, and the long established local public health and track and trace capabilities had been abolished during the ten years of austerity. It was a perfect (viral) storm.

These contemporary anti-system neo-Maoists believe in breaking down established political and social orders to create a chaos that results in the strongest being able to innovate and flourish (Hopkin 2020) (A. Davis 2021). They believe the societal and political order will correct itself in the face of existential crises, but assert this from within political brands that

are established, safe and well-considered. They have been ably supported by a broadcast, and paper and internet based legacy media. These anti-system politicians, that won their Brexit and mishandled the pandemic, are unified by the following beliefs: 1) the existing system is broken, 2) the existing system will see 'us' continue to lose influence and power in the global system; 3) there is an identifiable cause of the dysfunction in the system, and this can be labelled as the establishment in various forms and outsiders who undermining the nation; 4) those establishment interests (be they political, media, academic, economic), and outsiders, who represent the cause of the dysfunction should be subject to an immune system response from the new political order; 5) nearly all means justify these ends; 6) only a 'strong' government can place the nation back to the position it should have always been in. The economic logic underpinning this vision is starkly neo-liberal, whilst appealing to working class voters who are the most likely to be negatively impacted by it. Ironically, these voters have also been the most likely to suffer negative outcomes in the pandemic.

Within the new economic model, the preferred solution is for the government to be an outsourcing broker. The size of the state is therefore reduced whilst – in the exceptional moment of the pandemic – the size of its financial draw is exponentially increased. The UK's experiment with such a model, enacted at a large scale because of Covid, is one tainted by accusations of corruption as party donors and friends of ministers have been accused of being given contracts they were not well qualified to win. Similarly, former high ranking government officials have been accused of seeking to enrich themselves through their privileged connections. Interestingly, and echoing the sense of British exceptionalism that marked the Brexit referendum and exit negotiations, the legacy media has stuck with describing these contractual situations as 'cronyism', whilst describing similar accusations abroad as corruption; a far more damaging linguistic tick. The reproduction of British exceptionalism is a key theme from the pandemic thus far, with far wider resonances.

This ideology of anti-system has a close relationship with technological disruptions, particularly in the society-changing innovations in communication, in travel and of data collection. This ideology is closely related to the radical libertarian spirit that fuelled the emergence of the dot.com era in technology and these technologists find themselves in unhappy concert with those forcefully pushing largely illiberal political disruption.

The disruptive technologists who have underpinned the infrastructure of modern societies had the vision of a form of participant capitalism, of sharing, of looser ties, and social liberalism but in which – paradoxically – they have become kleptocrats. These paradoxes exist in the political realm too. Experts and those who maintain the status quo order are enemies of this disruption, because they actively work to avoid the chaos that the neo-Maoists believe is the route to a better form of politics and social order. When it comes to Brexit those experts are dismissed as ‘remoaners’. During the pandemic virologists and epidemiologists have been denigrated with personal attacks in the legacy media (e.g. ‘Dr Doom’) or in terms of needing the lockdown to continue for their psychological needs.

Those advancing the agenda of disruption (be it through Brexit, MAGA and Covid derestriction) see the established order as one of managed decline, and themselves as being on a historical mission to break free of this historical inevitability and to deliver a form of 19th century laissez-faire on the world. So, rather than cooperating with the World Health Organisation or the European Union on the pandemic the US and the UK initially preferred to act unilaterally. By luck, rather than judgement, UK public money had been long helping Oxford University establish the research platform on which vaccines could be quickly repurposed for Covid-19 (Safi 2021). This is precisely the sort of research investment that Boris Johnson’s government has sought to undermine since winning re-election in the winter of 2019.

Anti-system politics has taken the forms of questioning and undermining certified expertise, undermining government expertise, questioning the motivation for official and government action, and pushing myths, disinformation and seeking to undermine and change the settled post-war social compact. The surprising turn has been that anti-system politicians have not remained at the fringes of mainstream politics, but in many cases across Europe and North America taken up occupancy in positions of government. The anti-system campaigners have become the establishment, whilst maintaining their narrative that they remain outsiders seeking to bend the establishment into serving the will of the people. This notion of subversion coming from within the state apparatus is relatively novel. It has – in the cases of the UK and America – also caused intelligence agencies to be in the invidious position of directly and indirectly investigating those they are responsible to. Even worse, anti-system politicians, who have achieved office, have been poor keepers of secrets and have tried to involve themselves in investigations (Atkinson, et al. 2020) (Hellinger 2019). In this era of digitally driven populism, the core functions of government have become politicised by all sides in an unprecedented way: legacy and new media outlets have become the key battlegrounds in this contest.

The attempt to politicise government science, public health, and analytical functions is important for us to note and understand. Surprise at these attempts springs from a particular understanding of government functions being apolitical. But the functions of government are not apolitical, because government agencies and officials seek to both protect and advance the state and its interests. This, in and of itself, is a choice that represents identifiable forms of political choice, with political, social and economic consequences. Government departments and civil servants are not party political, but they are political. To understand this provides an angle through which to see why government offices became legitimate targets for anti-system political actors: public authorities represent a hindrance to their transformation of society. For

those tasked with protecting the Crown and the continuation of Parliamentary democracy, the fierce debate around the proroguing of Parliament demonstrated the extent to which anti-system politicians would go to secure their preferred outcomes: almost nothing was off-limits to their higher ideals, something that should concern those who seek to protect the constitutional balance (Schleiter and Fleming 2020) (White 2019).

