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The BBC and Covid-19: the Politicisation of a Pandemic?

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Introduction

As the United Kingdom's public service broadcaster, the BBC has a responsibility to hold the Government to account during times of crisis, and the emergence of the novel Coronavirus in January 2020 provided such a moment. The pandemic not only presented journalists with a particular challenge, but also created a *crisis of communication* in terms of how to mediate and explain the virus. As a consequence, the whole process took on multiple guises: as a public health story, a political narrative, an economic tale, and an account of the racial disparities and social inequalities in the UK. As the virus had not yet been fully understood, and was not therefore an easy story for journalists to communicate, this contributed to a confused representation of health and safety concerns, yet in addition helped to amplify the lack of scientific consensus. This was compounded by mixed 'messaging' from the Government in relation to key issues, such as how individuals should protect themselves from the virus, and which measures should be taken to limit its spread. This motley form of communication proved confusing to the public (Cushion, et al., 2020a).

As a result, trust in Government decreased substantially in the UK, with 48% of people rating the government as relatively trustworthy (as of June 2020), down from 67% six weeks earlier, in April 2020 (Fletcher, et al., 2020). According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, in a study of people's attitudes towards how Governments, news organisations and institutions responded to the coronavirus, this decline in trust was in all likelihood compounded by the fact that Boris Johnson's Chief Advisor, Dominic Cummings, broke the first nationwide lockdown on 28 May 2020 (Fletcher, et al., 2020). Studies have shown that a majority of news consumers in the UK were not only closely following the story, but were also becoming more disillusioned with the Government as a result of it, and desired more critical media coverage (Cushion, et al., 2020a).

This coincided with a decline in trust in news organisations, which was also down to 46% in June 2020 from 57% in April 2020 (Fletcher, et al., 2020). Interestingly, a similar survey of 200 news consumers by Cardiff University found that, as of April 2020, trust in television journalists, and broadcasters as a whole, had actually risen during the pandemic (Cushion, et al., 2020b), but another key finding in the survey pointed to the authority of television news over other platforms, since it was associated with more accurate rather than speculative reporting (Cushion, et al. 2020b). This study showed that the most trusted broadcaster was the BBC, with a trust rating of 85%, followed by Channel 4 and ITV at 73%, Sky News at 69%, and finally Channel 5 at 54%.

The difficulty faced by journalists in mediating this unusual event was compounded by limited access to Government sources, a problem which took on greater proportions as the story developed and as the relationship between Ministers and the ‘Lobby’ became more strained. Inconsistent Government messaging added a further layer of complexity, undermining to some extent journalists’ key task of mediating information about the virus itself, and accentuating the need for proper accountability to be embedded in coverage. The daily Covid-19 Briefings, which were the space that allowed journalists (and the public) to address Government officials in a more direct fashion, had a carefully controlled format, allowing the Government to maintain a firm grip on the narratives surrounding coronavirus. The removal of graphs (on 11 May 2020), which had showed the UK’s position in terms of recorded deaths globally, was a further indication of formal authority trying to maintain its own narrative within broader media coverage. Questions were also vetted prior to their inclusion in these Daily Covid-19 Briefings, further augmenting the idea that the UK Government strove to control the narratives surrounding the pandemic.

Similar restrictions were placed upon the regular daily press briefings, which were the main forum for journalists in the UK to scrutinise the government’s policies. There has been contention with regards to these briefings and the ‘Lobby’, as its “critics claim it encourages a cosy relationship between political journalists and the political establishment” (Gabor, 2020). The relationship between the Government and the ‘Lobby’ had started fraying at the edges, particularly post-Brexit. In February 2020, there was an attempt by Lee Cain, Boris Johnson’s Director of Communications, to

block certain members of the ‘Lobby’ (mainly from the left-wing or more ‘liberal’ press) from attending a briefing. This led to a walkout, staged in solidarity with their colleagues, by the “chosen few” among the journalists (Gabor, 2020), including the BBC’s Laura Keunssberg. In the transition from the Brexit to the Covid 19 crisis, the Government prioritised broadcast journalists over those from the press.

