Chapter 12
The UK Government's "Balancing Act" in the Pandemic: Rational Decision-Making from an Argumentative Perspective

Isabela Fairclough

Abstract This chapter looks at how the "balance" between lives, livelihoods and other concerns was talked about in four main newspapers in the UK, between March 2020 and March 2021, in assessing the UK government's performance. Different arguments were made for opposite conclusions, favouring either strict and prolonged lockdowns or, on the contrary, a speedy exit from lockdown and a resumption of normal life. From the point of view of argumentation theory, the empirical data suggests that what is being balanced or weighed together in pro/con argumentation by two opposite parties are not as much the costs and benefits of one's own proposal, but the costs of one proposal against the costs of its alternative (a "cost-cost" analysis). Rather than defending their own proposal by arguing that the benefits outweigh the costs, each side is criticizing the opponent's proposal by claiming that the costs of their proposal are more unacceptable than the costs of their own. An implicit *minimax* strategy (minimize costs in a worst-case scenario) was applied in different ways, depending on how the consequences were assessed, and how this assessment changed over time. The debate over lockdown illustrated an interesting type of pro/con argument, typical to crisis situations, in which all the intended "benefits" were in fact avoided "costs", and contrasted a medical/epidemiological perspective with a political perspective on the best course of action.

Keywords Balance-of-consideration arguments · Conductive arguments · Covid-19 · Decision-making · Pro/con arguments · Lockdown · Minimax · Uncertainty

I. Fairclough (✉)
School of Humanities, Language and Global Studies, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK
e-mail: IFairclough@uclan.ac.uk

S. Oswald et al. (eds.), *The Pandemic of Argumentation*, Argumentation Library 43,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4_12

12.1 Introduction

Throughout 2020, it could not escape anyone's notice that in newspapers, on radio and on television, many journalists and commentators talked about how the UK government was trying to strike the "right balance" between different stated goals, e.g. between protecting "lives and livelihoods", or between "saving lives" and preserving our "civil liberties", as well as what its "priorities" ought to be in getting the country through the corona virus pandemic.

I will look at how the "balance" between lives, livelihoods and other concerns was talked about in four main newspapers in the UK, between March 2020 and March 2021, in assessing the government's performance. Different arguments were made for opposite conclusions, favouring either strict and prolonged lockdowns or, on the contrary, a speedy exit from lockdown and a resumption of normal life. I will suggest that the empirical data corroborates the view on pro/con argumentation I have suggested elsewhere (Fairclough, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b), namely that what is being weighed together are not as much the costs and benefits of one's own proposal, but the costs of one proposal against the costs of its alternative. Each party will try to claim that the costs of the opponent's proposal are more serious than the costs of their own proposal, cannot be suitably mitigated and therefore (being ultimately unacceptable) conclusively rebut it. Consequently, that the balance of judgment inclines in their favour.

Having worked on deliberation, decision-making and pro/con argumentation in various settings, and mainly on the public policy debate on fracking in Lancashire (Fairclough, 2019a), as well as more generally on practical reasoning in politics (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012), I found the emerging discourse on "getting the balance right" both familiar and intriguing. A balance of judgment that seemed right for one group of people often seemed wrong for another. As people assessed their own risks and priorities differently, different course of action seemed "best" to them. Was it possible to arrive at a policy decision that satisfied the interests of everyone concerned? From the start, there seemed to be wide disagreement across society, including among epidemiologists, as to what the best course of action was, and this was reflected in the media coverage of the unfolding of the pandemic.[1]

I began by collecting a media corpus,[2] with *balance* and *lockdown* as main search terms, from Nexis. After repeated efforts to narrow down the immense amount of

[1] The proponents of the Great Barrington Declaration (n.d.) advocated 'focused protection'—hielding older and vulnerable people, while encouraging the rest of the population to carry on as normal and build up herd immunity; this strategy was aimed at minimizing the public health, economic and educational harms.

[2] The examples I give in this paper come from two main searches: (1) an earlier search (23 March 2021), with *balanc** and *lockdown* as search terms, which yielded 1771 articles in *The Guardian*, 1916 in *The Times*, 1069 in *The Daily Telegraph* and 509 in the *Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday*; (2) a later one (7 April 2021), with *balanc**, *lockdown** and *government** as search terms (narrowed down by excluding: "work-life balance", "balance sheet*", "balanced diet*", "balance of power", etc.). This search yielded 223 articles (*The Guardian*), 85 (*The Times*), 83 (*Daily Telegraph*) and 26 articles respectively (*Daily Mail*). I have used Antconc (Anthony, 2019) for concordances.

media data on the pandemic, I ended up with 4 data sets from *The Guardian* (223 articles), *The Times* (85), *The Daily Telegraph* (83), *The Daily Mail & Mail on Sunday* (26), over one year, from 23 March 2020 to 23 March 2021. I will examine how these newspapers were commenting on the government's attempt to strike the "right" balance, and reporting on how this balance was being assessed throughout society and what it ought to be. Secondly, I will use the empirical data to answer this theoretical question: what exactly is being weighed together, in pro/con argumentation, in arriving at a conclusion "on balance"? What has to be kept in balance for a decision to be made rationally? I will suggest that it is primarily the costs of each alternative, not the costs against the benefits. This particular case is in fact one where there are no "benefits" (in the sense of intended positive consequences): all the intended "benefits" are in fact avoided costs.[3]

A critical rationalist approach to the evaluation of a theoretical or practical hypothesis looks at the consequences derived from that hypothesis. Criticism of a hypothesis is criticism of its consequences – which may be false or in other ways unacceptable (Miller, 2006: 79). If subjecting a practical proposal (e.g. repeated lockdowns) to criticism reveals it either as being ineffective in achieving a set of goals (failing to achieve its intended consequence), or as having unacceptable impacts or risks (unintended consequences), it will follow that repeated lockdowns are not the right way forward. In conditions of uncertainty and risk, and whenever agents cannot avoid action, a rational approach to decision-making suggests that a practical decision is made rationally only if it avoids or mitigates the worst possible consequences. What is meant here by "rational decision-making" is the "rational making of decisions", i.e. according to a methodical procedure of critical testing, and not the "making of rational decisions" (Miller, 1994, 2006, 2013). The purpose of criticism is not to narrow down a range of alternative proposals to the "best" and maximally rational solution, but to eliminate the clearly unreasonable ones (the ones with unacceptable consequences) from a set of alternatives. If several reasonable alternatives survive the testing procedure, one can still be chosen as a better solution, in light of some preference criterion that is relevant in the context (e.g. because, in addition to achieving the goals, it has some additional benefits that outweigh any counter-considerations against it, as I explain below). A decision arrived at in a rational manner may be satisfactory though sub-optimal, and may turn out not to have been a good decision at all, in hindsight.

