

Fact v opinion:

Maitlis v BBC & Times ... Brazil v Belgium ... Trump v Twitter¹

Gordon Burt²

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(1) [Times Editorial: “A Newsnight presenter’s \[criticisms of Cummings\] breached the boundary between fact and opinion ... Many think \[Cummings\] should resign or be sacked. Many do not. Many have no strong view ...”](#)

but *The Times*’s three ‘many’s are 59%, 27% and 14% respectively.

(2) [“Brazil death toll soars”](#)

but Belgium’s deaths per capita is six times higher than Brazil’s.

(3) [Trump says mail-in ballots](#) will be ‘substantially fraudulent’

but Twitter says ‘get the facts’.

Introduction

When reading news items I often feel there is scope for a deepening of fact or a deepening of value. The following recent news items illustrate what I have in mind. First though, a brief comment on my notion of deepening.

Deepening fact and value

¹ This is Paper 77.5, part of ANA Commentary for May 2020.

<https://sites.google.com/site/gordonburmathsocsci/home/a-new-agenda>;

² Gordon Burt: gordonjurt@gmail.com. Website: <https://sites.google.com/site/gordonburmathsocsci/all>.

People have beliefs and attitudes. Discourse contains statements of fact and statements of value. It is a distinction associated with the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. For facts there is a certainty-of-belief continuum and for values there is a negative-positive continuum – and in certain contexts I have referred to a hate-love continuum. Discourse can be practised in a shallow or in a deep manner – indeed there is a continuum of depth. For depth of conceptualisation in relation to facts I have referred to the Trump-Penrose discourse continuum. And now for values I shall introduce the Gottman discourse continuum.

Fact v opinion ... Maitlis v BBC & Times

(1) [Times Editorial: “A Newsnight presenter’s \[criticisms of Cummings\] breached the boundary between fact and opinion ... Many think \[Cummings\] should resign or be sacked. Many do not. Many have no strong view ...”](#)

but *The Times*’s three ‘many’s are 59%, 27% and 14% respectively.

One issue here is whether a statement corresponds to fact; and another issue is whether it is appropriate in a given setting to express an opinion ...

In March Prime Minister Boris Johnson gave the British people a simple instruction: *Stay At Home*. Two months later throughout the last week of May one story dominated the news in the UK. It concerned Bernard Cummings, Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s chief adviser. Back in March he and his family had travelled from their London home 300 miles to stay in a house on their parent’s estate. There was outrage as it appeared that he had flouted the government’s own instructions to *Stay At Home*.

YouGov did a survey to find out what people thought and the results were reported in *The Times*. A few days later Evelyn Maitlis introduced BBC Newsnight, commenting on the story. Her comments were reprimanded by the BBC and led to further press coverage. At the weekend *The Observer* reported a survey by Opinium on the same issue.

[https://www.opinium.co.uk/public-opinion-on-coronavirus-28th-may/;](https://www.opinium.co.uk/public-opinion-on-coronavirus-28th-may/)

[https://www.opinium.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Opinium-Political-Report-28th-May-2020.pdf;](https://www.opinium.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Opinium-Political-Report-28th-May-2020.pdf)

One issue here is whether a statement corresponds to fact. Does a given statement about public opinion provide a truthful representation of public opinion? *The Times* seems to be suggesting that Maitlis implied that there was a consensus amongst the public whereas *The Times* argues that people had different opinions – perhaps even that there was an equivalence between three possible points of view.

YouGov asked “should Cummings resign?”. The responses were 59% said Yes; 27% said No; 14% did not know. Let us represent this as (59,27,14). A consensus around Yes would give (100,0,0). Equality between the three response would give (33,33,33).

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/survey-results/daily/2020/05/26/3fb8f/2>

The modulus distance between these three are: 82 between YouGov and consensus; 52 between YouGov and equality; and 134 between consensus and equality. The maximum distance from YouGov is 172. A claim that there is consensus has 48%

error, hence 52% accuracy. A claim that there is equality has 30% error, hence 70% accuracy. Thus the Times Editorial gives a more accurate account of public opinion than does Evelyn Maitlis.

Another issue is whether it is appropriate in a given setting to express an opinion. Different institutions in society have different rules. Some actors or roles are partisan and accepted as such; others are professedly non-partisan and valued for that. The non-partisanship of the BBC is valued and so any partisan comment from the BBC can be subject to challenge. This was the argument put by Libby Purves:

“It’s about time BBC reined in Emily Maitlis.”

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/it-s-about-time-bbc-reined-in-emily-maitlis-zcgs3blsm>

Twitter: local groups in global networks [to be developed]

“Donald Trump has 80.3 million followers and has tweeted over 52,000 times.”

