COVID-19 Recovery Committee

15th Meeting, 2022, Thursday 26 May 2022

COVID-19: communication of public health information

Introduction and purpose of paper

The Committee launched its inquiry into COVID-19: communication of public health information in April 2022. The inquiry has the following aims:

- To understand the challenges, including the existence of any misinformation and disinformation, faced by government in communicating public health messages in the pandemic to date and to consider what could be done by government to tackle these issues going forward.

- To consider whether public health information about COVID-19 is accessible to and meets the needs of specific audiences going forward, including people in the shielding category and communities where there has been below average uptake in vaccination to date.

- To understand how scientific information about personal health risks and risks to wider society can be best used to inform decision-making and public health messaging.

On 19 May 2022, the Committee held an informal discussion with the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) to discuss the findings of its Post Covid Futures Commission. A separate note by the clerk summarises the discussion, and some suggested issues below come from points raised by the RSE.

At its formal meeting on 26 May, the Committee will take evidence from two panels. This paper provides some brief background to these organisations, together with a brief summary of some of their recent, relevant work, and some suggested issues for discussion with both panels.

Panel 1: Sources of fake news, conspiracy theories and misinformation / solutions / developing trusted sources of information

Witnesses

The Committee will take evidence from:

- Callum Hood, Head of Research, Centre for Countering Digital Hate

- Will Moy, Chief Executive, Full Fact

- Dr Dawn Holford, Senior Research Associate, SciBeh

- Tracey Brown OBE, Director, Sense about Science

Background on the organisations and some recent work

The **Centre for Countering Digital Hate** is an international not-for-profit NGO that "seeks to disrupt the architecture of online hate and misinformation". The Centre's website explains that:

> "CCDH's solutions seek to increase the economic, political and social costs of all parts of the infrastructure - the actors, systems and culture - that support, and often profit from hate and misinformation.
>
> Solutions such as Stop Funding Fake News have proven effective in demonetising and reducing the reach of websites that masquerade as real news but in fact contain conspiracy theories, misinformation and propaganda, intermingled with shoddy journalism.
>
> Programs such as Don't Feed the Trolls and Don't Spread the Virus aim to reduce visibility of hate and misinformation by persuading social media users not to engage with provocative statements - because engagement is rewarded in social media algorithms with wider exposure - and instead to ignore, block and report."

Full Fact is a charity employing a team of "independent fact checkers and campaigners who find, expose and counter the harm [bad information] does". Full Fact has produced a number of reports, including one recently (February 2022) setting out ways the [UK] Online Safety Bill can tackle misinformation.

In January 2021 Full Fact published its second annual report, *Fighting a pandemic needs good information*. The report identified a number of issues, and said:

> "Good communication from the government is essential during a crisis, both to reassure concerned citizens and ensure that official guidance is followed. At

the same time, good communication is crucial for transparency and accountability. A pandemic does not reduce the need for scrutiny of government decisions; arguably it increases it, as more draconian measures may be sped through in the name of tackling the outbreak."

The report did acknowledge that a "major challenge" for the government has been the need to communicate uncertainty, "and this has been done with varying degrees of success. The initial narrative that the government was "following the science" risked oversimplifying the process, while the daily briefings often brought so much data they were impenetrable."

The report also said that "the way that errors are addressed is crucial". Full Fact recognised that "there are significant pressures on the government, from ministers to communications teams, and that mistakes can and do happen, especially in high-pressure situations. We also recognise that the way perceived U-turns are often seized upon by the media or the opposition can make it harder to be honest about mistakes or the need to change tack. But it is incumbent on all departments and officials to provide the public with accurate information, and to ensure that any errors are quickly and transparently corrected."