What are the implications of such a view when two (or more) alternatives are put forward by different arguers—e.g. suppression vs elimination vs mitigation of the virus, or adoption vs rejection of lockdown measures? Each alternative will have its own costs, but its supporters will have come to the conclusion that the costs potentially incurred by their proposal are less serious than the costs of the alternative, that are

[3] There were of course unintended positive side effects (unintended benefits) of lockdown, e.g. less road traffic, cleaner air, more time spent with family and less time spent commuting to work, etc., but these were not the intended consequences in light of which lockdown decisions were made, but side effects. Some positive side effects, once observed, might become potential future goals (intended benefits): both companies and employees might intentionally opt for working-from-home policies in the future, to reduce costs.

potentially avoided. The opponents' proposal will be criticized by undertaking a "cost-cost" (rather than a "cost–benefit") analysis, claiming that one's own preferred alternative minimizes the worst possible costs, unlike the opponents' alternative, which does not. The preferability of one's own alternative will emerge from criticizing the opponent's alternative, from showing it cannot withstand criticism in light of its potential risks and impacts. By arguing in this way, and criticizing proposals in light of their consequences, both parties will be following a rational *minimax* strategy: minimize costs in a worst-case scenario, minimize those losses that you consider to be most serious.

How can the same strategy produce two different decision outcomes? In many situations of choice between alternatives, the answer will be seen to lie in the different ways that costs are assessed (or weighed) by each of the parties involved. At the beginning of the pandemic, prolonged lockdowns resulted from worst-case scenario thinking in which there was a unique concern to minimize the Covid death count. Costs to "lives" (Covid mortality – see also Lewiński & Abreu, 2022, this volume) weighed more heavily in the balance for decision-makers than costs to the "livelihoods" (the economy), hence the need to minimize those costs as a matter of priority by imposing a hard lockdown: saving lives was an overriding reason in favour of this course of action. Soon, however, lockdown sceptics argued that there were other undesirable outcomes that needed to be considered, and that the right policy should be based on minimizing those losses as well – not just deaths from Covid, but deaths from untreated cancer and strokes, impacts on lives from the destruction of the economy and education. Crucially, they argued that there was *mitigation* available for Covid-mortality, e.g. shielding all vulnerable people (focused protection), and vaccination later on, which meant that the worst possible consequences were no longer in terms of Covid deaths, but in terms of collateral public health, economic and educational costs, and these costs were maximized by prolonged lockdowns. Briefly, at some point during the pandemic, the balance of considerations changed, in the eyes of many people, from seeing Covid deaths as the worst consequence to seeing other collateral impacts as the worst consequence, in a context where a dramatic spike in Covid deaths became increasingly preventable and other costs gradually became more serious.

I will begin by giving some background information on the Conservative government's efforts to steer the country though the pandemic, and the Labour opposition's criticism of these efforts. In Sect. 12.3, I will first explain how a concept of balance is used in a particular area of argumentation theory concerned with pro/con or "conductive" argumentation. In Sects. 12.4–12.7, I shall look at the views expressed in newspapers on whether the "right balance" was achieved or not, and what it ought to be. In Sect. 12.8 I will look at the implications of this analysis for a theory of pro/con (conductive) argumentation.

12.2 The United Kingdom: Worst Death Toll and Worst Recession in Europe

Throughout the spring of 2020, the government's stated overriding priority was to save lives, and the slogan "Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives", accompanying the first lockdown (which began on 23 March 2020), indicated this. In September 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson overruled government scientists who pressed for another national lockdown, after the relaxation of restrictions over the summer, arguing that it would spell "misery" for everyone and was therefore unacceptable. Around mid-October 2020, he was declaring that his policies were "getting the balance right" between keeping the virus under control and allowing some levels of economic activity and socializing. After 15 August, some businesses had been allowed to open, children had gone back to school in September, and various schemes such as "eat out to help out" encouraged the population to go to restaurants; international travel for holiday purposes had also been encouraged in the summer. At the same time, around mid-October, calling for a strict three-week "circuit-break" lockdown, Labour leader Keir Starmer was criticizing the PM for getting the balance completely wrong, and for "balanc[ing] the needs of the [Conservative] party against the national interest" (Labour.org.uk 2020). In response, according to BBC journalist Laura Kuenssberg, a senior government source declared that Starmer was a "shameless opportunist playing political games in the middle of a global pandemic" (Peat, 2020). Eventually, the PM had to call a second national lockdown in November, when infections had risen much higher, and yet another one in January 2021.

Against a background of polarized opinion, pro or against lockdown, the UK government alternated periods of lockdown with periods of relaxation of restrictions, apparently trying to steer a middle course that would avoid the worst consequences of both alternative courses of action. The strategy was assessed differently by different media outlets, by politicians of different parties, and the population at large. Throughout 2020, the balance struck at any given time was accepted by some and rejected by others, and what the "right balance" was seemed to change not only over time, as the situation evolved and in light of new evidence, but also in relation to who exactly was actually assessing it or from whose perspective (e.g. young vs old people), what their circumstances were (e.g. which professional groups they belonged to) and how they were assessing their own risks – health risks from the pandemic or emerging impacts on jobs, education, social life, other aspects of health. Many economic costs were attributed to the lockdowns imposed by the government, although economists have since then argued that an overall drop in economic activity would have occurred anyway, due to voluntary behavioural changes (Bourne, 2021: 83–85).

According to a widespread view, not only was Britain woefully unprepared at the beginning of the pandemic, but many crucial decisions were taken too late and with insufficient consistency. While trying to encourage some forms of economic and social activity, keep children in schools, and being reluctant to impose border controls and quarantine regulations, the government had at many crucial junctures

apparently got the balance wrong. Another widespread view is that, once the first lockdown had passed, the Prime Minister's "libertarian instincts" had been right. He ought to have listened more to economists and anti-lockdown epidemiologists rather than to his narrow group of advisors, who promoted a "lockdown-at-all-costs" viewpoint. On this view, what Britain experienced in late 2020 and early 2021 was "no longer a health crisis, [but] … a total economic catastrophe", which suggests that the PM got the balance wrong in allowing lockdown to continue.[4]

Undeniably, one year into the pandemic, the UK's response compares poorly with that of other countries. Delays in introducing the first lockdown in March 2020 are thought to have been responsible for around 20,000 deaths. Failure to protect care homes and to impose border controls and quarantining arrangements at the right time, together with the inefficiency of the test-and-trace system and the overcentralised management of the pandemic, have had disastrous effects. Admittedly, not everything in the UK's response went wrong. The government's support for businesses through the furlough scheme and business rates relief was widely praised. Other UK successes include the development of a vaccine at Oxford University, followed by a wide-scale vaccination programme. On 23 June 2021, exactly 15 months since the first lockdown, the UK had vaccinated 47.6% of its population, with 75.2 million doses given and 31.74 million people fully vaccinated (according to ourworldindata.org).

On 23 March 2021, the one-year anniversary of the first lockdown in the UK, *The Guardian* newspaper was blaming Prime Minister Boris Johnson for the highest death toll (126,284 deaths by that date) and the deepest economic recession in Europe. An article entitled "Johnson marks year since first lockdown – knowing he acted far too late" made the Prime Minister entirely responsible for being "unwilling to take the coronavirus seriously" in the early days and for the government's disorganized strategy in subsequent months:

> Then there was the abject failure of test and trace in its early months. The care home scandal. The over-optimistic relaxation of the rules over the summer. The refusal to adopt a circuit breaker in autumn. The complacent messaging around Christmas. The delay in bringing in a third national lockdown. So arguably what the country was also pausing to remember was the many thousands of people who had lost their lives through Johnson's incompetence and negligence. (Crace, 2021).

