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Data, trust, democracy and Covid-19: the first parliamentary assessment of the UK government's approach to data during the pandemic

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IMPACT

The coronavirus crisis has led to governments making huge interventions into everyday life. These interventions have been justified on the basis of published data. However, the authors argue from the experience of a recent UK parliamentary report, that policy-makers need to be mindful of the double task that this data performs—both in securing the democratic legitimacy of the restrictions made to everyday life and in securing the adherence of people to those restrictions.

ABSTRACT

There is a challenge with the collection, storage, use and archiving of data by government, especially regarding upholding trust in democracy. A gap in our knowledge exists with the use of data during crises. To address that gap, this article considers the UK's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's (PACAC) report on data and transparency during the Covid-19 crisis. This affords an initial insight into how the UK government used data to legitimate policy and support implementation. The data connected the government to the governed in two ways. First, it enabled democratic accountability. Second, it also helped persuade citizens to act in ways that the government wished them too. As a result, this dual function of the data published made it even more important than normal for the government to fulfil its democratic objectives with data.

Keywords

Communication; crisis; Covid-19; data; democracy; parliament; trust; UK

Introduction

The continuing Covid-19 crisis has had a huge impact on politics and political thinking everywhere. Both democratic and non-democratic governments have brought in restrictions to individual liberty, which were unimaginable in peacetime a few months before they became a popular consensus. In the UK, and elsewhere, this has prompted agonized debate between proponents of different strategies—ranging from 'zero covid' to advocates of 'unlocking' the economy. There has also been much debate about the use of calculative practices to understand the crisis. In March 2021, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) published a report on the data and transparency during the Covid-19 crisis (PACAC, 2021). In this article, we describe the PACAC's initial view of the way that the UK government has used data both to legitimate policy and to support the implementation of policy, against the background of the accounting literature about the role of data in the Covid-19 crisis.

Data and Covid-19

The Covid-19 crisis happened against the background of an increased focus on data as a mechanism of both legitimacy and government within modern liberal democracies (Ahrens & Ferry, 2021a; Ferry & Ahrens, 2021; Rose, 1993). Rose (1993) suggests that numbers have four functions within modern liberal democracies: they establish who should hold power; link the government with the lives of the governed outside of the electoral process; establish a

mechanism for the sceptical observer to hold the government to account; and make possible the activities of modern government itself. Whether numbers themselves can achieve all these objectives is uncertain: as Heald (2018) suggests, some forms of numerical transparency may be threatening to those subjected to it. Rose's thesis about the importance of numbers is even more important in a crisis or emergency, where new forms of calculation or numbers are needed to support the role of government in responding to the crisis (Sargiacomo & Walker, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic met the definition of a crisis within the UK. From March 2020, the UK government identified coronavirus as a clear threat to public health. The UK response was led by the Cabinet Office and Department for Health and Social Care in England and by the various devolved governments across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—though an effort was made to keep a roughly consistent approach across the four nations. Restrictions to social and economic life were first introduced in March 2020 in all four countries. In England, those initial restrictions were relaxed over the summer of 2020, but then many of them were reintroduced locally first and then nationally in autumn 2020 and in a renewed phase of lockdown through the winter and spring of 2020/21. The scale and the severity of the measures is indicated by their impact on the public finances (Heald & Hodges, 2020).

The government justified their policy response with data from the beginning. Testing results showing the numbers of infections, hospitalizations and deaths were deployed both to explain why measures were introduced, to defend the government's approach and to target interventions at

specific areas. As Ahmad et al. (2021) suggest, the approach to data changed over time: with testing used to measure performance initially and then, over the course of the pandemic, used as a strategic tool to manage the risk of disease outbreak. This became particularly true with the deployment in 2021 of surge testing in areas where ‘new variants’ of the virus had taken hold. However, the English approach to data in the pandemic has been criticised: for example, Ahrens & Ferry (2020, 2021a, 2021b) have criticised the way that government understood the financial consequences of the pandemic for local government. Mitchell et al. (2021) suggest the UK’s weakness on data drove a weaker performance than Germany during the pandemic. Given the prominence of data within the government response to Covid-19, it is natural that its publication became controversial during the pandemic.

The PACAC report

Accountability within the UK system for data and data quality rests with the PACAC which, like other parliamentary select committees, is a cross-party committee with members holding different views of how the UK should have responded to the coronavirus pandemic. The PACAC became involved in scrutiny of Covid-19 from May 2020 when it requested and obtained the publication of the minutes of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergency (SAGE) meetings (PACAC, 2021, p. 6). The PACAC formally launched an inquiry into data transparency and accountability on 22 September 2020 after holding an evidence session with officials from the UK statistics authority. The inquiry’s final report was published in March 2021 and assessed the government’s approach to data and accountability for data during the crisis.