There was a tendency for Government sources to frame its approach to the pandemic through a heavy reliance on wartime narratives, and this in turn was reflected in news coverage. Was the permeation of these narratives into news media coverage, particularly that of the BBC, the result of reliance on official sources, and if so what were some of the other key influences that affected the BBC’s coverage of Covid-19? More importantly, had the BBC, as the country’s Public Service broadcaster, and the most trusted source of news (Cushion, et al., 2020b) been able to fulfil its journalistic responsibility of holding Government to account, at this very sensitive moment in the history of the country?

This Chapter explores these questions through an examination of a sample of coverage from the BBC, in addition to surveying and interviewing BBC journalists in order to determine what they perceive to be some of the influences on their journalistic practices, and their perceptions of the level of accountability in the coverage of Coronavirus. Some of these influences include: pressure to adhere to Government narratives; health and safety issues for journalists; and the limited access to official sources (as evidenced from the top-down control exercised during the Daily Briefings).

The sample of coverage has been deliberately chosen in order to examine programming which aims to follow the principle of accountability. The sample involves four weeks of coverage from the BBC’s Sunday morning programme *The Andrew Marr Show*. The rationale behind this choice rests in its being the weekly round-up programme, and its ability to set the agenda for the new week specifically in terms of the use of interviews in the daily BBC News bulletins. More importantly, the programme includes what has been described by Martin Montgomery (2011) as the ‘accountability interview’. Other BBC programming also includes this type of interview, such as *Newsnight* on BBC2 and *The Today Programme* on BBC Radio 4.

Montgomery described politicians who are interviewed in relation to relevant current events as the clearest example of the accountability interview:

For here the main emphasis falls exactly upon ‘calling a public figure (the politician) to account’ in relation to an issue or event of the moment, either for their own deeds or words or for the actions/statements of the institution or party with which they are associated (Montgomery, 2011: 35)

Interviews with Government officials (such as Health Secretary Matt Hancock) would fall within this frame of the accountability interview. Here, the form of questioning and the tone chosen by the interviewer (Andrew Marr) became a key indicator of whether or not Government officials were held to account over their handling of the UK’s coronavirus pandemic. The sample of four consecutive weeks also allows for an examination of how certain narratives might develop and recur within the coverage.

Methodology and Sample

The study utilises framing analysis to examine a sample of coverage from *The Andrew Marr Show*, dated from the 15 March 2020 to 5 April 2020. The purpose of this enquiry is not, therefore, to determine whether or not *regular* daily news bulletins (such as BBC News at 1 or BBC News at 10) held the authorities to account, as such a study is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, the aim is to establish the BBC’s responsibility in this respect where accountability is *at the core of the programme’s ethos*. It should be noted that there are other types of programming on the BBC (besides those that include accountability interviews), which are tasked with this function. Chief among these is *Panorama*, the BBC investigative documentary series, which pursued this approach, particularly in episodes dated 27 April 2020 and 20 July 2020. On 27 April 2020, *Panorama* revealed how the Government failed to stockpile on Personal Protective Equipment (Panorama, 2020a), while on 20 July 2020 it investigated the Government’s possible attachment to the early and contentious strategy of establishing ‘herd immunity’ (Panorama, 2020b).

With reference to methodology, framing analysis refers to the way a news story is packaged, and frames are described as “the central organising idea to a news

package” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Framing analysis is also an appropriate method for understanding the media’s role in political life (Reese, 2001: 7), and as such is a useful methodology when assessing the impact of Government narratives on media coverage of Coronavirus. In order to identify the dominant frames, several elements were coded and analysed, and the programme’s key issues (again, like herd immunity or lack of PPE) subjected to scrutiny. As noted above, to determine whether Government sources were being held to account, the *type* of questioning levelled at the interviewee, and the *tone* of the interviewer (Andrew Marr) were both analysed.

If accountability was established, via an evaluative or challenging tone and the use of follow up questions, then the dominant frame would be the *Accountability* frame. If questioning was relatively tame, and the tone was supportive or fairly neutral, and/or there was a ready acceptance of the Government line, then emergent frames might be the *Government Narrative Frame* or the *Government Support Frame*. An interrogation and analysis of the most commonly occurring frames, and the tones related to these news items, were explored.

The second method was an anonymised short survey (conducted via Survey Monkey in July/August 2020) with 22 BBC journalists and freelancers, as well as an in-depth interview with a senior BBC journalist. The aim of this interview was to determine the influences that affected journalists in covering the pandemic. Other questions include an evaluation of whether the BBC was able to bring the government to account, particularly in relation to key stories such as the Dominic Cummings affair, and whether there was pressure on the BBC to echo Government narratives in its coverage.