In one of their own anniversary articles, assessing the "grim cost of lockdown on health and wealth", the *Daily Mail* arrived at a somewhat different assessment. The article focused not on the death toll from the virus but on the "collateral damage" inflicted by a total of 195 days of lockdown:

> Tomorrow marks the anniversary of the most draconian restrictions imposed on our freedoms in modern times. Today, the *Mail* counts the devastating cost of Covid lockdown. The collateral damage to national health has been immense. A staggering 79 million fewer in-person GP appointments. Hospital waiting lists soaring to nearly 4.6 million. Urgent cancer tests down by 400,000, 44,000 fewer starting therapy…

[4] All the examples quoted in this paper come from the above-mentioned 4 newspaper corpora. For reasons of space, it has not been possible to fully reference every example, but only the longer ones (i.e., longer than two lines).

> So many thousands of people are suffering and dying that the casualty list of lockdown may well end up being far worse than from the virus itself…
>
> Then there is the ruinous economic cost. Unemployment up by 700,000 and rising. One in four businesses closed and many more on the brink. Prominent chain stores boarded up - some for ever. High streets decimated. The travel and hospitality industries hollowed out. National debt well above the £2 trillion mark. Public borrowing at £1 billion a day. Output down by £500 million a day. Compared with this monumental car crash, the 2008 financial meltdown was little more than a scraped wing-mirror. (Groves, 2021).

The *Daily Mail* rejected the "time-consuming, energy-sapping blame game" and urged the PM to "get the country moving again", "show more ambition with his road map to freedom" and put an end to the lockdown, "urgently and irreversibly", taking advantage of the "spectacular success" of the vaccination programme.

As of 23 March 2021, while Labour is accusing the government of "monumental mistakes" and "disastrous U-turns" in its handling of the pandemic, the Conservative government is defending itself by invoking the genuine uncertainty about the virus, which required a policy of constant revisions and adaptations in a quickly evolving context of limited knowledge. While admitting that, with the benefit of hindsight, many things could have been done better, government ministers are also pointing out that deciding on the best course of action has not been easy, that every alternative came with its own costs, that any decision has had to balance the divergent interests of different groups of people and also take into account the likelihood of prolonged public compliance with harsh measures.

12.3 Practical Reasoning, Deliberation and Decision-Making

In my work so far (Fairclough, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b) I have tried to take a critical rationalist (deductivist) perspective on practical reasoning and decision-making in conditions of incomplete knowledge, i.e. uncertainty and risk (Miller, 1994, 2006; Popper, 1963). Confronted with a practical problem and the goals of solving it, agents put forward proposals for action, as hypotheses. These hypotheses, generated in light of goals, have to be tested or criticized (in advance of action) by thinking of all the consequences that might arise if they were adopted. The process is essentially deliberative (whether undertaken by one or more arguers), and can be seen—I suggested—as a critical procedure that filters out those conclusions (and corresponding decisions) that would not pass the test of whether the intended or unintended consequences of a proposed course of action would be acceptable. Unacceptable consequences (unacceptable goals, or foreseeable unacceptable impacts or risks) are "decisive objections" against a proposal and can conclusively rebut it, indicating it should be abandoned (unless some acceptable mitigation, insurance or a Plan B are available, or unless the agents are willing to take the risks involved). The purpose of critical testing is: (1) to eliminate unreasonable proposals by examining

their potential intended and unintended consequences (is the stated goal acceptable, and would the potential side effects be acceptable?); (2) to enable (if possible) non-arbitrary choice of a better proposal, if several reasonable proposals have withstood criticism at stage (1). From this perspective, I have challenged the concept of "conductive" argument, as it exists in the literature (Blair & Johnson, 2011; Govier, 2010). I suggested that what (confusingly) appears to be a "conductive argument"—as a distinct structure, with pro and con reasons pertaining to a single conclusion—is a particular outcome of a deliberative process, involving the critical testing of one or more proposals (conjectures), for the purpose of deciding in rational way which one to choose.

Deliberation (I suggest) involves putting forward one or more alternative proposals for action, in light of problems (and other facts), desirable goals and potential means-goal relations, and testing each proposal in turn in light of their potential undesirable consequences for the parties concerned. A "normative minimum" of two schemes—a practical argument from goals and an argument from consequence—is required: the practical hypothesis (conclusion) is tested by an argument from consequence (Fairclough, 2019b). For any one alternative X being suggested, there will be reasons in favour of doing X (e.g. minimally, the potential achievement of the goal, but possibly of some other benefit) and reasons against doing X (e.g. some undesirable potential consequence). For any alternative Y, there will be reasons in favour of doing Y and reasons against doing Y, and similarly for any alternative Z. But the reasons counting against any one alternative may be of different strengths, and it is by examining the strength of these reasons, and the way they may rebut a proposal (as unreasonable), or leave it in place but show it is still less preferable than another one that has also survived criticism, that a decision can be made among them. I have drawn a distinction between undesirable consequences that do not necessarily indicate that a proposal is unreasonable (i.e. *counter-considerations*), on the one hand, and ultimately unacceptable consequences that do indicate the proposal is unreasonable and ought to be abandoned or revised (which I called *decisive objections*). Decisive objections will rebut the proposal, indicating it should not go ahead. If a proposal Y has only counter-considerations against it, but no decisive objections, then the balance of considerations may still come down in favour of going ahead with it, seeing that the reasons against it are not considered serious enough to warrant abandoning it (Fairclough, 2019b). If the decisive objections to Y that have come to light can be made acceptable (e.g. by mitigating their effect or by enabling a switch to an alternative course of action if and when they arise), then again Y can (provisionally) go ahead. If none of this is possible, and decisive objections remain, agents had better abandon the proposal, and either do nothing or look for an alternative, or (if this is not possible either) they may decide to go ahead, accepting the risks and impacts involved (Miller, 2013). As I shall show, all of these possibilities were explored, over time, in dealing with the current crisis.

From the start, the pandemic unfolded in conditions of incomplete knowledge, i.e. risk and uncertainty. While risks are known and therefore to some extent calculable (e.g. the R number tried to quantify the risk of infecting other people), little if

any calculation of probability could be done, for example, about the possible long-term effects of the rapidly developed (and therefore insufficiently tested) vaccines: that was the realm of genuine uncertainty. However, uncertainty was often talked about in terms of risks, as if some calculation had been performed and the risks to the population from the vaccines themselves had been found to be negligible. And although uncertainty (the "unknown unknowns") cannot be reduced to risk (the "known unknowns"), political decision-making seemed to require such a reduction in order to act with authority in a situation of emergency. Governments, but also the scientific establishment, often made claims with considerable certainty about matters they could not possibly know about, e.g. the safety of vaccines, their efficacy over time. The emergence of iatrogenic effects (including deaths), as the vaccination campaign went on, subsequently leading to vaccine "hesitancy" and to an erosion of trust in institutions (including in the impartiality of scientific institutions), became a significant public debate issue in the UK much later than the debate on the costs and benefits of lockdown that I deal with below, and I will not attempt to address it here.