In the case of Brexit, covered elsewhere in this book, the consequences are mostly political and economic: things likely to be electorally forgiven over time. The UK's fitful exit from the *European Exchange Rate Mechanism* and resulting economic damage was largely forgiven by 2005, and replaced by the critique of Labour's handling of the economic crisis of 2008 (Aykens 2002) (Green and Jennings 2017). The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic added loss of life, and impairment of life opportunities to the list of consequences, which are far less likely to be forgiven. The early stages of the pandemic (in January-February 2020) was refracted through anti-system lenses in both the UK and US, leading to catastrophic public health outcomes. The virus was downplayed in terms of its lethality, as part of anti-Chinese sentiment, and in terms of the exceptionalism of the UK to face the virus down without locking down, closing the borders or implementing functioning track and trace systems. The right-leaning legacy media played a full role in (re)producing and supporting these narratives.

One of the lessons that we need to learn from the Covid-19 disinformation and populist politics is that the amplification of misleading narratives is only partly done via platforms and outlets that are open to academic researchers and other interested parties such as journalists and third sector organisations. Legacy media outlets have continued to play a highly politicised role: the editorials of *The Sun* newspaper have heavily emphasised the economic need of lifting lockdowns quickly, of reopening schools (vilifying teachers and teaching unions as anti-education in the process), and to downplay the risks of Covid (Liddle 2021). When the UK went into its second full lockdown in November 2020, *The Sun* published an

editorial supporting the government's move: it has fore-run government policies on many issues since 2015. Academics and journalists find easy headlines in reporting and analysing inflammatory material posted on *Twitter* and *Facebook*, largely because it is simple to find, and relatively straightforward to collect and analyse. The assessment of online harms is therefore skewed by the constraints inherent in research budgets and the design of studies, rather than being a true reflection of the information contest. This is important, because these hidden communication pathologies help to shape the public policy response, and result in a misdirection of resourcing to countering dangerous or subversive narratives.

The large social media companies have been slow to arrive at the position that they could and should remove posts inciting violence and hatred, or which facilitate wilfully poor public health outcomes (Facebook 2020). Since the summer of 2020 this has now become commonplace. In the US, this platform centred censorship was triggered by the possible commercial fallout from allowing the then President Trump to push disinformation in the pursuit of re-election in November 2020 (Ashokkumar, et al. 2020). But it also helpfully coalesced with governmental pressure to clamp down upon disinformation concerning the pandemic, which had gained considerable traction.

As John Downey, David Smith and I found in our research on crisis communications, disinformation often originates on the so-called 'Dark Web', where it is pre-refined and amplified prior to making its way on to the indexed web and open social media platforms (UK Defence Select Committee 2019). This mechanism allows state actors to acquire plausible deniability and more difficult for researchers to locate the 'patient zero' of disinformation campaigns. The first mover advantage into the information space also provides disinformation with greater longevity: we found that the initial speculation around security incidents published before the first official tweet, were still circulating 30 days after the incident. These insights suggest changes to official communications doctrine, particularly

in seeing a foreshortening of the time to make the first communication, establishing an authoritative voice, a single point of reference, and clear and consistent messages. The British government's communication of public health advice during the early phases of the pandemic was inconsistent and confusing. A year into the pandemic the British government's official communications finally reflect the reality that Covid-19 is an airborne illness, although it maintains the confusing fiction that schools do not require significant mitigations for this airborne illness. The point here is that having public health messages in tension undermines the public's confidence in the communications themselves but also the underpinning competence: something that comes through in the public opinion surveying.

Focusing on the impact of social media on shaping the public's understanding of and attitude towards Covid-19 obscures an important element in modern communications technology.

Much as the August 2011 riots in the UK were organised and escalated by encrypted Blackberry Messenger messages, disinformation about Covid-19 has circulated freely on popular private messaging services such as WhatsApp and Signal, and on deliberately less well-regulated social media sites such as 4Chan, which find their way indirectly onto mainstream platforms and onto legacy media platforms too. Ironically, the British government's difficulties with corruption allegations also stems from its use of WhatsApp as a means of communication (Cummings 2021). Disrupting the production and reproduction of disinformation on encrypted messaging platforms is a technologically sophisticated activity, and not something that has successfully scaled, even within government security circles. This – in part – informs the recent warning to Facebook from the UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel, not to encrypt its platform which – in her view – would facilitate the exploitation of children and other serious crimes (Molloy 2021).

While the Covid-19 pandemic persists, and mutations and vaccine escape look likely, the future communications challenges will continue to come from encrypted and discrete

platforms, and from the rapid development and use of ‘deep fake’ technologies. These technologies have reached a level of maturation where convincing videos can be created (mis)using the face and voice of trusted figures to push disinformation or to maliciously edit videos to discredit a particular individual (Roth 2021). Even at the time of writing, the quality of deep fake videos is such that it requires significant computing power in enforcement agencies to identify them. By the time this is done a significant cleavage of an internet community – by accident or design – will be pushing or commenting upon the fake as if it were real. The much-discussed hybrid media system continues to act as a mechanism for amplifying sensationalist narratives: a combination of accessibility, profit driven motive and information contest. Whilst anti-system politicians continue to feature strongly in our democracies, and as demonstrated by the discourse around Covid the current media landscape offers little defence against those wishing to recast politics or to deceive ill-equipped publics.

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