“about 45% of the false narratives about Covid-19 on Twitter are sent by Bots.”
Kathleen Carley, Centre for Computational Analysis of Social and Organizational Systems,

Carnegie Mellon University

https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dygnwz/if-youre-talking-about-coronavirus-on-twitter-youre-probably-a-bot

“ ... you are - like me - cheerfully encased in your own filter bubble ...
... on the morning after the Brexit referendum, I went through the list of about 800 people whom I follow on Twitter, and I could not locate a single one who seemed to have been in favour of Brexit in the run-up to the vote.”

Naughton, John. “Twitter is finally taking on Trump’s lies, but it may be too little, too late ...”

The Observer, The New Review, May 31, 2020: 19.

Different models [to be developed]

Some models are constructed to fit the historical data ... another type of model is a generative model.

Spinney, Laura. “Q&A Karl Friston.”

The Observer, The New Review, May 31, 2020: 20-21.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/31/covid-19-expert-karl-friston-germany-may-have-more-immunological-dark-matter>

Karl Friston

<https://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/~karl/>.

Granger causality.

<https://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/~karl/Granger%20causality%20revisited.pdf>;

Modelling Covid 19

<https://wellcomeopenresearch.org/articles/5-89>

Country comparisons

Germany: are virus outcomes related to policy interventions?

“... it looks as if the low German fatality rates is not due to their superior testing capacity, but rather to the fact that the average German is less likely to get infected and die than the average Brit.”

Spinney, Laura. “Q&A Karl Friston.”

The Observer, The New Review, May 31, 2020: 20-21.

USA

(0) “The US passed the 100,000 tally, far higher than any other country ...”

(29 May: 10)

... **but** the USA is a big country. Perhaps the high death toll is because the USA has a large population. Deaths D equal population N times deaths per capita, D/N . Sure enough if we look at deaths per capita the USA is no longer at ‘the top’ – there are seven other countries which have higher per capita deaths.

$$D = N D/N$$

Mexico

“Days of the dead: nation braces for record deaths as populist president lifts lockdown.”

The Observer, May 31, 2020: 28.

A graph plots cumulative deaths from March to May for four countries. Brazil is three times Mexico which is two times Peru which is six or so times Chile, in other words variation by a factor of 36. But deaths per capita produce a somewhat different ordering - with less dramatic variation, a factor of only 3 between countries. Deaths per capita in Latin America: Peru 121; Brazil 118; Mexico 63; and Chile 44.

Brazil

(2) “Brazil death toll soars ...”³

(28 May: 10)

... **but** Brazil’s deaths per capita is only a sixth that of Belgium’s. Today (May 28) Brazil has 7,272 new cases giving a total so far of 399,632 cases (second highest in the world) and 25,035 deaths (fifth highest) ... with 125,000 deaths predicted by August. Currently the death toll is doubling every two weeks. But Brazil is a big

³ <https://www.washington.edu/news/uw-in-the-media/coronavirus/> ;
<http://www.healthdata.org/news-release/new-ihme-projection-sees-covid-19-deaths-brazil-more-125000>;
[The Times, May 28, 2020: 10-11.]

country: it has 210 million people. Its current deaths per capita is 118 (fifteenth highest) – one sixth that of Belgium. Its predicted August per capita deaths is less than 600 per million people – considerably less than the 808 deaths per million people currently in Belgium.

Note: Deaths per capita in Latin America: Peru 121; Brazil 118; Mexico 63; and Chile 44.

A key question is whether Brazil's numbers will continue to 'soar' – and if so by how much? It is helpful to place the current 'soar' in relation to the trajectory since the outbreak started. We look at the weekly Wednesday cases and deaths for Brazil in the period March 4 to May 27, 2020.

Figure B1 shows the number of cases for Brazil: cumulative, weekly and change in weekly, using the Wednesday numbers for March 4 to May 27, 2020. The cumulative number of cases shows a rapidly rising curve; the weekly number of cases shows a rising curve; and the change in the weekly number of cases also shows a curve rising on most occasions but falling on three occasions.

Figure B2 provides yet another portrayal of the numbers of weekly cases, namely the growth ratio – the ratio of one week over the previous week. There were three very large growth ratios in the early weeks but otherwise the growth ratios have fluctuated within quite narrow boundaries between 1.2 and 1.7. There is no obvious trend and so the curve is approximately exponential with a growth ratio of 1.5 say – hence a doubling every fortnight (over the most recent period of seven weeks).

Figure B3 shows the number of deaths for Brazil: cumulative, weekly and change in weekly, using the Wednesday numbers for March 4 to May 27, 2020. The cumulative number of deaths shows a rapidly rising curve; the weekly number of deaths shows a rising curve, sometimes rising more slowly and sometimes rising more rapidly; and the change in the weekly number of deaths shows a curve which has had three peaks.