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised a host of scientific/ theoretical questions about the nature of the virus, leading to findings that can be assessed in terms of their truth or falsehood, and a host of practical questions, including public policy questions about what can and ought to be done to prevent or mitigate the risks and impacts, at an individual and collective level. Naturally, these have been closely interrelated. The conjecture that action Y may be capable of achieving certain goals cannot occur in isolation from an understanding of what the situation is. Just as a theoretical hypothesis can be falsified by comparing its predictions (i.e. which statements would be true if the hypothesis were true) to experimental evidence, a practical hypothesis (that doing action Y is the right course of action) can be falsified by comparing its predicted consequences to what we take to be desirable or "right". If the predicted consequences (e.g. impacts or risks) are unacceptable, if they undermine goals which the deliberating agents do not want undermined, then action Y is not reasonable or recommended.

While such a way of evaluating practical conclusions may seem straightforward when conducted by single agents who know what their hierarchies of goals and values are, what they are willing to risk or sacrifice (although even a single agent's goals are often in conflict), the situation becomes complicated when deciding for groups of individuals, e.g. politicians deciding for whole countries, where multiple hierarchies of goals and values are espoused by different individuals and have to be kept "in balance", and where there will be both reasonable and unreasonable disagreement on any one chosen course of action. The assessment of any course of action or decision as being the "right" one (or as striking the "right balance") may be different among individuals. In Christian Kock's memorable phrase, "choice is not true or false" (Kock, 2009, 2017), and practical conclusions cannot be assessed in the same way as theoretical/epistemic ones. A theoretical statement about the nature of the virus's genome is true or false for everyone, while a practical statement about what ought to be done about the pandemic may not be "right" for everyone affected. It is not unreasonable to expect the resolution of disagreement on matters of epistemic truth, i.e. the retraction of a standpoint that has been shown to be false (van

Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). It is however unreasonable to expect consensus on a wide range of practical matters, and particularly in politics, where disagreement may persist among proponents of different lines of action, often grounded in competing (and often incommensurable) values and goals, or in the same values and goals, but differently prioritized (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012: 59–60).

According to the standard view of pro/con or "conductive" argumentation, to say that a practical conclusion (hence decision or plan of action) has been arrived at "on balance" means that reasons in favour (pro) and reasons against (con) have been considered, and the reasons in favour have outweighed the reasons against. On this view, both the pro and con reasons pertain to only one conclusion, and the fact that this one conclusion (e.g., in favour of doing Y) is recommended (or even chosen as a basis for action) is the result of a sort of "weighing" and "subtraction" process: the weight of the reasons against was subtracted, as it were, from the weight of the rea,sons pro, and the result was positive.

As I said above, I have suggested a different way of looking at pro/con arguments (Fairclough, 2019b), which assumes that, if several possible alternatives (as solutions to a problem) are suggested, then each one has to be tested in turn, by considering the reasons that count against each. So, for each proposal or possible solution Y (out of a set of several alternatives), two possible conclusions are always involved: Do Y versus Don't do Y; or Y is the right course of action vs Y is not the right course of action. When reasons for doing Y and against doing Y are considered, the fact that the pro (and not the con) conclusion may be recommended in the end will result from the assessment of the objections raised against Y as being counter-considerations, and not decisive objections. (Or, if any potentially decisive objection had been raised, some acceptable mitigation or other solution was offered, which removed its rebutting force). If rational decision-making involves criticism, i.e. involves a thorough search for potential reasons against a proposal (against Do Y), not just for reasons in favour, and therefore allows for the possibility that the opposite conclusion (Do not do Y) might in fact be the reasonable option, it follows that two opposite conclusions are always potentially in play, for each of the proposed solutions: Do Y and Don't do Y, Do Z and Don't do Z, etc. It follows that, whichever proposal emerges as the better choice (or the less bad choice) among several reasonable alternative, it has survived a process of critical questioning, meaning that its potential costs were assessed as not being ultimately unacceptable. Moreover, if more than one alternative has emerged as reasonable (with no decisive objections against it), then the 'better' choice also has less undesirable counter-considerations against it than those of any other reasonable alternative (a "cost-cost" analysis). When this critical filtering procedure still yields more than one possible reasonable course of action, decision-makers can look at what other additional relevant benefits are afforded by one and not the other. To sum up, a "cost-cost" comparison, examining the consequences of alternatives, is the main activity in deliberative practice and will help to eliminate (first) the downright unacceptable and (subsequently) the less desirable options. Weighing the pros (additional benefits) and cons (counter-considerations) of the options that have survived criticism occurs, if at all, at a later, final stage, and only if more than one alternative

has survived criticism up to that point; otherwise, a decision (albeit a fallible and revisable one) can be made on the basis of the "cost-cost" analysis alone.

The question that arises immediately, when speaking of unacceptable consequences, is "unacceptable for whom", or "serious" for whom? And if there is going to be disagreement on the answer to this question, and the final decision is not going to be acceptable to everyone concerned, how is a way forward to be found? This is a situation of genuine "polylogue" (Lewiński, 2014; Lewiński & Aakhus, 2014; Lewiński, 2017), where each of the several alternatives that have been proposed, in response to a problem and a goal, is advocated as the best course of action by its own supporters. In the controversy I analysed in Fairclough (2019a),[5] the unacceptable consequences that constituted decisive objections for one party were considered acceptable (and suitably mitigated) by the other party. Consequently, the balance inclined towards radically opposite conclusions (and decisions) for the two parties concerned, and each conclusion (decision) was considered reasonable by its proponents. I shall illustrate a similar situation with examples in the next four sections.

12.4 Getting the Balance Right or Wrong: A View from *The Guardian*

The Guardian acknowledged that the way forward was a difficult "balancing act":

> [11 May 2020, Editorial] None of this, of course, is easy. The prime minister is simultaneously confronted with a public health crisis and an unfolding economic disaster which he must address. This is a delicate and dangerous balancing act. (*The* Guardian, 2020).

> [28 May 2020] Easing the lockdown is a balancing act. The optimal strategy relaxes the right restrictions by the right amount to allow some return to normalcy without risking a second wave of infections. (Sample, 2020).

The newspaper was generally critical of the Conservative government's approach, criticizing it for being inconsistent, 'muddled', full of U-turns, always too late and half-hearted in implementing lockdowns and tighter controls. The correct balance, on their view, would have inclined more consistently towards saving lives by closing down the economy and schools—more lockdowns, circuit breakers and restrictions of all sorts. A frequent view in the opinion articles seems to be that "the government is misjudging this balancing act and lifting too many restrictions, too quickly".

On 22 February 2021, when a phased lifting of restrictions was announced (Boris Johnson's "roadmap"), *The Guardian*'s verdict (expressed by a panel of scientists and health advisors) was sceptical on several grounds: the opening of schools, deemed imprudent, would need to be accompanied by a host of "basic mitigation measures" (e.g. proper ventilation and mask wearing), so would the opening of the hospitality sector. Timing was said to be essential: "balancing the amount of social contact with the speed of the vaccine rollout will allow us to exit the epidemic with minimal

[5] The public debate on the proposal to explore shale gas in Lancashire.

damage". Not overly enthusiastic about the PM's "roadmap", *The Guardian*'s experts concluded that a "coherent and sustainable long-term strategy to suppress Covid-19" was still missing. One of them claimed that the PM's "roadmap throws caution to the wind", getting the balance wrong again (Sridhar et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the idea of a necessary trade-off that avoids the worst impacts on both sides of the balance (i.e. different kinds of costs), while not prioritizing one concern at the expense of the other, was aired early on in *The Guardian,* and was specifically said to be the responsibility of politicians, as distinct from scientists and doctors[6]:

> [Article on 23 April 2020, citing Prof Mark Woolhouse, epidemiologist at Edinburgh University] "I do think scientific advice is driven far too much by epidemiology… What we're not talking about in the same formal, quantitative way are the economic costs, the social costs, the psychological costs of being under lockdown," he said. Woolhouse said that while it was understandable that saving lives was the top priority, the idea of doing this at any cost was naive. "With any disease there is a trade-off. Public health is largely about that trade-off. What's happening here is that both sides of the equation are so enormous and so damaging that the routine public health challenge of balancing costs and benefits is thrown into incredibly stark relief. Yet that balance has to be found." (Devlin & Boseley, 2020).

