

# Modern communications skills including how to address “fake news”

*Patrick Burns, former BBC West Midlands Politics Editor*

# PART ONE: MODERN COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- ▶ "I would have written a shorter letter if I'd had more time".

Henry David Thoreau, Philosopher. 1817-62

- ▶ "Everything should be made as simple as possible. But no simpler."

Albert Einstein, Theoretical physicist. 1879-1955

- ▶ "This pudding has no theme. Take it away."

Winston Churchill, Prime Minister. 1874-1965

# Modern communications skills including how to address “fake news”

*Patrick Burns, former BBC West Midlands Politics Editor*

A bad way to  
"bury bad news"!

#### We're improving your supply of wonderful water...

- We're going to be doing some vital improvement work in your area
- We plan to start the water main renewals from 15 March 2021 and take 12 weeks to complete.

#### Why we're doing this work

We're committed to making sure our customers receive a continuous supply of water now and in the future. So, we're constantly checking the condition of our network and recognise that we may need to upgrade some of the water pipes in your area.

#### Important things to know

We plan to start the water main renewals in Moor Green Lane from 15 March 2021. The work will be done in two phases, **Phase 1** - we will start close to the junction of Bad's Lane, working along Moor Green Lane towards the junction with Shutlock Lane. **Phase 2** - will be from the junction of Shutlock Lane, working along Moor Green Lane towards its junction with Yew Tree Road. To allow us to carry out this work quickly and safely, we will have road closures in place. This is to ensure your safety and the safety of our workforce. We will always keep access to properties or businesses within the closure, including access for emergency services, but access will be from one side or the other of the working area. There will be no through road access and there will be a signposted diversion route in place, you may wish to allow extra time for your journey. Pedestrian access will be maintained, at all times. The location of the work and durations can be found on the rear diagram.

#### Will my water supply be interrupted?

If we plan to interrupt your water supply during these works, we will let you know in advance.

#### Do you own a retail business?

If you own and operate a business which benefits from customers visiting to purchase goods or services from you and our works are affecting your custom, then please contact our Business Loss team at [businessloss@severntrent.co.uk](mailto:businessloss@severntrent.co.uk) for advice.

#### Keeping you informed every step of the way

There are lots of ways for you to keep up to date with our work in your area:



[www.stw.works](http://www.stw.works)



07716 227712 – Sarah Miles, Arney Customer Service Officer  
0800 521 660 – Arney 24hr Customer Service Centre

Please quote the project reference on the top of this letter. If your call is about your water supply or sewerage service, you can call our Customer Operations Service Centre on 0800 783 4444.

# Modern communications skills including how to address “fake news”

*Patrick Burns, former BBC West Midlands Politics Editor*

# THE RULE OF THREE

1. Communicate the message
  2. How, where, what and why?
  3. Limit the damage. Accentuate the positive.
- ▶ “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”

Winston Churchill, May 1940.

# Modern communications skills including how to address “fake news”

*Patrick Burns, former BBC West Midlands Politics Editor*

# Oxford muddled a good vaccine with bad PR

A poorly explained launch overshadowed a game-changing British scientific achievement

Tom Whipple



@WHIPPLETOM

Statistics can be depressing. Back in the spring, the government asked vaccine experts what they thought the chances of success were. How likely was it that any vaccine in clinical trials would protect us against Covid-19? Their answer? 15 per cent.

Here's another statistic that was, at the time, moderately depressing. As recently as November 2, the Tony Blair Institute was preparing us for the possibility that a vaccine may only stop 50 per cent of infections, if that. Right until the middle of last month, more pessimistic scientists were warning that we might never get a vaccine.

Now, a matter of weeks later, the Oxford-Astrazeneca vaccine has greatly exceeded all their expectations — in speed alone it's one of the greatest scientific achievements of the century. The response? It's being treated like it's the recipient of a mediocre 2:2, compared with the starred firsts of Pfizer and Moderna.

This is, once again, because of statistics — or, in this case, because of the way Oxford communicated them and how we understood them. Somehow — and it's difficult not to feel a twinge of wounded national

pride — Britain's vaccine, which is set to become the workhorse of Covid immunisation around the world, looks a little less shiny. And it needn't have been this way: it's still pretty shiny.

We have, in this pandemic, got used to statistics and sometimes quite complicated ones at that. There has been R, herd immunity and exponentials. By contrast, the latest statistic in which armchair virologists gained expertise seemed relatively simple. Pfizer's vaccine was 95 per cent effective, Moderna's was 94. This was, pleasingly, as easy to understand as an exam grade.

