



Laura Dodsworth

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A week of life under the Ministry of Fear

This time, we locked ourselves down.



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Last Sunday evening, Boris Johnson interrupted the nation's TV viewing with an announcement about the new Covid-19 variant. "Fighting Omicron is the most important thing we can do," he said. It's early days, and in the absence of clinical data or indeed any rise in hospitalisations and deaths, it remains to be seen if this is true.

We were left in no doubt about how to fight - get boosted. In retrospect, the triadic structure of previous press briefings ("Hands, Face, Space" and "Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives") was the ultimate in sophistication compared to the frequent repetition of "boosted" (eight times), "booster" (eight times) and "vaccination" (four times) in one short speech.

This past week exemplifies nearly two years of life under the “Ministry of Fear”, as Sir Desmond Swayne MP termed it. Amid a Tory rebellion, he delivered a tirade in the House of Commons on the day that MPs voted on Covid Passes, the expansion of mask mandates and compulsory jabs for NHS workers. He accused the UK government of “twisting the fear lever” and unleashing “the dogs of war”.



Desmond Swayne
@DesmondSwayne

Ministry of fear

0:00 / 2:07

December 14th 2021

2,216 Retweets **7,588** Likes

He is not alone. Andrew Bridgen MP said that, in his opinion, “the most dangerous epidemic sweeping the world and sweeping our country is an epidemic of fear”. I agree. Pandemics come and eventually go, but our basic psychology is here to stay. The UK government has relied upon the use of fear, nudges, behavioural science techniques and propaganda to subliminally encourage people to comply with the regulations, as I set out in my book *A State of Fear: how the UK government weaponised fear in the Covid-19 pandemic*.

These techniques work so well that, this time, we have essentially locked ourselves down. Without so much as a new law, statutory instrument, or prime ministerial request, Nativity plays, office Christmas parties and pub bookings are cancelled. Stocks of lateral flow test ran dry. People queued for eight hours for their boosters. The media enthusiastically obliged with a new “tidal wave” of articles and programmes prophesying catastrophic cases and demonising the “selfish” unjabbed. Journalists asked for more restrictions, sooner.

I spoke to Swayne who told me he believes the fear is driven very much by the doom-mongering scientists on SAGE and Independent SAGE whose worst case scenarios necessitate action, and then “the media hams it up”.

One of the government’s early concerns was that some people actually understood that the risk from Covid-19 to their demographic is low, hence fear was leveraged to ensure everyone feel at risk so that they would follow the rules. Similarly, last Sunday, Johnson acknowledged that “some people” would believe Omicron to be less severe than previous variants - and at this point there is little clinical data to prove Omicron will be more serious or able to evade our natural immunity and vaccine-derived antibodies - but he warned “scientists cannot say that Omicron is less severe”. Essentially we were told to ignore the lack of scientific evidence and instead embrace fear and follow instructions.

So, how to convince us of a threat, before the threat has actually manifested? By using the same methods they have honed throughout the pandemic, including the use of big scary numbers, advertising, subtle messaging, alarmist language and the most punitive fines since the Dark Ages.

I dedicated a chapter of my book to the metrics of fear - daily death tolls, the reproduction number, cases and worst case modelling. This week’s numbers have crumbled like icing sugar.

Sajid Javid estimated that there were 200,000 infections, which appears to have been a back of the envelope calculation, based upon assumptions and extrapolations. Dominic Raab said there were 250 people in hospital with Omicron, when there were 10. Dr Jenny Harries, head of the UKHSA, warned the Omicron variant is “probably the most significant threat” of the pandemic and we should expect a “staggering” growth rate, but her dire warning was juxtaposed with acknowledging it’s too early a stage to be clear about the clinical severity.

These speed-generated pessimistic numbers and contradictions give the rational mind whiplash and leave you vulnerable to fear. As Swayne put it, “It’s designed to make your flesh creep. Even if you then ameliorate it, the first scary bit is out there.”