A similar warning, about the disproportionate influence played by pessimistic epidemiological modelling in shaping policy, was issued by David McCoy (Professor of Global Public Health and director of the Centre for Public Health at Queen Mary University of London) on 10 April 2020. What was needed, in his view, was "political experience and good judgment", not a proliferation of mathematical models:

> There is also a non-scientific element to decision-making which involves choosing between competing demands and needs in society, determining what is ethical and moral, and balancing challenges that are current and immediate with those that will only emerge in the future. For example, a model that incorporates value judgments is needed to balance the direct, visible and dramatic harms of Covid-19 with the more indirect, chronic and hidden social and economic harms of lockdown.
>
> Furthermore, while it is often said that Covid-19 "does not discriminate", this statement is only partially true…. How we manage this differentiated vulnerability is all about ethics and politics. It may be informed by a scientific model, but it shouldn't be disguised as a technocratic problem that can be resolved by mathematical equations. (McCoy, 2020).

Both examples acknowledge the magnitude of the consequences on "both sides of the equation" and seem to suggest that worst-case scenario thinking informed exclusively by an overriding concern to prevent Covid deaths, driven by epidemiological models, ought to be balanced by a political concern for a wider range of social and economic harms, and that it is the government's duty to consider the overall potential costs, including the less immediately visible ones that will impact people in the future.

Another clear exception to *The Guardian's* general pro-lockdown stance was an opinion piece (on 4 November 2020) signed by Lord Jonathan Sumption, former Justice of the Supreme Court, who made a strong case for ending lockdown as an "indiscriminate" approach that punishes young people disproportionately. According

[6] For an analysis of how scientific disagreements over Covid-19 mutually impact policy debates, see Antiochou & Psillos (2022, this volume).

to Lord Sumption, "England underestimates the costs of lockdown at its own peril" and "we need to think hard about whether the benefits outweigh the harm", particularly for young people. His intervention focuses on the "immeasurable collateral damage" of lockdown policies, felt by categories of population who are not at risk from Covid, but suffer other unacceptable harms instead:

> In my opinion, the problem with lockdowns is that they are indiscriminate, ineffective in the long term, and carry social and economic costs that outweigh their likely benefits…
>
> Lockdowns are indiscriminate because they do not distinguish between different categories of people whose vulnerabilities are very different. Some are young, some old. Some have had the disease and enjoy a measure of immunity while others do not… Some live alone and are starved of company, others have their families around them… Ministers treat the entire population as an undifferentiated mass. This one-size-fits-all approach is irrational.
>
> The result is to inflict an appalling injustice on the young, who are unlikely to become seriously ill but are bearing almost all the burden of the counter-measures… The risk of death for young people is very small. They are not the ones who are filling NHS beds. Yet their job prospects are being snuffed out…. But the young and healthy should not be deprived of the ability to live fulfilling and productive lives simply to spare the old and vulnerable from taking precautions for their own safety…
>
> Scientists advise on science, statisticians on numbers. But what weight should be given to this material, when the humane values of our society and the preservation of its economic and social fabric are placed on the other side of the scales? This is not a scientific question. It is a political one. And therein lies the problem. Politicians rarely ask what is in the public interest. They ask what they will be blamed for.
>
> The result is that the whole issue is distorted by concentrating on what is visible, dramatic and immediate: deaths, frantic hospitals, frightened people. The collateral consequences, however severe, do not have the same media impact or political weight… Sometimes it takes courage to do the right thing. (Sumption, 2020).

On Lord Sumption's view, therefore, the priority placed on reducing Covid deaths is not in the "public interest" (but in the interests of politicians as decision-makers, for reasons of immediate accountability), and not the "right" thing to do, seeing as lockdowns seem to cause more cumulative damage than the virus itself. The balance ought to change not in relation to dramatic daily statistics, but ought to favour that course of action which avoids the even more unacceptable undermining of the "fabric" of society and of the future.

12.5 Getting the Balance Right or Wrong: the *Daily Mail* View

Similarly to Lord Sumption's argument above, the *Daily Mail* tended towards a consistent anti-lockdown stance, according to which the right balance ought to tilt in favour of "freedom"—resuming normal social and economic life as soon as possible, seeing as the costs of prolonged lockdown were said to be worse than the costs of the

alternative. According to the prevailing *Daily Mail* view, "the real risk would be not easing lockdown", and any fear of infection "must be balanced against the profound damage lockdown itself is doing both to our safety and the fabric of national life", particularly the "terrifying collateral damage caused to public health, as the NHS became a fortress against coronavirus—to the near exclusion of everything else" (1 June 2020).

To avoid effects that are "far deadlier than the disease" they were meant to cure, the country should be kept functioning as normally as possible, "sheltering the vulnerable while everyone else gets on with life". The Prime Minister "must prise himself from the grip of scientists—whose sole concern is health issues—and start striking a balance between epidemiology and the economy" (21 September 2020). In other words, a *political* decision that is made rationally is one that has looked at the potential consequences of alternative proposals and has chosen the one with the least damaging impacts on a wider range of concerns that governments are responsible for, not only Covid-related mortality.

12.6 Getting the Balance Right or Wrong: *The Daily Telegraph* View

Like the *Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph* emphasized the "economic catastrophe", criticizing the PM for not being consistent enough in his attempts to relax restrictions earlier. Several articles paint a picture of a Prime Minister "overwhelmed" by his "public health advisers [who] are weighted very heavily in favour of virus control, with too few people weighing the human costs". According to economist Roger Bootle, in a *Telegraph* piece (9 November 2020), "there needs to be a major input from economists into Covid decision making":

> The only thing that can really have a major effect in both boosting the economy, reducing financial strains and heading off a future fiscal calamity is a different policy with regard to locking down the economy. Sadly…, the influence of economic considerations in the key decisions taken with regard to controlling the virus is next to zero. (Bootle, 2020).

Overall, the balance was said to be wrong (even "irrational") if achieved at the expense of the economy and without taking in to account the collateral impacts of lockdown on people's lives. For *The Telegraph* too, the impacts of lockdown spoke more decisively against it than in favour of it, particularly since there were ways of mitigating the risks for the more vulnerable categories. Citing views from the business community, *The Telegraph* (12 June 2020) was concerned that "the government has erred too much on the side of precautionary closure while other countries have been quicker to balance the economic risk with the health one". Urging the PM to "break the endless lockdown cycle", to reject a "cure just as deadly as Covid", the newspaper emphasized that "a pandemic kills people directly and indirectly, and a sensible government seeks to minimise both kinds of deaths" (20 November 2020).