The BBC, the Government, and the Pandemic

While the BBC has a responsibility to the citizen, studies have shown that, during times of crisis (particularly during wartime) the Corporation largely follows the Government line (Barkho, 2008; Robinson, et al., 2012; Philo and Berry, 2004; 2011). This was evident, for example, during the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya where framing largely followed the Government line (Alnahed, 2015), and again during the 2003 Iraq War (Robinson, et al., 2012).

As stated above, narratives in news media coverage of Covid-19 strove to reproduce the narrative of a country at war, with a reliance on government discourses that forwarded war-like terminology, such as referring to the virus as an invisible enemy, issuing a ‘call to arms’ to recruit volunteers, and characterising NHS workers as serving on the ‘frontline’ of the crisis. Adherence to these narratives may be attributed, at least early on in the crisis, to journalists and news media outlets focussing on national unity, rather than concentrating on scrutinising the performance of Government - again, in some respects, echoing the structures that govern wartime coverage. When observing coverage on BBC News bulletins, many of the dominant frames and narratives were close to the Government line, with an emphasis on good news stories during daily bulletins, such as the Captain Tom saga, and public involvement in ‘Clap for Carers’. Additionally, there had been relatively limited emphasis on coverage from inside Covid-19 stricken hospitals, with coverage largely focussed on the creation of the Nightingale Hospitals.¹

My interview with a senior BBC journalist shed light on the lack of coverage from inside hospitals. These were caused in part because restrictions on reporting were instituted by the hospitals themselves, as well as by safety issues raised by journalists, employers and unions. My informant explained that “it has always been tricky to access hospitals, this time it was 100 times more” (Interviewee A, 2020). There have been rare news packages which contain footage from hospital wards, with patients’ faces blurred for anonymity, such as the one reported by Clive Myrie from the Royal London Hospital, titled *Coronavirus: One week one hospital*, which aired on 26 May 2020 (BBC, 2020a). A *Panorama* episode from 20 April, titled *On the NHS Frontline*, also reported from inside a Coventry hospital (Panorama, 2020c). As for the emphasis on the Nightingale Hospital, the senior BBC journalist said that this was a narrative promoted primarily by NHS management, which was keen for the Nightingale to be filmed (Interviewee A, 2020).

The ‘Three Phases’ of BBC coverage

¹ This was observed by the researcher in a sample of coverage between March 2020 and August 2020.

Coverage of Covid 19 on the BBC (and to a large extent the majority of news media in the UK) followed, on the whole, a pattern with three phases. The first involved what I refer to as the Support Phase, again with emphasis on good news stories, such as Clapping for Carers, the Nightingale Hospital, Captain Tom (and his birthday), and a wave of support for the PM during his illness and hospitalisation. This was followed by a succession of what could be described as scandals, such as: the PPE debacle (which was covered extensively by the UK press, but propelled into further prominence by the *Panorama* episode from 27 April 2020 (Panorama, 2020a); the Care Homes scandal; and the Dominic Cummings affair. I label this the Scandal Phase, within which a tangible shift in emphasis was noticeable in the work of many journalists. After Cummings' flouting of lockdown restrictions, and particularly around the time that the 14 day quarantine was (belatedly) imposed in early June 2020, journalists began to challenge the government more robustly, as evidenced from the Daily Briefings. I label this third phase the Accountability Phase. On the BBC's *Newsnight*, on 26 May, Emily Maitlis described Cummings as breaking the rules, in these words: "the country can see that and it is shocked that the Government cannot" (Newsnight, 2020). The BBC, however, ruled that Maitlis had breached impartiality rules. She did not appear on the programme the next day. Programming and coverage within this final phase involves Laura Keunnsberg's interview with Boris Johnson, on 24 July 2020, to mark his 100 days as Prime Minister. Keunnsberg deftly challenged the PM on Government policies toward Covid-19, with Johnson conceding that "there were things it could have done differently" (BBC, 2020b).