To lay the groundwork, masks were re-introduced as a “softening up exercise for Plan B,” according to a government advisor who sits on a government Covid taskforce. He anonymously confided that, “Masks are a behavioural psychology policy. We need to stop pretending that it’s about public health. Nudge is a big thing in government.” Masks turn us into walking billboards advertising danger.

I have already argued that the whole point of the Winter Plan was Plan B and Covid Passes. The government has not provided convincing scientific evidence for vaccine passports, but they are widely understood to be a 'tool' to drive take-up. Now, fines of up to £10,000 can be imposed for falsifying Covid Passports - a life-destroying amount designed to strike fear into your heart.

The advisor shared internal documents with me that show Covid Passes were ready to go in early November. Worryingly, they also show that the government is also working with analysts to see whether "mandatory vaccination would hit the right target or not".

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The government has launched new advertising campaigns. One TV advertisement, intended to encourage ventilation has frightened children. One father wrote to tell he had complained to his MP and the Advertising Standards Authority because the "sinister black mist" snaking out of people's mouths terrified his four and six year olds in the ad break of a Christmas film. His daughter had nightmares and was still crying about "germs" the next day. He is angry about the "intentionally fear-inducing piece of Gov media forced in their face".

Martin Kemp played the part of Santa Claus preparing for Christmas by getting his booster jab in a government advertisement. Santa has a long history of being enlisted for propaganda purposes from Soviet space missions to selling World War Two US government bonds. Even Tesco got in on the act this year in their festive ad, making Santa brandish a Covid Pass QR code to enter the country. However, this badly misjudged public mood and #BoycottTesco trended on Twitter.



Martin Kemp plays Santa in an NHS advertisement

Press and social media ads have returned to the red and yellow ‘danger’ style chevrons, although they feature smiling younger people presumably boosted against Omicron. The “O” in boosted is golden and enlarged, presumably to echo “O-micron” and also evoke the circle of protection Johnson wants the booster to deliver. The people are surrounded with a warming Ready Brek-style glow.

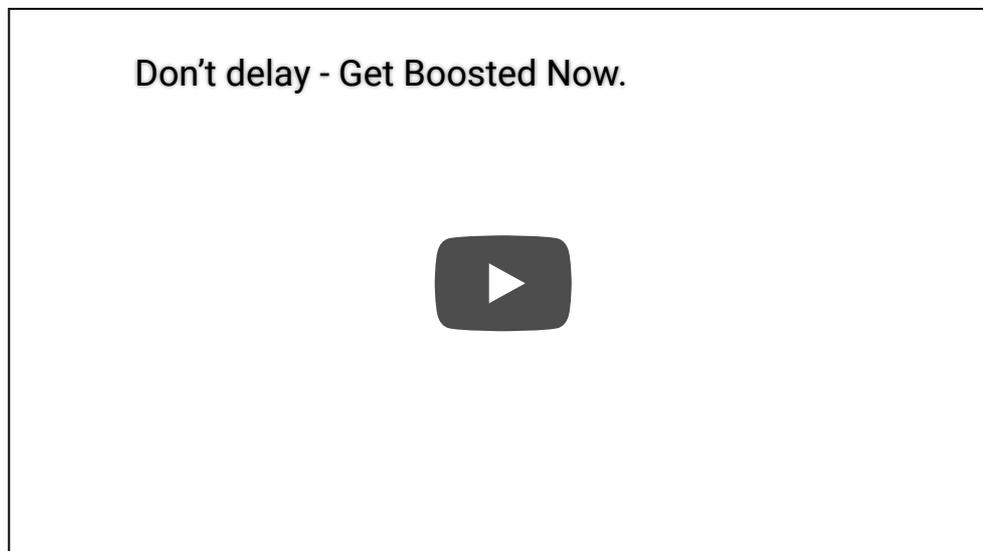
I warned in The Telegraph in October that I would not be surprised to see ministers on television, urging us to follow restrictions in order or to “save Christmas”, once again. I’ll be on Santa’s ‘Nice List’ for getting that right.