The imperative of minimising the worst consequences overall, having considered different kinds of consequences, is explicitly advocated in these interventions, which suggest that the balance is wrong when it tries too hard to avoid the potential costs of the alternative it decides to reject without sufficiently considering the costs of the alternative it decides to adopt.

12.7 Getting the Balance Right or Wrong: A View from *The Times*

On 5 May 2020, an article bearing the title "Ignore these siren calls to end the lockdown" acknowledged "Johnson's complex balancing act" and Britain's "horrible choice between protecting the economy and safeguarding life and health", and came down against the "economy-firsters" and their insistence that "lockdown must end immediately".

Later in the year, in an article entitled "When a politician says they follow the science, that's when I start screaming" (1 September 2020), statistician Sir David Spiegelhalter was cited as saying that young people who carried on partying were behaving perfectly rationally, given the low risks to themselves, but that "everyone has to look at the threat in the round rather than just from an individual perspective"… "This whole crisis has turned into an issue of risk management. That means perpetually a balance of potential harms and benefits. There's no such thing as safe, there's no such thing as right or wrong. Everyone has to carry out that balancing act" … On the question whether the "government got the balance between lives and livelihoods right", Spiegelhalter argued that the initial radical response (lockdown) was appropriate. However, "now we know a lot more about it and so it's reasonable to start weighing up the costs and the benefits of policies with the acknowledgement that we're never going to be safe" (Pond, 2020).

On 24 October 2020, in an article entitled "To say there's no trade-off between health and the economy during lockdown is a convenient delusion", Phillip Aldrick (Economics Editor of *The Times*) challenged "the argument that there is no trade-off between lives and livelihoods" used both by Labour (in calling for a new lockdown) and by some leading economists, as well as by the IMF:

> It would be nice if there were no trade-off, if public health and economic policy were neatly aligned, if every life saved at whatever cost improved the overall wellbeing and wealth of the country. Decision making would be so easy then. But it's dangerously oversimplified wish fulfilment by well-intentioned people whose hearts are ruling their heads… (Aldrick, 2020a).

Instead, according to him, seeing as "knowledge allows people to tailor their behaviour to their circumstances", and much more is known now than at the beginning of the pandemic, e.g. that young people are not so badly affected, a rational case can be made for a relaxation of restrictions. He had made a similar point in another article (25 June 2020), citing a report from the Institute for Economic Affairs. The

report had concluded that "it is increasingly hard to justify the economic and social costs" of lockdown against "a growing risk that more lives will be lost as a result of the lockdown than those that might be saved". Briefly, "lockdown may have been worth it originally, but is no longer so now" (Aldrick, 2020b).

Other articles acknowledged that "the government is facing fiendishly difficult choices", also pointing out that "the danger of Covid-19 is not spread equally in the population, and neither can the burden of inconvenience be", and therefore that "children must stay in school and … elderly people must be protected", and any new school shutdown would be "manifestly unjust". Overall, there was a recognition that lockdowns and restrictions, while appropriate at the beginning, were inhibiting the economic recovery a year into the pandemic, and "the principal threat to our wellbeing now is economic". In the end, in a context of limited, yet ever growing knowledge, *The Times* acknowledged that "any new rules will be a political judgment and a balance of difficult options", as no way forward is without its own risks.

In January 2021, an article citing Professor Chris Whitty (Chief Medical Officer for England), who had told a House of Commons committee that it is "very unlikely we'll get to zero level of risk", placed the decisions made by scientists and politicians into stark contrast. At some point in the roll out of the vaccination, the writer argued, "priorities can change", and society (through political leaders and parliament) will decide that a certain level of risk can be tolerated. "That means that government must balance the stark certainty of some deaths against the economic, psychological and political damage of restrictions", and "such a decision is not for doctors but government". The idea of a "nirvana where nobody suffers and dies" is an illusion (Purves, 2021).

12.8 Pro/Con Argumentation: What Reasons Are Weighed Together in Arriving at a Conclusion "On Balance"?

The disagreement over what the right balance, hence what the right way forward ought to be, in coping with the pandemic, is relevant for a theory of pro/con (so-called "conductive") argumentation. The examples above contain arguments for or against prolonged lockdown measures (or for or against resuming normal life and restarting the economy as soon as possible). Are these courses of action evaluated by weighing the costs against the benefits of each, e.g. the benefits of lockdown versus the costs of lockdown? I have argued that this is not what goes on. What is being compared are the costs of lockdown against the costs of rejecting lockdown. Depending on what consequences are considered or omitted, on what "weight" is assigned to these costs by the arguers and crucially what mitigation is said to be available (that can remove the rebutting force of a potentially decisive objection), the supporters of each side will arrive at different conclusions, but this will be based on a cost-cost analysis of both alternatives, not on a cost–benefit analysis of one proposal at a time.

Maintaining a state of lockdown was said to prevent further loss of lives to the virus and avoid overwhelming the NHS, i.e. avoid the unacceptable consequences allegedly resulting from the opposite course of action. Putting an end to lockdown was said to avoid the collateral social and health costs to the population, and prevent economic and educational catastrophe, i.e. similarly, avoid the unacceptable consequences of the alternative. Each course of action was therefore defended in light of its presumed ability to avoid the even worse consequences said to result from the opposite course of action. Both the risk of an increase in Covid deaths, on the pro-lockdown side, and the impacts on the economy and other aspects of life, on the anti-lockdown side, were taken to be decisive objections, indicating that the opponent's proposed course of action was wrong. Each side accepted that their own proposal also came with certain potential costs. However, these were said to be mitigated to an acceptable extent: the economic costs would be mitigated by support from the Treasury; the excess mortality would be mitigated by shielding the vulnerable and later by vaccination take up.

It is customary to speak of doing a "cost–benefit" analysis, or of weighing the costs against the benefits. Some of the examples above also use these phrases. For example, Lord Sumption argued that lockdowns "carry social and economic costs that outweigh their likely benefits" and emphasized the "need to think hard about whether the benefits outweigh the harm". A closer look shows, however, that the intended positive consequence ("benefit") is in fact one and the same here with avoiding the negative consequence ("cost"). What the lockdown is designed to avoid (an increase in deaths from Covid), as "benefit", on the pro-lockdown view, is an avoided cost of the alternative course of action. A return to normal life is intended to avoid undermining the economy: once again, the intended benefit is an avoided cost. Asking whether the benefits of lockdown are not in fact outweighed by the harms is another way of asking whether the costs that lockdown avoids are not in fact outweighed by the costs that it incurs. The "cost–benefit" analysis in this case is clearly a "cost-cost" analysis.

Depending on who is assessing them, the costs of one alternative will be more unacceptable than (and thus outweigh) the costs of the other. Of two proposed lines of action that have survived criticism, one will allegedly minimize the potential costs better than the other and will therefore be the "less bad" option, the "lesser evil". Government officials sometimes spoke clearly in these terms. According to Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty (cited in the *Daily Mail*, 7 February 2021), the government found itself in a situation where "there were no good solutions": "what we're trying to do is have the least bad set of solutions". This is to say that the "best" decision in choosing among two proposals with negative consequences is the one that avoids the proposal with the worse consequences (and thus minimizes the maximum possible loss). "Cost-cost" reasoning of this type is to be expected in situations of crisis management, where the goal itself is to minimize the damage.[7] However, on the view of deliberation I am proposing here, along critical rational lines, "cost-cost" (*minimax*) reasoning is the paradigm case of rational decision-making, whether one

[7] I am grateful to one of the reviewers for this important point.

is dealing with crisis management or with choosing among alternatives that have both costs and substantive benefits. This amounts to saying that, if a decision is to be made rationally, maximizing any additional benefits ought to come at a later stage, after minimizing the costs: first by eliminating the alternatives with ultimately unacceptable costs (or, if possible, by acceptable mitigation, insurance, or Plan B availability); only then by choosing the alternative with the best cost–benefit ratio from the remaining set of potentially reasonable alternatives).