After the Maitlis case, and the *Panorama* analysis of 26 April 2020 (Panorama, 2020a), the BBC was subject to Government pressure, during a time when it was facing prospective cuts to its funding - through the suspension of the license fee for over 75s - and with Licence Fee negotiations due in 2022 and the renewal of its Charter five years thereafter. In a survey I conducted for the purposes of this study, journalists were asked if they felt there was any pressure from the Government to echo official narratives when covering the pandemic - 60% felt there was indeed pressure. However, half of the respondents felt the BBC had been able to cover the Dominic Cummings affair in a way that held the Government to account. Of the 50% who said that coverage lacked accountability, some cited the situation surrounding

Emily Maitlis (discussed above). One respondent wrote, “Four words: ‘Emily Maitlis’ and ‘Night Off’” (Respondent A, 2020), while another referred to the BBC censoring itself, noting that “the BBC and its *Newsnight* coverage showed the BBC were trying to censor the response to DC (Dominic Cummings)” (Respondent B, 2020). A third respondent referred to the BBC’s “lack of b***s” in reference to its handling of “the Emily Maitlis situation” (Respondent C, 2020). A fourth respondent felt the BBC “should have been more forceful and forthcoming” (Respondent D, 2020). In the same vein, many other respondents felt that the BBC had brought the Government to account, with one stating, “yes, I think at this point there was a marked change in tone and journalists breaking rank and challenging the Government” (Respondent D, 2020). However, the senior BBC journalist I interviewed did not locate the change in tone within journalism itself, stating “I don’t think that journalists turned, rather the public and the political mood changed” (Alnahed, 2020) with discontent growing amongst the public with regards to the Government’s handling of the crisis (again, with regards to PPE and care homes, culminating in the Cummings Affair). This shift in public mood was then reflected in the coverage.

When determining whether the BBC had held the government accountable in its handling of the pandemic as whole, the results are slightly more nuanced, as shown in the table below.

Question: On-going research has found that news consumers would like the BBC to hold the government more accountable in terms of their response to the Coronavirus. Do you think the BBC has held the government to account with regards to its handling of the Coronavirus pandemic?

Illustration 1

Yes	32%
No	27%
Somewhat	41%

When asked to clarify their position, one respondent pointed to the backlash surrounding Emily Maitlis in her *Newsnight* monologue from 26 April, while another wrote, “there is a tension between its [the BBC’s] Public Service role to inform the

public in a state of crisis, and its role to hold truth to power, which might undermine the Government” (Respondent E, 2020). Another respondent referred to a heavy reliance on wartime narratives, arguing that “there was far too much of a wartime narrative and BBC working with the Government, not questioning it” (Respondent F, 2020). Another journalist felt the BBC “never asked any hard-hitting questions” (Respondent G, 2020), which is another measure of accountability. Some pointed to the lack of health and science expertise, “the BBC is treating this as a political story- the correspondents at the briefings don’t know enough about virology to ask the right questions...The public are not being served well by this” (Respondent H, 2020). However, other respondents felt the BBC had been impartial in its coverage, with one stating, “the BBC has never covered a global pandemic before, and some mistakes are to be expected. On the whole, the BBC did well to keep people informed and hold politicians to account” (Respondent I, 2020).

In terms of the influences that may affect the BBC’s coverage, respondents were asked about their biggest challenges in covering the Coronavirus pandemic. The majority cited health and safety concerns (40%), closely followed by adherence to Government narratives (35%). Access to official sources was also seen as a barrier (20%). Access was clearly an issue for the majority of journalists throughout the pandemic, as evidenced in the discussion (noted above) on the Daily Briefings. Respondents across the sample largely felt that these briefings were controlled, as evidenced in the table below:

Question: In your opinion, were the daily Coronavirus government briefings tightly controlled (in terms of allowing journalists the freedom to hold government into account, through freedom to ask questions/follow ups)?

Illustration 2

Very Controlled	45%
Somewhat Controlled	41%
Fair	9%
Not Controlled	5%

It is also noteworthy that the closure of Parliament during the crisis exacerbated the lack of access to Government sources, creating further difficulties for political journalists. As for other challenges, the senior BBC journalist mentioned the unique nature of the story itself, also citing “the scale of the story” (Alnahed, 2020). The journalist also cited other influences on coverage, such as the majority of staff working from home (where they faced various issues presented by technology), and the impact of social distancing on the ability to conduct sit-down interviews. Referring to Government control of the ‘narrative’, the senior journalist stated that it was not a new phenomenon, as “the Government always wants to control [it], there is nothing sinister about that,” noting that the official Opposition (in this case, the Parliamentary Labour Party) also wants to control public discourse. Interestingly, when asked whether the coverage on the BBC had been critical enough, the same source said, “we do the best we can - it is not our job to be critical but to be robust” (Alnahed, 2020). This reporter also emphasised the need to “to provide facts, context, and analysis, and to be scrupulous and impartial”, citing the robust coverage the BBC had provided over the Care Homes crisis (Alnahed, 2020).