Figure B4 provides yet another portrayal of the numbers of weekly deaths, namely the growth ratio – the ratio of one week over the previous week. There were two large growth ratios in the first two weeks; the next three weeks had growth ratios above 1.5; and three of the last four weeks had growth ratios below 1.5.

Figure B1 Brazil number of cases: cumulative, weekly, change in weekly; Wednesday numbers, March 4 to May 27, 2020.

Number of cases; cumulative, weekly, change in weekly

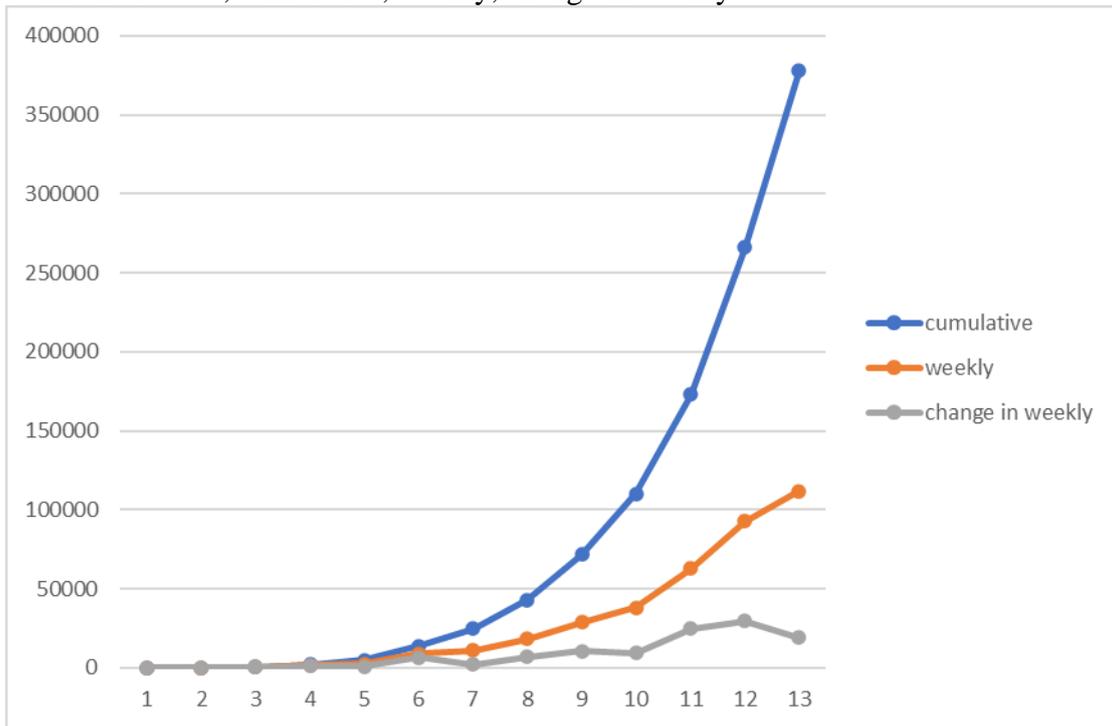


Figure B2 Brazil, growth ratio for weekly cases; Wednesday numbers, March 4 to May 27, 2020.