In their report the PACAC argue, ‘the ability of Parliament and the public to understand the government’s decisions and hold them [to] account is central to democracy’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 9). This fundamental axiom lies behind one of the arguments of their report, which is that statistics enable that account holding to happen. The Downing Street press conferences, held by the prime minister and other ministers, were mechanisms in ‘engaging the public and seeking democratic consent’ and that ‘statistics should be used for the purpose of genuinely informing the public’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 11, 14). The PACAC stressed, ‘democratic consent is even more vital’ when the government moved from national restrictions to targeted local restrictions (PACAC, 2021, p. 36). From this, a number of concerns followed for the PACAC. They were concerned that the government’s data was still not accessible to all potential users (PACAC, 2021, p. 13). They expressed regret that ministers and senior officials quoted unpublished management information: the PACAC warned that the information ‘may be used to make politicised points and members of the public, journalists and Parliamentarians have no way of verifying the information shared’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 15). They argued that, particularly in the case of local lockdowns, the government’s decision-making was opaque and data was not clearly presented (PACAC, 2021, p. 43).

The PACAC, however, did not approach the issue of when and what data to publish solely through the lens of the government’s democratic obligations. Rather, throughout the report, they argued that public consent and public trust were instruments of government policy. The PACAC

considered that it was ‘vital’ to the government’s strategy for managing the pandemic that the ‘public comply with government guidance designed to prevent the spread of the virus’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 18). They cited findings from ‘behavioural scientists’ that ‘people with lower trust in government and in the science of covid appeared less likely to follow the rules and guidance’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 19). Summarizing the evidence they received, the PACAC stated that ‘there was a consensus that sharing data honestly and openly, complete with uncertainties, was helpful’ in improving trust (PACAC, 2021, p. 19). Strategies to maximize anxiety might not change behaviour and ‘might even be counter productive’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 21). This position led them to represent flaws in the presentation of data, not just as failures in the democratic obligations of ministers, but also as risks to policy. They noted, ‘there was deep concern that this trust between the government and the people had been undermined or broken’ by misuses of data (PACAC, 2021, p. 20). The PACAC’s view was that as the UK moved through lifting restrictions in the spring and summer of 2021, this ‘becomes even more pertinent’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 23).

A focus on trust meant that the PACAC were interested in the transmission of government material to the public. As they viewed the transparent communication of information as a policy good, they saw its evaluation as a positive contribution. They welcomed ‘efforts to understand how messages are landing [with the public] in general’ as a means of understanding how policy aims were being achieved (PACAC, 2021, p. 23). The PACAC likewise paid more attention than in previous inquiries to the role of intermediaries who explained government information to the public. It devoted a section of the report to the way in which independent scientists appointed to SAGE communicated with the public, suggesting rules should be adopted to forestall any ‘potential to create confusion and undermine trust’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 16). The PACAC suggested that departments presenting information to the public needed to think more about the way in which that information might be used by the media. They suggested, ‘notes on uncertainties and mythologies’ were useful to the press in understanding the data and welcoming moves by the Office for National Statistics to more properly explain the way that deaths were registered (PACAC, 2021, p. 22).

The PACAC’s view that data communication was an instrument of policy—not simply a matter of analysis—fed through into its views about the way that data was managed within government. The PACAC did analyse the way in which data was used by the government but did so in the light of its concerns about trust and the manufacture of public compliance. For example, the PACAC analysed the ways in which pubs, bars and shops were forced to close and reopen during the crisis but did so through this lens. It received evidence from frustrated business representatives who claimed that measures they had taken to invest in measures to protect the public had not been taken into account when the UK entered its second or third lockdowns (PACAC, 2021, pp. 43–44). The PACAC did not directly endorse these comments—it provided counter-evidence that these establishments might not be safe. However, it did argue that the government ‘was not clear on the evidence underpinning their decisions’ (PACAC, 2021, p. 45) and that the failure to explain undermined trust in these sectors and, consequently, wider trust in society.

The PACAC's view of data as an instrument of policy translated into a strong view that there should be a point of accountability within government for the data collected during the pandemic. The PACAC 'struggled to establish who the government sees as accountable for the data underpinning decisions on Covid' (PACAC, 2021, p. 24). Finding that its questions were passed between the Cabinet Office and Department of Health during the inquiry (PACAC, 2021, p. 26), the PACAC argued that the cross-cutting nature of the data meant that a single minister needed to be identified by the government as responsible for ensuring its integrity (PACAC, 2021, p. 26).

Discussion

This article describes the findings of the first parliamentary investigation of the use of data during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK. The PACAC's work supports the views of scholars both that there have been gaps in the data and that data use and collection has changed during the pandemic. More fundamentally, the PACAC acknowledged the different roles of data during the pandemic and its argument was that those roles were reinforcing. In the PACAC's view, the data was connecting the government to the governed in two ways: it enabled democratic accountability but it also helped persuade citizens to act in the ways that the government wished them too. This dual function of the data published made it even more important than normal for the government to fulfil its democratic objectives with data. During the crisis, data both was the mechanism for accountability and the mechanism to obtain policy success and these two priorities reinforced each other. Practically, the PACAC's diagnosis offers scholars of accounting reassurance that the developing research agenda within the subject is in line with the political view of the role of data during the crisis. It also offers opportunities for scholars to reflect on how the subtle understandings of the role of data during the crisis emerging from the scholarship can help inform political scrutiny in the future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

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