Some polls are used as both a nudge and a spoiler of public policy. When you see a result such as 76% of Britons want to see the return of compulsory face masks in shops and on public transport (Yougov) you are meant to identify with the group and imagine yourself in the majority - “ah yes, that is what I think too!” The poll was also a signal to seed the idea of the ensuing policy change. This mutually influential relationship between polls and policy is especially clear in the case of questions such as “If someone has had two doses of a Covid-19 vaccine, but it has been over six months since their second dose, would you consider that person to be ‘fully vaccinated?’” (also Yougov) which should have nothing to do with public opinion.

Polls don’t always go the ‘right way’ though. Good Morning Britain ran a Twitter poll which asked “With Omicrom cases doubling every two days, is it time to make vaccines mandatory?” After 89% of 44,533 respondents voted no, the Twitter poll was pulled. Presumably it was not the answer that GMB wanted and, curtain pulled back, they knew that we knew it.

There is less fear in the air this time despite the “tidal wave” of fear-mongering. Redfield and Wilton Strategies latest research into public attitudes found that 81% of people plan to have a normal Christmas and New Year and feelings of safety in public have only marginally declined. Once you have seen the nudges you cannot un-see them, and fear cannot be sustained indefinitely.

When the government resorts to fear and hyperbole to gain compliance, it shows what they think of us. We are emotionally kettled rather than treated as responsible individuals with agency. As a Nudge Unit report said, we have a “powerful tendency to conform” and the government relentlessly exploits this human feature. I suspect that this time, the government is keen to address concerns that it has not acted swiftly enough in the past, and believes the strong warnings are in our best interests. Perhaps Ministers are themselves in thrall to the anxiety-inducing steep-lined graphs.



10 Downing Street released a nugget sized version of Johnson's Omicron announcement on Youtube, with a tight crop and dramatic music. The selected few dramatic sentences could have been borrowed from a disaster genre 'B' movie. I'm not sure if Youtube comments are more or less valid than Yougov, but they are certainly revealingly scathing about “fear inducing language”, “Orwellian passports” and NHS queues.

- 

Crimley 2 days ago
 My auntie's oncologist has cancelled appointments because he's been called to help give booster jabs that barely work instead. I can't believe this government would give up everything from civil liberties to health care to our way of live just because of covid. Frightening times.

👍 9 🗨️ REPLY
- 

scattyfi 2 days ago
 Stop with the fear inducing language Boris! Do you realise how much anxiety you're causing? You might as well go sit with Keir because you seem to have forgotten what Conservative values are. It's obvious this isn't about health or natural immunity wouldn't feel like dirty words. You've destroyed the faith we had in you & you're destroying what was a huge win for your party. Big mistake Boris. I knew you wouldn't be perfect but I just expected more.

👍 7 🗨️ REPLY

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Peter Istrate 2 days ago
 Drop the Orwellian passports. Your single most biggest failure as a politician. UK's as well.

👍 4 🗨️ REPLY
- 

Citizen Warwick 2 days ago

Queue epic background music

👍 7 🗨️ REPLY
- 

John Donwood 2 days ago
 Since when did a free people suddenly have to be given their freedoms back? I thought freedom was free.

👍 4 🗨️ REPLY

I think there is a sense that people will do quite a lot to have a normal Christmas and get life back to normal, but fear of Covid and trust in the messaging are running out, just like those lateral flow tests.

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Robert Malcolm Kay 1 hr ago
 We normally have a pretty quiet family Christmas anyway: its New Year up here in Scotland where we let it rip!

❤️ Reply



Jase the ace 14 hr ago Liked by Laura Dodsworth

Absolutely spot on, make something a rumour to soften us up then slip

To the press to bolster the fear and condition us to accepting what is inevitable, all fear mongering and it's truly enlightening when u see past it.

♡ 1 Reply

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