

How the BBC Lost Its Way on COVID

I've seen from the inside how the corporation has failed in its reporting on the pandemic

By [Charlie Walsham](#)

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I have been a BBC journalist for many years, and in that time I have been committed to impartiality and the corporation's Reithian values to inform and educate. My despair about the BBC's one-sided coverage of the pandemic though has been steadily growing for some time. And in early December, as I listened to a BBC radio broadcast, I felt the corporation reach a new low.

During a morning phone-in show on 5Live the topic of discussion was Covid jabs and whether they should be mandated, or if punitive action should be taken against those who refuse them, such as imposing lockdowns on the unvaccinated. Setting aside the fact that these authoritarian measures are now considered a matter for breezy debate, I at least expected a balanced discussion.

This was wishful thinking on my part, as 'Michael from Birmingham' – a caller – was about to find out. Michael told the host he hadn't been vaccinated because he didn't trust 'the data' and cited historic incidents of documented corporate malfeasance by pharmaceutical giants to explain why he was concerned. Now you may disagree with Michael, or think him completely deluded, but he was still a person who had genuine fears about the vaccine and its safety. Yet instead of holding a reasoned debate with his concerned caller, the host immediately lost his temper, talked over Michael, implied he was a flat-earthier and then muted him entirely.

It was an interaction that goes to the very heart of the dismal failure of BBC News. I have been working at BBC News throughout the Covid era and have witnessed how the insatiable demands of the 24-hour news cycle have exacerbated a serious and protracted crisis. I have also seen how any attempt at balance has been abandoned in favour of supporting and promoting Covid restrictions.

It didn't have to be this way. Initially, the BBC covered the pandemic in a considered and measured manner, pointing out in news summaries in early 2020 that the majority of those who succumbed to the illness had 'underlying health problems' and the vast majority of people who were infected would live to tell the tale. There was a time when even the joyless Chris Whitty used to emphasise this fact at news conferences.

But that context was quickly jettisoned as complacency turned to panic within government and newsrooms everywhere were swept up in a major story. The BBC's public service brief meant reporting on Covid had an extra dimension: we had to do this 'right'; lives depended on it; we must be responsible and 'follow the science'; and we must debunk misinformation. These well-meaning intentions were to have unintended consequences.

The government pursued its lockdown strategy with a campaign specifically designed to frighten the public. BBC employees were not immune to this approach; neither were their managers, who were soon bombarding staff with email missives about Covid. Far-reaching measures were promised to keep BBC employees 'safe' from the invisible killer in our midst. Thousands of staff members were allowed to work from home. Those of us in 'broadcast critical' roles remained at our desks, at least two metres apart from our departmental colleagues, tapping nervously away at our sanitised keyboards in near-deserted buildings.

The atmosphere in these BBC offices in the early days of the pandemic became comically oppressive. Absurd in-house 'safety measures' were introduced, including baffling one-way arrow stickers on floors which routinely pointed the wrong way, making navigating staircases the stuff of an Oscar Reutersvärd fever dream. Ludicrous lift capacity limits were also imposed: only one person at a time would be allowed to travel in an elevator capable of holding a small crowd - but only up, not down. Then, in a move that could have come straight from the sitcom *WIA*, 'proximity monitoring devices' were issued to staff to enforce social distancing. These re-purposed pagers issued a quacking noise whenever one colleague came 'dangerously' close to another.

It was perhaps inevitable that this risk-averse, anxiety-inducing environment would have an effect on the editorial stance of the BBC. Before long, colleagues I respected, and who held sway over running orders, succumbed to the belief that lockdowns, social distancing and face coverings - the whole gamut of coronavirus measures - were the only viable route out of the crisis. Alternative strategies, even those backed by eminent scientists and medics, were dismissed as dangerous or the work of cranks without any effort being made to properly examine their ideas.

In a further deterioration of journalistic standards, the impact of Covid-19 and measures imposed to 'stop the spread' started to be routinely conflated in news bulletins. All the horrors of lockdown - the enforced isolation of older people; funerals without mourners; the dying being denied a relative's hand to hold in their final hours - were blamed directly on the coronavirus, rather than the rules, and characterised as tragic but unavoidable consequences of an essential national sacrifice.

