



Can politicians ever really control the media agenda?



Johnson will struggle to move on from the furore around Cummings until public anger subsides (10 Downing street/EPA)

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Boris Johnson is trying to change the subject. When he decided to take the daily coronavirus briefing himself on Sunday to deal with the furore over his chief adviser's trip to Durham during the lockdown, he followed it by announcing that the government was pressing ahead with limited reopening of primary schools on 1 June.

The schools failed to make it on to the front pages of Monday's newspapers. The prime minister then sent Dominic Cummings himself out to provide a fuller, first-person account of himself. Johnson followed that up by taking the daily briefing again, this time deflecting questions about Dominic's Cummings and goings by referring to the earlier "substantial chunk of autobiography", and then announcing that open-air markets would be opening on 1 June and, if possible, non-essential shops on 15 June.

One or two newspapers mentioned the further easing of the lockdown on their front pages, but the media remained overwhelmingly focused on the story of the Cummings family sojourn in "an isolated cottage on my father's farm".

Yesterday, Matt Hancock, the health secretary, announced government support for trials of a possible treatment for Covid-19 patients, remdesivir, but the questions at the daily briefing were almost all about Cummings.

What was significant was that one of the questions from the public was to ask whether penalty fines imposed on parents travelling to seek childcare would be refunded.



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It is the strength of feeling among the public that is the main reason the government is finding it hard to move on. Despite Cummings's attempt to suggest that people were angry because of "reports in the media that are not true", this outcry has not been orchestrated by journalists.

After Cummings himself set out the case for his defence, unmediated, for an hour, 71 per cent of the public told YouGov they thought he had broken lockdown rules. The government has the unique chance in this crisis to speak directly to the people, so many of whom are furloughed and locked down at home. Savanta ComRes, another polling company, reports that 60 per cent of the population has been watching the daily news conferences, either live or afterwards.

Of course, there is usually a two-way feedback between public opinion and the media. But at the moment, the traffic is all going one way. Journalists are reflecting public opinion, rather than stoking it. Indeed, so are Conservative MPs, many of whom say they have never seen a deluge of emails from constituents like it.

In normal times, the government has some control over the timing of important announcements that it can use to try to influence coverage – although any official who has been responsible for "the grid" will recount how such attempts to dictate to the media are almost always overwhelmed in practice by the need to "fight fires" as unpredictable crises erupt.

These are not normal times. Boris Johnson's desire to divert the media cycle is reminiscent of Tony Blair's attempt to "move on" from criticism of the Iraq war after one inquiry after another came up with findings that flew in the face of public opinion. Blair succeeded, eventually, and even went on to win a third election, but he sustained lasting damage once public opinion had made up its mind.

Johnson can try to change the subject of media coverage, but he won't succeed until public opinion moves on.