Scibeh states that it is "Reconfiguring behavioral science for crisis knowledge management: We are creating the infrastructure necessary for rapid crisis knowledge management." Among a range of other relevant projects, Scibeh have created a "COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook" which includes a "summary for policymakers". The introduction states that:

> "A team of scientific experts, led by the University of Bristol, have created a online guide help fight the spread of misinformation about the COVID -19 vaccines. Topics in the handbook include public behaviour and attitudes, policy, facts, and misinformation.
>
> The guide aims to arm people with practical tips and provide up–to-date information and evidence to talk reliably about the vaccines , reduce fear and constructively challenge associated myths.
>
> It includes:
>
>> - Key facts and messages about vaccines and uptake
>> - How to engage with someone expressing vaccine uncertainty
>> - Evidence-informed communication approaches to address myths and reduce misinformation
>
> The handbook links to a 'living library' of information that will be regularly updated."

Sense about Science is an independent charity that "promotes the public interest in sound science and evidence." Sense about Science carried out an inquiry to understand people's experiences of obtaining and using Covid-19 evidence for

policy decisions, inside and outside government. They reported that a [national survey conducted in partnership with NatCen](#) found that over half of UK adults have been using government statistics and medical websites. But public interest in government information on Covid-19 has waned since the start of the pandemic, especially among young people. The full report will be launched on 24 May, so the charity will be able to discuss this with the Committee.

Panel 2: government sources of information / regulation of government sources of information

Witnesses

The Committee will take evidence from:

- Nick Phin, Clinical Director and Director of Health Protection, Public Health Scotland

- Stefan Webster, Regulatory Affairs Manager, Ofcom

- Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation, Office of Statistics Regulation

Background on the organisations and some recent work

[Public Health Scotland](#) (PHS) is "is Scotland's lead national agency for improving and protecting the health and wellbeing of all of Scotland's people." Its vision and values states that:

> "Our vision is for a Scotland where everybody thrives. Focusing on prevention and early intervention, we aim to increase healthy life expectancy and reduce premature mortality by responding to the wider determinants that impact on people's health and wellbeing. To do this, we use data, intelligence and a place-based approach to lead and deliver Scotland's public health priorities.
>
> We are jointly sponsored by COSLA and the Scottish Government and collaborate across the public and third sectors. We provide advice and support to local government and authorities in a professionally independent manner.
>
> Our values of respect, collaboration, innovation, excellence and integrity are at the heart of our work."

PHS has a range of activity on COVID-19, [all set out on its dedicated webpage](#).

Ofcom is the UK regulator for the TV, radio and video on demand sectors, fixed line telecoms, mobiles, postal services and the airwaves over which wireless devices operate.

Ofcom produced resources to help combat COVID misinformation, as well as data about how people across the UK have accessed information and news about Covid-19. This ran up to September 2021 (week 76), and some of the key findings are set out in the diagram below:
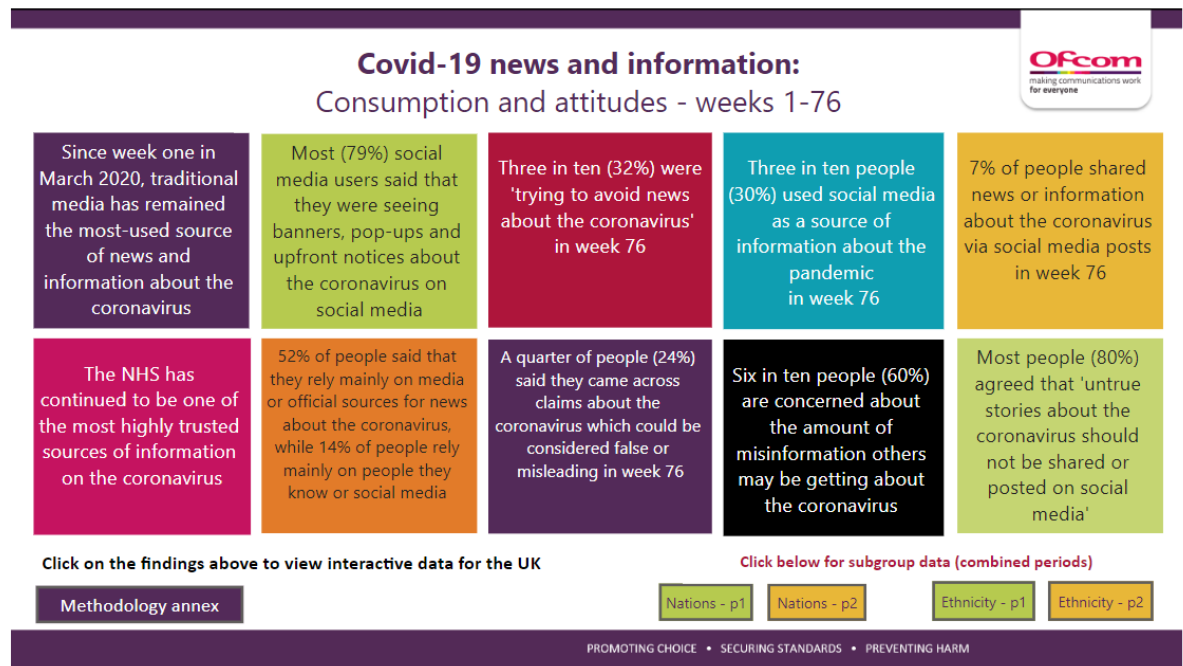
The **Office for Statistics Regulation** (OSR) is the independent regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority. The OSR states that:

> **"Our vision is simple: Statistics that serve the public good.**
>
> Statistics should be produced in a trustworthy way, be of high quality, and provide value by answering people's questions: providing accountability, helping people make choices and informing policy.
>
> In line with the Statistics and Registration Service Act (2007) our principal roles are to:
>
> - set the statutory Code of Practice for Statistics
>
> - assess compliance with the Code
>
> - award the National Statistics designation to official statistics that comply fully with the Code
>
> - report any concerns on the quality, good practice and comprehensiveness of official statistics"

On COVID-19 in particular, in October 2021, the OSR published "Improving health and social care statistics: lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic". As well as noting that the "efforts of those involved in producing health and social care statistics in response to the pandemic have been remarkable", the report also states that "the pandemic has also drawn attention to existing problems, and created new challenges, for health and social care data." It states that:

> "Building on the achievements of the pandemic and overcoming existing challenges will require:
>
> - Strong leadership and collaboration to protect the independent role of government statisticians and create a coherent picture for users
>
> - A commitment to transparency to ensure that statistics and data quoted publicly are published in an accessible form
>
> - Governments to commit sufficient investment, for example in data sharing and linking, data infrastructures, and analytical resource."

The review identifies ten lessons to support these objectives, grouped under five themes "transparent and trustworthy; responsive and proactive; collaborative; clear and insightful; and timely."

Suggested issues for discussion – both panels

The Committee may wish to discuss the following issues with both panels:

1. How the panel would define "misinformation" and "disinformation".

2. Some examples of the "misinformation" and "disinformation" spread during the pandemic.

3. The impacts of the spread of misinformation.

4. Who is responsible for misinformation in relation to COVID-19, where does it come from, how is it spread.

5. Whether misinformation increased during the pandemic/recent years or if it has been constant for some time.

6. How people consumed information during the pandemic and what lessons can be learned from this for the future?

7. What evaluation has been done of the efficacy of public health campaigns and communication (such as "FACTS"; NHS Inform website; daily briefings) during COVID-19?

8. What factors are important for maintaining public trust in public health communication?

9. How different people in different groups are affected differently by science communication and disinformation.

10. Solutions - how can misinformation best be dealt with, including examples from all organisations' experience.

11. Implications of misinformation for government policy, especially in a devolved context and how best to handle "corrections" from a government perspective.

12. Views on the proposal from the RSE of a "national conversation" on the use and sharing of data and that an independent fact checking service should be established in Scotland.

13. Suggestions for recommendations that the Committee could make to improve things in the future and in particular around future public health messaging and using data.

14. Points raised by the RSE about the communication of risk – where did this work well and where it could have been improved.

15. The extent to which relevant Scottish public sector bodies (like Public Health Scotland) work with academic institutions to ensure that their data is accessible, and whether guardians of such data are too risk averse.

16. Current data gaps in Scotland and what the Scottish Government and its agencies are doing to address these.

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