Then there were the daily death figures, reported as 'within 28 days of a positive test' but with little additional context. When daily deaths began to fall, positive test results would be reported instead.

Licence fee payers might have expected the BBC's well-remunerated senior correspondents to step up to the plate and interrogate the long-term impacts of the lockdown strategy.

Covid restrictions may have saved the lives of mainly older people in the short term but what of their impact on the lives and livelihoods of younger generations in the longer run? Anyone who held such hopes was to be seriously disappointed. Political correspondents instead lined up to pile pressure on ministers to take ever more draconian steps to tackle the coronavirus. 'Why haven't you closed down schools, Minister? Why haven't you imposed a mask mandate? Will you order another lockdown? When? Why not sooner?'

And then there was the Health Cluster, a BBC News department which was notorious before the pandemic as being the place where stories go to die. It found itself at the centre of a maelstrom: a medical and moral morass it made no attempt whatsoever to untangle. Health reporters did not scrutinise No. 10's medical advisers but instead amplified them, becoming, in effect, the government's Covid propaganda wing.

The Health Cluster's shortcomings didn't end there. Blinded by liberal sensibilities and hamstrung by an unhealthy departmental culture, its reporters went out their way to characterise the suggestion that Covid-19 might have leaked from a Chinese lab as a conspiracy theory promoted by Donald Trump. On a BBC News webpage (which remains online), one BBC health hack said the World Health Organisation had 'closed the lid' on the lab leak theory after visiting Wuhan in February.

As 'Freedom Day' beckoned in July this year, I began to feel less downbeat about the BBC. Sure, BBC News outlets continued to invite an army of Covid zealots onto the airwaves, all of whom seemed to call for restrictions to continue indefinitely. But I thought the end of the pandemic might be in sight. Most of my BBC colleagues are good, well-meaning people. Perhaps senior managers and editors were guilty only of a form of noble cause corruption, trying their best during an unprecedented health crisis to help keep the public safe. Maybe the BBC had done nothing fundamentally wrong and I was the one who was overreacting.

But this winter has seen a rise in infections again, and inevitably there have been renewed calls for the country to lock down to protect our health service. No one knows how bad the Omicron wave will be and it might just be that only a lockdown can prevent the NHS being overwhelmed this winter. But the national broadcaster should surely feature both sides of the debate and not just relentlessly make the case for further restrictions while ignoring the toll they have on our society.

The BBC insists that it has 'covered the pandemic with great care and in detail' but there are signs that the corporation is once again failing in this critical function. The BBC News website now almost constantly features the 'Live' number of coronavirus cases. 'Two vaccine doses don't stop you catching Omicron' read a headline last week, as if this was somehow remarkable - totally ignoring the fact that double-jabbed BBC staff had been succumbing to the coronavirus for months, long before Omicron reared its head.

I have come to the depressing conclusion that this pattern will keep on repeating every year and every time we face a new Covid variant.

There is a strong case to be made now that the vaccines have done their job and should (as long as the Omicron variant does not significantly evade them) protect the vast majority of people from serious illness, meaning we should no longer be forced to endure any new restrictions.

Most people in the country have obediently had the jabs when offered, including me.

Personally speaking, I would rather face Covid than face compulsory restrictions every year – or live in a two-tier society where those who get jabbed enjoy freedoms denied to the unvaccinated. We're not there yet but we seem to be getting closer by the day.

As the public service broadcaster in a democratic country the BBC should understand and feature this debate – and not act as a government campaigner. Instead, with its reporting of the pandemic, it has made a truly awful 'new normal' much more likely.

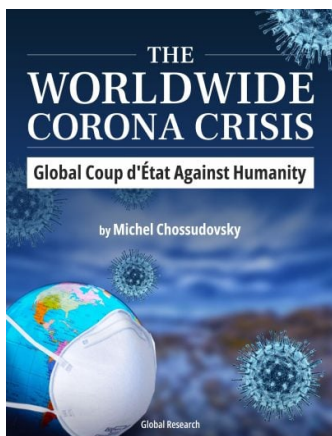
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Charlie Walsham is the pseudonym of a BBC News employee who has worked at the Corporation for several years. No fee has been paid for this article.

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