Framing the Pandemic on *The Andrew Marr Show*

The sample referred to here covers a period of four weeks, and focuses on episodes from 15 March, 22 March, 29 March, and 5 April 2020. The rationale behind the choice of sample is that the first episode aired following the UK Chief Medical Officer raising the risk of Covid-19 from moderate to high (12 March 2020), with confirmed cases rising to 1,140 (14 March 2020). Perhaps more importantly, it marked the week when the controversial so-called ‘herd immunity’ strategy entered the political lexicon, appearing on *The Andrew Marr Show* 15 March 2020 episode, during which Health Secretary Matt Hancock vehemently denied it was Government strategy. The sample covers key events from the crisis, including: the modelling from Imperial College London, which indicated that if the Government did nothing (i.e., follow the herd immunity strategy) 250,000 people would die (16 March 2020); the reports surrounding lack of ventilators (17 March 2020); the nationwide lockdown (23 March 2020); the introduction of the Coronavirus Act (25 March 2020); and Boris Johnson’s illness (27 March 2020). The choice of four consecutive weeks also allows an analysis of narratives that may have developed as the crisis escalated. The sample

did not consider international stories, or entertainment stories, but only included the following elements:

- Andrew Marr’s monologue at the start of the programme,
- The first story of the bulletin (included at the start of the programme, since this was the most in-depth and included multiple voices,
- The review of papers,
- Interviews with UK political figures (both Government and Opposition),
- Interviews with official sources from UK medical organisations or with NHS workers (a type of questioning that would help analyse Government responsibility in protecting Care Homes, providing PPE and testing, and other matters.

The choice is predicated on the rationale of determining whether the UK government was held to account in its handling of the pandemic. A total of 24 news segments were analysed. The eight dominant frames in coverage are set out below. All news segments were framed on a scale ranging from *Supportive*, to *Neutral*, to *Evaluative*, to *Challenging*, and finally to *Oppositional*. These ‘tones’ were determined by analysing the mode of response to Government narratives and policies, and to Government officials themselves when present on the programme. It is worth noting that some segments contained multiple, and sometimes competing, frames, and as a result the number of frames exceeds the number of news segments. Each of these frames was also given a tone.

The ‘People’s Responsibility’ Frame: this is a frame that places emphasis on the responsibilities of the public in controlling the virus, by adhering to lockdown rules and by practicing social distancing. It is a frame that was in many ways promoted by Government officials, and was the most commonly occurring in the sample, with great emphasis placed on “people following the rules”. In many cases it shifted responsibility from the Government to the public.

The Accountability Frame: this frame indicated that Marr had challenged Government narratives and had held Government officials to account. The tone here ranged from

neutral or evaluative to challenging, so the *level* of accountability was determined by the tone. This frame was never present in early episodes (at the time when national unity and public responsibility were emphasised) but started appearing with more frequency as the crisis developed, and as Government failings started to emerge, particularly in relation to PPE and herd immunity. It was the (joint) second most commonly occurring frame in the sample.

The Government Narrative Frame: this frame resembles the Government Support Frame (below), but is more subtle in its support for official statements and policies. A key frame indicator here is a tacit acceptance of official narratives (as opposed to the provision of outright support). In other words, this frame refers to the easy and ready acceptance of Government statements, with very little questioning or analysis. Examples of this approach include lack of scrutiny towards the supposed Government strategy of herd immunity, despite the controversy surrounding it. This changed as narratives developed in further coverage, and herd immunity was discussed with more rigour. Interestingly, it was also the (joint) second most frequently occurring frame, along with *The Accountability Frame*, which was at the opposite end of the spectrum.

The Government Support Frame: this frame indicates support for Government policies, with statements from officials supported or, conversely, when members of the Opposition presented a case that contradicted official sources, they would be challenged.

