Public affairs in a time of coronavirus

In our previous editorial for JPA 20:2, we noted the growing concerns over the global impact of the coronavirus pandemic not only in terms of the rapidly growing number of cases and associated deaths, particularly among older segments of the population, but also increasingly the potentially catastrophic effect of the pandemic on national, regional and the global business economy. Indeed, at the time of writing, WHO data suggest there are nearly 13 million cases of covid19 worldwide and approximately 575,000 deaths, with the USA heading the infamous league table with some 3.2 million cases and over 130,000 deaths. Brazil has the second-highest number of cases at 1.8 million with 72,000 deaths, and the UK lies in the third place with just over 291,000 cases and almost 45,000 deaths. Moreover, the most recent update from WHO indicates that worldwide infection rates are still continuing to rise significantly.

While governments around the world have committed resources on an unprecedented scale to the effort to combat the coronavirus and treat those infected; for most governments, it is now the spectre of potentially one of the worst economic recessions since the Seventeenth Century that has become the focus of attention. In the face of dire economic forecasts and pressure from representative bodies from many industry sectors as well as individual corporate entities, the UK government (mirrored by similar measures in the USA and other countries) has introduced a wide range of measures to address the sharp economic decline and prop-up failing sectors of business, ranging from a hugely expensive furlough scheme, and loan guarantee scheme to support large swathes of businesses at risk of permanent closure, to the announcements of large infrastructure projects to try to help kick-start economic growth. Of course, to fund such measures the UK’s government borrowing to over £650 billion with the UKs’ Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) forecasting that public debt could reach some £2.63 trillion by 2024.

From a public affairs perspective, there have been some fascinating insights into how governments around the world have sought to address the challenge of balancing on the one hand concerns over the health impact of Coronavirus and on the other hand the rapidly worsening economic climate caused by a coronavirus lockdown. There has been a perceptible shift of emphasis in the UK away from purely health-related messaging—“stay home—save the NHS” to the prevailing more nuanced call to essentially “stay alert” and maintain social distancing. More recently, the messaging has changed further with Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, encouraging employees to go back to work if they can do so safely. Indeed, as lockdown measures have eased in the UK, the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer have both encouraged people to return to spending on the high street as well in pubs and restaurants, albeit with the caveat of maintaining the necessary social distancing rules to avoid the threat of a second wave of coronavirus.

The UK Conservative government has come under increasing pressure from industry groups, opposition parties and business employer representative groups throughout this challenging period of coronavirus over the claimed ambiguity of their messaging strategy, particularly as they have attempted to move away from the initial lockdown period. Critics have pointed to the inconsistencies in some of the messaging, and a failure to articulate a clear overall strategy for dealing with coronavirus. But in this failing, the UK government arguable are not alone. Indeed, a study of how governments around the world have sought to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, and in particular, how each have handled the communication with key stakeholder groups is likely to reveal some fascinating lessons, not the least in terms of political leadership styles and the messaging stances adopted. Here some very relevant questions are likely to emerge. Why, for example, have female political leaders been more successful in communicating messages and managing governmental systems during coronavirus? Equally, how long will the pandemic continue and what might be its longer term impact on policy-making and governmental processes?

There appears to be little doubt that the coronavirus pandemic will have major implications for public affairs professionals around the world not the least in terms of the lessons learned so far about how best to communicate health, scientific and wellbeing messages in the long term. Moreover, the public affairs profession itself has come under similar financial pressures to those that many other industry and service sectors have experienced during the pandemic, with many professionals being put on furlough schemes, but there also seem to have been significant job losses across the sector, although much of the evidence to date is largely anecdotal.

Thus many lessons and questions will undoubtedly arise when a full “post-mortem” is conducted into how the world responded to coronavirus both collectively as well as on an individual nation basis. The absence of any globally coordinated and unified approach to tackling the coronavirus is perhaps an indictment of the failure of our political systems to unite and overcome their differences even in the face of a world pandemic as serious as coronavirus. Indeed, it is perhaps ironic that it is 200 years since the birth of Florence Nightingale (“the lady with the lamp”), the great campaigner for universal access to quality health care, champion of modern nursing and medical science allied to good statistical evidence, who would have undoubtedly championed a call for coordinated world leadership...
to fight this pandemic. Of course, one particularly sensitive question that no government is likely to feel comfortable answering is how far has scientific advice been overruled by government concerns over the potentially devastating effect of corona virus on the economy not only in the short term but potentially for generations to come.

One consequence of the almost universal lockdown and social distancing regime imposed to combat the spread of coronavirus has been a huge increase in the move toward a "virtual world" in all aspects of peoples' lives, business and politics. A feature of this change has been a rapid growth in the use of virtual platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype to facilitate communication on a one-to-one or group basis in a variety of private, public and business settings. For example, many universities have announced that while the pandemic persists, they will deliver all their teaching on a remote basis using virtual platforms such as Teams. The marked changes that this "virtualisation" has brought in many peoples' lives, working practices and even to the processes of governance have raised many new questions, notably about how we maintain the security and accountability of data in a virtual world? Moreover, with government, policymaking also currently taking place at least in part in this virtual environment, questions surround how do we maintain transparency and accountability in legislative, participatory and regulatory systems? Some commentators have also questioned whether the increased reliance on virtual communication is resulting in an increasingly coercive world? Indeed, has 1984 arrived in a modified form for the 21st Century? The public affairs world will have to confront these and other profound questions as we struggle to emerge from the grip of the coronavirus pandemic. Going forward we very much welcome submissions of papers to JPA focused on these the challenges and other profound questions affecting our understanding of contemporary public affairs. We will be publishing a first selection of papers from around the world on coronavirus in the next issue.

This issue of JPA includes an article celebrating the 20 years of the Journal of Public Affairs by Conor McGrath and Craig Fleisher which examines how the public affairs industry and discipline have matured and developed over the past two decades. The article explores the key trends and direction of travel for the public affairs and considers the cultural and societal differences in the subject. This issue also continues the journal's policy of maintaining a balance of good quality academic and practitioner articles. It is particularly notable this issue continues the trend of attracting and articles from authors from every major continent in the world, including a significant number dealing with real issues and policymaking in Africa and Asia.

Finally, as editors, we would like to encourage the future submission of papers that will help us explore how coronas virus has impacted on public affairs and policymaking around the world. Here, for example, we would welcome proposals for a special issue of papers focused on how the pandemic has affected contemporary public affairs thinking and practice.

Danny Moss1
Phil Harris2

1Business School, University of Chester, Chester, UK
2Business Research Institute, University of Chester, Chester, UK

Correspondence
Danny Moss, Business School, University of Chester, Westminster Building, Parkgate Rd, Chester, CH 1 4BJ UK.
Email: d.moss@chester.ac.uk