This implicit *minimax* strategy was applied in radically different ways, depending on how the consequences were assessed by the two sides of the debate, and which consequences were considered less unacceptable. Proposals on how to mitigate (reduce) the worst impacts were crucial in these arguments. The prevailing opinion expressed in *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* was that the balance was wrong when it inclined excessively towards protecting "lives" from Covid risks. On this view, also expressed by Lord Sumption in his *Guardian* piece, it was unacceptable to sacrifice certain categories of the population who were not at significant risk. The old and vulnerable ought to protect themselves, while the rest of society ought to get on with normal life, each taking those risks considered personally acceptable. The consequences of prolonged lockdown were, on this view, worse than an increase in Covid-related mortality. Resuming normal life and economic activity ("freedom") was therefore the reasonable course of action, on this view, and was in fact a necessary condition for protecting lives ("without wealth, Boris cannot safeguard the nation's health").

In addition to this instrumental justification (saving the economy is necessary for achieving any other goal, including public health), which turns the destruction of the economy, as cost, into a decisive objection against lockdown policies, there is a moral justification as well for resuming normal life as soon as possible, springing from the reasonably different, yet legitimate goals of different categories of population. As Lord Sumption argues, a "one-size-fits-all approach" is not only "irrational" but "inflicts an appalling injustice on the young"—a decisive objection against pursuing it. This view emphasizes that lockdown kills too, that the rights of individuals might legitimately conflict with general collective interests, and that they cannot be overridden by the "common good". The choice is said to be not between "lives and livelihoods" but between saving the lives of some people and destroying the lives of others, and lockdown policies seem to have been unacceptably doing the latter, on this view.

Arguments like Lord Sumption's above show that an overriding concern for human lives is involved on both sides of the debate. The decision to be made is not between saving lives and keeping the economy going, not between human beings and economic growth. If it were, then the "lesser evil" would be easy to figure out: sacrificing the economy would have to be the lesser evil, and the right balance would clearly incline towards saving as many lives from Covid as possible. With the passing of time, as the implications of potential economic collapse for all human lives became clearer, "saving lives" at any cost by means of lockdowns no longer seemed a straightforward choice. Both courses of action had unacceptable consequences for human lives, and—because the risks and impacts were so unevenly distributed across categories of population—what was "right" for one group was often "wrong"

for another. As a cabinet source cited in the *Daily Mail* (15 October 2020) said, "The caricature is that this is health versus the economy" … "The reality is it is health versus every other responsibility the Government has". In other words, a government has many competing goals and duties and cannot be expected to focus only on protecting vulnerable people by bringing most other activities to a halt.

In Sect. 12.4, I said that a proposal against which decisive objections have been raised can be still maintained if some acceptable mitigation (or alternative plan) is found, or (if this is not possible) if the agent is prepared to take the risks involved. On a pro-lockdown view, the potential damage done to people's livelihoods was taken to be temporarily mitigated by the furlough scheme and other government support measures. On the anti-lockdown view, the potential increase in deaths can be mitigated by selective and voluntary self-shielding; more recently, the emergence of vaccines, universally hailed as "game changers", are providing the most significant mitigation of Covid death risks. With acceptable mitigation of either sort, actions which seemed to have *prima facie* decisive objections against them became reasonable options. As more and more experts agree that a "zero Covid" future is an "illusion" (*Daily Telegraph*, 22 March 2021), seeing as "we can't stay in suspended animation indefinitely" (*Daily Mail*, 1 June 2020), a return to normality is also being defended by appealing to people's willingness to take their own risks and use their "common sense" in circumventing them. (I have discussed mitigation and risk acceptance as part of rational decision-making in Sect. 12.3.) The least bad option is now to resume normal life while accepting the inevitability of some Covid deaths (as a lesser cost):

> [*Daily Mail*, 21 February 2021, citing a government source] This is the delicate equilibrium… Just as we sadly have to accept a certain death toll from the flu every year, we will have to learn to live with Covid fatalities. (Owen, 2021).

12.9 Conclusion

In looking at how the government's "balancing act" was assessed from different perspectives, I have tested my own conception of pro/con argumentation, as one involving a comparative assessment of the consequences (or costs) of two contrary alternatives (a "cost-cost" comparison, not a "cost–benefit" assessment of one alternative), and indirectly supported the view that a *minimax* approach (minimizing loss in a worst-case scenario) is both more defensible than a cost–benefit approach and a more accurate representation of what goes on in rational decision-making in conditions of uncertainty and risk. In the case discussed here (though not necessarily in every case), speaking of achieving "benefits" was no different from saying that certain negative consequences would be averted: the benefits amounted to an avoidance of costs. Based on different priorities (and what consequently was assessed as decisive objections), but also on different conceptions about risk mitigation, the defenders and opponents of lockdown policies decided differently on what the "least bad" option was. Benefits are not always tantamount to avoidance of costs, though in the case discussed here they were. In addition to comparing the costs of two options,

one can usually compare the benefits as well. Normatively speaking, I suggest, if a decision is to be made rationally, maximizing the benefits ought to come at a later stage, after minimizing the costs.

Each of the two proposals (for/against lockdown) was defended and criticized in light of the imperative to avoid the unacceptable consequences of its counter-proposal. What was taken to be an unacceptable consequence has varied in relation to political and ideological affiliation, but also seems to have changed over time, as the serious impacts of prolonged lockdown have become more apparent and risk-mitigation measures have become possible. Moving from a simple "lives versus livelihoods" dilemma, which seemed to promise a clear solution, one favouring "lives" as a moral, overriding imperative (a perspective also favoured by the scientific and medical advisors), the political balancing act has had to encompass a much wider range of concerns, including duties towards different groups of people. None of these duties can be allowed to override others permanently, in the long term, reasonable trade-offs must be found, and what the least bad option is will reasonably change. Both alternatives have their costs, and the dilemma seemed to change from saving lives versus protecting the economy, to one involving protection of lives from harms arising from both alternatives.

As of May 2021, the popular consensus seems to be moving, with the roll out of the vaccination programme (as the most obvious way of mitigating risk), from avoiding Covid deaths at all costs, as an overriding priority, towards avoiding the worst of the economic, social and collateral health damage inflicted by prolonged restrictions, while accepting a certain amount of risk as unavoidable. With vaccination and mass-testing holding the prospect of a return to normal life, including a return to workplaces and public transport, people will be expected (or forced) to manage their own risks—deciding which risks are worth accepting but also which risks they might have to accept.