The Wartime Narrative Frame: this frame involves heavy reliance on wartime narratives, with an emphasis on war metaphors, on the nation pulling together to face a common enemy, and on references to Second World War (as was the case with the Queen's Speech from 5 April 2020). Analogies between war and the lockdown were also evident. Examples include an emphasis on healthcare workers being on 'the frontline', or a 'call to arms' when describing the effort to recruit volunteers. Interestingly, this frame was not the most prevalent (it fell somewhere in the middle in terms of frequency) despite wartime narratives being ubiquitous in coverage across BBC News bulletins.

The NHS Frame: this is a largely neutral frame that, although focussed on discussions of the NHS, does not try to hold Government officials to account (over issues like inadequate stockpiles of PPE, or the lack of ventilators, for example). It did, however, highlight a lack of accountability and support for the Government's strategy.

The Opposition Frame: this frame focusses on the formal political opposition to the Government, and involved interviews with members of the Opposition, such as Shadow Health Secretary Jonathan Ashworth; the emphasis was on the Opposition's point of view, characterised by Labour politicians as a readiness to 'work with' the Government while at the same time scrutinising its strategic decisions.

The Science Frame: This was the least prominent frame; it focussed on the science without much political debate. It appeared only once and the segment involved Professor Neil Ferguson, of Imperial College, whom the media had dubbed "Professor Lockdown".

Analysis of Findings

The tables below provide further clarity on these findings, with Table 3 indicating the frequency each of these frames occurred, and Table 4 indicating the frequency of tones in the sample. There were a total of 29 frames and tones present in a sample of 24 news segments.

Table 3-Frames in sample

Illustration 3

Frame	Number of times frame appeared in sample
<i>The People's Responsibility Frame</i>	6
<i>The Government Narrative Frame</i>	5
<i>The Accountability Frame</i>	5
<i>The Wartime Narrative Frame</i>	4
<i>The Government Support Frame</i>	3

<i>The NHS Frame</i>	3
<i>The Opposition Frame</i>	2
<i>The Science Frame</i>	1

Table 4-Tones in sample, tone scale ranges from supportive to government to oppositional to government

Illustration 4

Tone	Number of times tone occurred in sample
<i>Supportive</i>	1
<i>Neutral</i>	16
<i>Evaluative</i>	9
<i>Challenging</i>	3
<i>Oppositional</i>	0

The findings indicate that the most commonly occurring frame was *The People's Responsibility Frame*; a frame that placed more emphasis on the British people's responsibility in controlling the spread of the virus, with limited emphasis on bringing Government to book. This was closely followed by *The Accountability Frame*, which indeed held Government officials to account with reference to their pandemic strategy and policies. This indicates a level of accountability: however, interestingly, the frequency with which this frame appeared matched the frequency of *The Government Narrative Frame*, which promoted perspectives which were close to those provided by the Government, without much analysis or scrutiny of the many deficiencies in the UK's Coronavirus strategy.

The *Wartime Narrative Frame* was also prevalent, falling into the in the middle of the frequency range, tending to advance the Government's wartime narratives, but also

reflecting elements of the public and political mood of the time. Outright support for Government was not, however, very dominant in the sample, paralleled by the below average frequency of the *Government Support Frame*. However, The Government Support Frames's frequency was matched by that of *The NHS Frame*, which also tended to exhibit acceptance of Government statements about lack of PPE, ventilators, and NHS capacity. These last two frames, while not the most prevalent, cumulatively represent *a lack of critical analysis* with regards to Government conduct.

Analysing tones within the sample also provided interesting results; with a majority of neutral tones appearing in the sample, as well as a good range of evaluative tones, this meant that there some level of accountability was achieved, particularly through evaluative tones. Challenging tones were not as prevalent, and segments that displayed these tones contained the highest level of accountability in the sample.

Conclusion

This Chapter has explored the challenges faced by BBC journalists in their coverage of the Coronavirus pandemic in the UK, and its ability to hold Government to account, irrespective of the challenges. The sample under analysis has shown that a certain level of accountability was achieved within the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show*, encompassing a good number of *Accountability Frames*: however, this number was exceeded by the presence of further frames which largely followed Government narratives or supported official strategies. However, tones across the sample were largely neutral or evaluative, which indicates a degree of balance, neutrality, and objectivity within coverage. The analysis also showed that journalists from the BBC, and indeed across the country, faced many challenges in covering this unique story, with the majority of these stemming from issues such as access to official sources, adherence to Government narratives and, inevitably, health and safety issues.

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