growth ratio for weekly cases

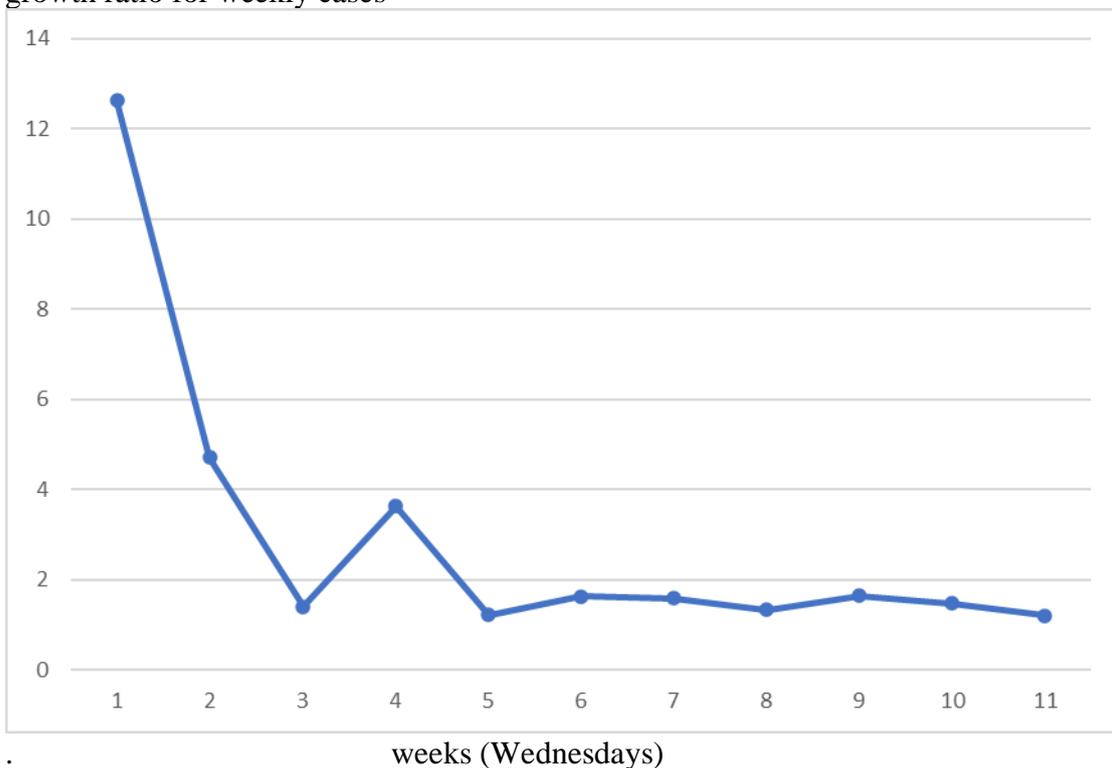


Figure B3 Brazil number of deaths: cumulative, weekly, change in weekly; Wednesday numbers, March 4 to May 27, 2020.

Number of deaths; cumulative, weekly, change in weekly

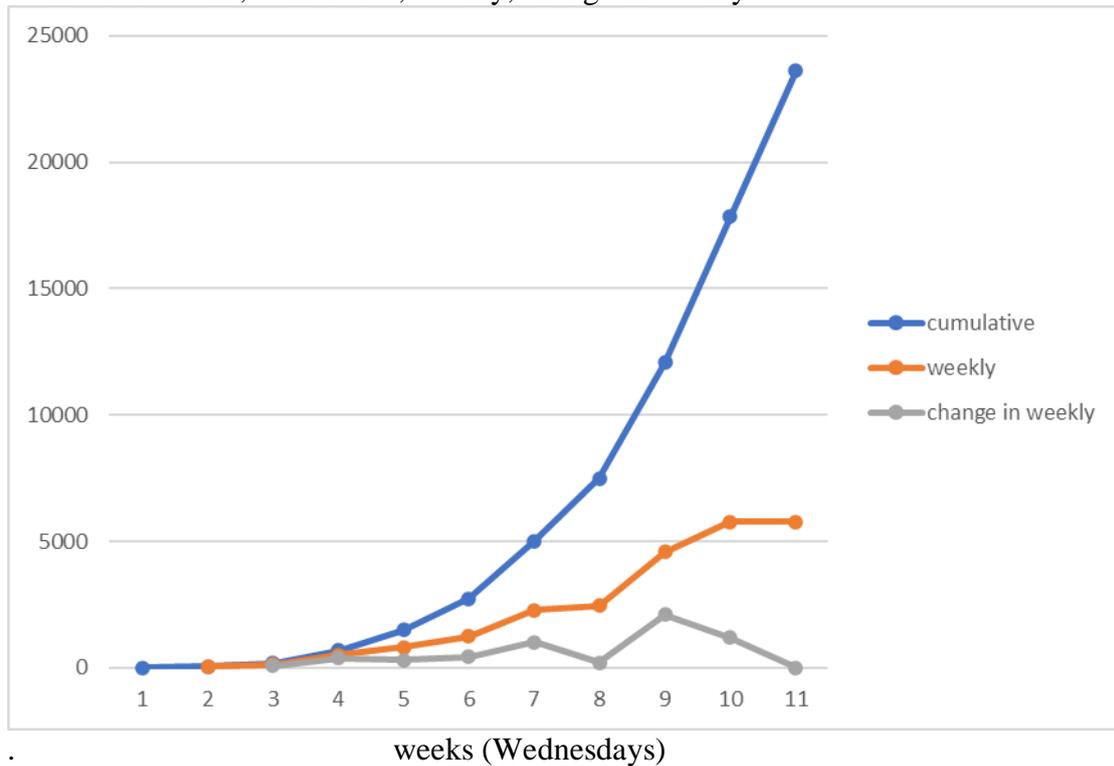


Figure B4 Brazil, growth ratio for weekly deaths; Wednesday numbers, March 4 to May 27, 2020.

growth ratio for weekly deaths