Acknowledgements This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA-17132, *European Network for Argumentation and Public Policy Analysis* (http://publicpolicyargument.eu), supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

References

Aldrick, P. (2020a). *To say there's no trade-off between health and the economy during lockdown is a convenient delusion.* 24 October 2020. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/to-say-there-s-no-trade-off-between-health-and-the-economy-during-lockdown-is-a-convenient-delusion-cn6pm92qm

Aldrick, P. (2020b). Lockdown costs 'higher than lives saved'. *The Times,* 25 June, at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lockdown-costs-higher-than-lives-saved-wvjwbq50s. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Anthony, L. (2019). AntConc (Version 3.5.8) [Computer Software]. Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University. Waseda University. https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software

Antiochou, K., & Psillos, S. (2022, this volume). How to handle reasonable scientific disagreement: The case of COVID-19. In S. Oswald, M. Lewiński, S. Greco, & S. Villata (Eds.), *The pandemic of argumentation* (pp. 63–80). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4_4

Blair, J. A., & Johnson, R. H. (Eds.). (2011). *Conductive argument, an overlooked type of defeasible reasoning*. College Publications.

Bootle, R. (2020). Forget negative rates, it's time to start listening to the economists. *The Telegraph*, 8 November, at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2020/11/08/forget-negative-rates-time-start-listening-economists/. last accessed June 16, 2021.

Bourne, R. A. (2021). *Economics in one virus. An introduction to economic reasoning through Covid-19*. Cato Institute.

Crace, J. (2021). Johnson marks year since first lockdown—Knowing he acted far too late. *The Guardian*, 23 March, at https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/mar/23/boris-johnson-admits-he-will-forever-be-haunted-by-englands-Covid-death-toll. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

The Great Barrington Declaration. (n.d) at https://gbdeclaration.org/. Last accessed June 20, 2021.

Devlin, H., & Boseley, S. (2020). Scientists criticise UK government's "following the science" claim. *The Guardian*, 23 April, at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/23/scientists-criticise-uk-government-over-following-the-science. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Eemeren, F. H., & van Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation. The pragma-dialectical approach.* Cambridge University Press.

Fairclough, I. (2016). Evaluating policy as practical argument: The public debate over the first UK austerity budget. *Critical Discourse Studies, 13*(1), 57–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2015.1074595

Fairclough, I. (2018). Deliberative discourse. In J. Richardson & J. Flowerdew (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 242–256). Routledge.

Fairclough, I. (2019). Deontic power and institutional contexts: The impact of institutional design on deliberation and decision-making in the UK fracking debate. *Journal of Argumentation in Context, 8*(1), 136–171. https://doi.org/10.1075/jaic.18014.fai

Fairclough, I., & Fairclough, N. (2012). *Political discourse analysis*. Routledge.

Fairclough, I. (2018b). Conductive argumentation in the UK fracking debate. In S. Oswald & D. Maillat (Eds.), *Argumentation and inference: Proceedings of the 2nd European Conference on Argumentation, Fribourg 2017*, Vol. II (pp. 297–310). College Publications.

Fairclough, I. (2019b). Is "conductive" argument a single argument? In F. H. Eemeren & B. Garssen (Eds.), *From argument schemes to argumentative relations in the wild. A variety of contributions to argumentation theory* (pp. 223–238). Springer.

Govier, T. (2010). *A practical study of argument* (7th ed.). Wadsworth.

Groves, J. (2021). Shattering price of lockdown. (Originally: Grim cost of lockdown on health and wealth). *The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday*, 22 March, at https://www.pressreader.com/uk/daily-mail/20210322/281483574152317. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Kock, C. (2009). Choice is not true or false: The domain of rhetorical argumentation. *Argumentation, 23*, 61–80. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-008-9115-x

Kock, C. (2017). *Deliberative rhetoric: Arguing about doing* (Vol. 5). Windsor Studies in Argumentation.

Labour.org.uk (The Labour Party's Official Website). (2020). Keir Starmer's statement about the fight against coronavirus, 13 October at https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmers-statement-about-the-fight-against-coronavirus/. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Lewiński, M. (2014). Argumentative polylogues: Beyond dialectical understanding of fallacies. *Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric, 36*(1), 193–218.

Lewiński, M. (2017). Practical argumentation as reasoned advocacy. *Informal Logic, 37*(2), 85–113.

Lewiński, M., & Aakhus, M. (2014). Argumentative polylogues in a dialectical framework: A methodological inquiry. *Argumentation, 28*(2), 161–185.

Lewiński, M., & Abreu, P. (2022, this volume). Arguing about "COVID": Metalinguistic arguments on what counts as a "COVID-19 death". In S. Oswald, M. Lewiński, S. Greco, & S. Villata (Eds.), *The pandemic of argumentation* (pp. 15–39). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4_2

McCoy, D. (2020). Faith in coronavirus modelling is no substitute for sound political judgment. *The Guardian*. 10 April, at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/10/modelling-pandemic-politicians-decisions-science (last accessed 16 June 2021).

Miller, D. W. (1994). *Critical rationalism: A restatement and defence*. Open Court.

Miller, D. W. (2006). *Out of error. Further essays on critical rationalism.* Ashgate. Paperback edition 2017. Routledge.

Miller, D. W. (2013). Deduktivistische Entscheidungsfindung. In R. Neck & H. Stelzer (Eds.), *Kritischer rationalismus heute. Zur aktuaklität de philosophie Karl Poppers*, Schriftenreihe der Karl Popper Foundation (pp. 45–78). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. German translation by Christina Kopetzky of Deductivist Decision Making (unpublished MS).

Owen, G. (2021) Covid vaccine for every adult in the UK by July 31st. *The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday*, 21 February, at https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9282255/Coronavirus-vaccine-adult-Britain-July-31st-Boris-accelerate-inoculation-drive.html. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Peat, J. (2020). Laura Kuenssberg's "client journalism" called out after she posts unnamed attacks on Starmer. *The London Economic*, 14 October, at https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/news/laura-kuenssbergs-client-journalism-called-out-after-she-posts-unnamed-attacks-on-starmer-205486/. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Pond, S. (2020). Sir David Spiegelhalter: When a politician says they follow the science, that's when I start screaming. *The Times*, 12 September, at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sir-david-spiegelhalter-when-a-politician-says-they-follow-the-science-thats-when-i-start-screaming-hqtl2pfgf. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Popper, K. R. (1963). *Conjectures and refutations* (5th ed., 1989). Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Purves, L. (2021). Just tell us how many jabs mean freedom. *The Times,* 4 January, at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/just-tell-us-how-many-jabs-mean-freedom-3wm8jbzlc. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Sample, I. (2020). Easing the lockdown: How will we know if infections bounce back? *The Guardian.* 28 May, at https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/may/28/how-will-no-10-decide-to-ease-lockdown-and-reopen-schools. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Sridhar, D., Dowd, J., Medley, G., & Reicher, S. (2020). Is England's Covid roadmap the right way out of lockdown? The experts' view. *The Guardian* 22 February, at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/22/england-Covid-roadmap-lockdown-experts-view. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

Sumption, J. (2020). England underestimates the costs of lockdown at its peril. *The Guardian*, 4 November, at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/04/england-lockdown-peril-young-people-mental-health. Last accessed June 16, 2021.

The Guardian. (2020). Editorial. The Guardian view on 'stay alert': A divisive muddle, *The Guardian*, 11 May, at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/11/the-guardian-view-on-stay-alert-a-divisive-muddle. Last accessed June 16, 2021.