SLIMING THE EXPERTS

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In the midst of a pandemic, it should go without saying (1) that we need experts in relevant scientific disciplines (epidemiology, virology etc) to be advising governments, and (2) that it would be disastrous if public trust in those experts collapsed.

Trust could collapse if the experts screw up badly enough. There's not much that we, as non-experts, can do about that. But trust could also collapse if the experts *don't* screw up. In fact, with a sufficiently dysfunctional public sphere, trust could collapse as a result of the experts doing their job well. That's what I want to focus on here.

CHANGING EVIDENCE, SHIFTING CONSENSUS

One problem is that the virus is new. We started off knowing very little about it, and now we're learning more each week. So if the experts are doing their jobs well, the expert consensus is going to shift from time to time. The reasons for the shifts will sometimes be hard to explain to the public, simply because cutting-edge science tends to be messy and complicated. But it will always be easy for journalists to run with some version of "those stupid scientists can't keep their story straight".

CONDITIONAL PREDICTIONS

Another problem is that government scientific advisers are often asked to make conditional predictions. What *would* happen if we did nothing? Or if we did X? Or if we did Y? Even if the advisors were magic oracles who got all these conditional predictions completely right, they'd still be vulnerable to being slimed. All the slimer has to do is ignore the distinction between conditional and unconditional predictions. For example, Imperial College is still getting flak for its 'prediction' of 500,000 Covid deaths in the UK. But that was their prediction for the what would happen *if no action was taken to mitigate the epidemic*. And of course action *was* taken.

MANAGING TAIL RISKS

A third type of problem arises when the evidence suggests that there is a small (but still significant) chance of a catastrophically bad outcome, and expert advisers draw attention to that fact. So, for example, imagine a scenario in which the experts judge that there is a 10% chance of a massive second wave of Covid cases this winter – say, five times bigger than the first wave. If the government trusts that judgement, then there are all sorts of costly things they should be doing now, just in case the massive second wave arrives. Now suppose once again (just for the sake of argument) that the experts are magic oracles whose judgement is absolutely spot-on. What is going to happen come winter? Most likely, no massive second wave: after all, the chance was only 10%. And yet, when the massive second wave doesn't arrive, there are going to be plenty of people blaming the experts for their stupid prediction – and for all the resources the government 'wasted' because they stupidly believed it.

So those are three ways in which expert advisers could find themselves getting unfairly slimed: changing their advice when the evidence changes; making correct conditional predictions that get misrepresented as incorrect unconditional predictions; and drawing attention to 'tail risks' which turn out – as expected! – not to materialise.

None of these 'sliming channels' is Covid-specific. However, they are all strongly Covid-enhanced. The evidence base in this crisis is changing unusually quickly, so evidence-driven shifts in expert consensus will occur more frequently than we are used to. Governments desperately trying to make policy on the hoof (Should we do X? Should we do Y?) need to be supplied with lots of conditional predictions. And of course, in a pandemic, there are always tail-risks worth worrying about. Moreover, the political stakes here are so high that there is a serious danger of governments taking advantage of some or all of these channels to slime their own experts. ('Don't blame us! Blame the scientific advisors!')

To conclude: if we see scientific advisors getting attacked in the media, or by government ministers, we need to think hard about whether the criticism is warranted. It will not always be easy to tell, but we should get into the habit of asking three questions.

1. Could this be a case in which experts are being blamed for responding to changing evidence?
2. Could this be a case in which the experts predicted *if P then Q* but are now being accused of predicting *Q*?
3. Could this be a case in which the experts said there was a small chance of disaster and are now being blamed for crying wolf?

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