Then along came the Oxford vaccine and, with all the clarity of an All Souls exam, it was 62 per cent, 70 per cent and 90 per cent. How could we compare it with the others? It got more confusing. The overall 70 per cent efficacy rate was

## Antivaxers used the confusion to sow even more confusion

impossible because it was an average of two mutually exclusive clinical trials. Journalists asked repeatedly about the data in the group who got 90 per cent protection. How many cases led to that figure? We weren't told. Statisticians were left to reverse-engineer the results to find out.

Clarity came only slowly. It emerged that this apparently winning group, which started with a half dose followed by a boost with a full one, had come about by chance, or, depending on your interpretation

by "error." Later still, it emerged that the group didn't include old people.

So what are we to make of it? Privately, many scientists were bemused; others were incandescent. Why not lay out all the data at once? Why not quote the 62 per cent figure and then flag the interesting 90 per cent result as just that — an interesting result? The vaccine would still be a triumph at 62 per cent efficacy.

In a pandemic, clarity matters. Antivaxers used the confusion to sow more confusion about a vaccine that, let us not forget, is safe and appears to stop all serious illness from Covid. And it's not just the antivaxers this matters to. The US regulator, the Food and Drug Administration, looks likely to want more data amid signs of what might, diplomatically, be called "tensions" between it and Astrazeneca.

Here, though, is the counter argument. Yes, Astrazeneca could undoubtedly have communicated better, but its vaccine data sounds complex because it is complex.

The problem is that no one really expected these results. Back in May, a batch of the vaccine was produced that appeared to be too strong. It wasn't, but to be safe and to keep the human trials going, it was given at half dose. The regulators were well aware of this, and they agreed with Oxford they would report all the data together in a single figure — the presumption being there wouldn't be much difference between the two approaches. But, it seems pretty clear, there was.

As obliged, Oxford published the combined data — the unobtainable 70 per cent figure. They also

published a breakdown of how it was arrived at. And now here we are. As Adrian Hill, head of Oxford's Jenner vaccine institute, puts it, the findings are complex, but "we are happy with complexity". Even if others aren't. So what now? We await the regulators' verdicts, and we await more data.

The truth is, if these really are the exam results of the vaccines, then the way we have used them so far is like judging an entire degree on a half glimpse of the first mark from the first paper. Many other tests are still to come.

We don't know how long immunity lasts, how good the jabs are at stopping transmission, or whether some might even work better if we mixed and matched doses between different types. We don't actually know if these figures are correct on their own terms.

But we do know that this is a vaccine that works and is safe, and that we are still in a pandemic. In a normal year, the world makes 600 million doses of the flu vaccine. Next year it needs to make billions of a coronavirus vaccine, and it still won't be enough. This is not a buyer's market.

In 2022, when this vaccine has gone into a billion arms, it feels unlikely we are going to say, "Thanks for the vaccine, shame about the communication strategy." In our obsession to mark vaccines like test papers, we (and perhaps some scientists too) have forgotten that the real competition is not between drug companies but between humanity and a virus.

Tom Whipple is science editor

Aid ch...  
the po...  
for fre...  
Ian Bi...

A

Alliance p...  
nine out of...  
parts of th...  
out on suc...  
greed of r...  
nature of...

Never r...  
have only...  
speed bet...  
efforts of...  
with scien...  
world. As...  
its vaccin...  
by Oxfo...  
profit ba...

Sadly, i...  
includes...  
Internat...  
afflicting...  
mania f...  
need in...  
places i...  
but for...  
and far...

The...  
through...  
and pr...  
derails...  
policie...  
nabor...  
wake...  
Re...



# Modern communications skills including how to address “fake news”

*Patrick Burns, former BBC West Midlands Politics Editor*

# PART TWO: HOW TO ADDRESS FAKE NEWS

- ▶ "The AZ vaccine has a PR problem. Not so much a scientific problem."

Dr Carsten Watel, Leibniz Research Centre.

- ▶ "The side-effects of the suspension of the AZ vaccine include moderate to severe Covid-19, organ damage and death."

Natasha Loder, The Economist

- ▶ "We are not just battling Covid. We also face a pandemic of misinformation and mistrust. We must fight them both with equal determination."

Sir Simon Stevens, Chief Executive, NHS England

# Modern communications skills including how to address “fake news”

*Patrick Burns, former BBC West Midlands Politics Editor*



**Sheikh Nuru Mohammed**  
Imam, Al-Abbas Islamic Centre

**BBC NEWS**

BBC News at Ten, BBC One, 22/01/21

# Modern communications skills including how to address “fake news”

*Patrick Burns, former BBC West Midlands Politics Editor*



Dr Lisa McNally, Director of Public Health, Sandwell

# Modern communications skills including how to address “fake news”

*Patrick Burns, former BBC West Midlands Politics Editor*