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Framing COVID-19: How UK Government and Media Narrated the "Crisis"

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to interrogate how narrative elements were used in the communication of policy by the UK government and media during the 2020–22 COVID-19 pandemic, using the lens of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). Contrary to *homo economicus* of the rational universe, the NPF contends that *homo narrans* navigates the world through stories; comprised of *setting, plot, characters* (heroes, villains, and victims) and, critically, the story's *moral*. The study aims to show how these narrative elements were employed as an effective *framing* strategy designed to sustain public attention and compliance through the playing out of a securitized script, in which archetypal characters—the policy actors—perform a *moral* story. This study also innovates the plot element, utilizing a theory of circular narrative—*story circles*—from outside the extant policy literature, it is hoped that this conceptual exploration of narrative dynamics can lay the foundations for future empirical research.

Related Articles:

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Neill, K. A., and J. C. Morris. 2012. "A Tangled Web of Principals and Agents: Examining the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Through a Principal–Agent Lens." *Politics & Policy* 40, no. 4: 629–656. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2012.00371.x.

Zimmermann, A., and J. O. Kenter. 2023. "Framing the Change and Changing Frames: Tensions in Participative Strategy Development." *Politics & Policy* 51, no. 1: 81–113. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12518.

抽象的

本文旨在利用叙事政策框架 (NPF) 的视角，探究英国政府和媒体在 2020–22 年 COVID-19 大流行期间如何使用叙事元素进行政策传播。与理性宇宙的经济人相反，NPF 认为叙事人通过故事来探索世界；故事包括背景、情节、角色(英雄、恶棍和受害者)以及至关重要的故事寓意。该研究旨在展示这些叙事元素如何被用作一种有效的框架策略，旨在通过演绎证券化剧本来维持公众的关注和遵守，其中原型人物——政策参与者——演绎一个道德故事。本文还创新了情节元素，利用现有政策文献之外的循环叙事理论——故事圈，希望这种对叙事动态的概念探索能够为未来的实证研究奠定基础。

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza cómo se utilizaron los elementos narrativos en la comunicación de políticas por parte del gobierno y los medios de comunicación del Reino Unido durante la pandemia de COVID-19 de 2020–22, desde la perspectiva del Marco de Políticas

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Narrativas (MPN). A diferencia del homo economicus del universo racional, el MPN sostiene que el homo narrans navega por el mundo a través de historias, compuestas por escenario, trama, personajes (héroes, villanos y víctimas) y, fundamentalmente, la moraleja de la historia. El estudio busca mostrar cómo estos elementos narrativos se emplearon como una estrategia eficaz de encuadre diseñada para mantener la atención pública y el cumplimiento mediante la representación de un guión securitizado, en el que personajes arquetípicos—los actores políticos—representan una historia moral. Este artículo también innova el elemento argumental, utilizando una teoría de la narrativa circular (círculos narrativos) ajena a la literatura política existente. Se espera que esta exploración conceptual de la dinámica narrativa pueda sentar las bases para futuras investigaciones empíricas.

1 | Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (2020) declared the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus. COVID-19 presented the most profound global public health crisis of our times and an event with epochal social and political consequences (Matthewman and Huppatz 2020). The response entailed mobilizing states and their populations on an unprecedented scale; a worldwide phenomenon where, in the UK for example, the state was to exercise coercive powers over its citizens on a scale never previously attempted (Sumption 2020). Once a viable solution to the policy problem was realized, the state undertook the largest-ever mass vaccination of the population. This required a collective action through engaging the public in a narrative in which they themselves would play a leading role, requiring profound behavior change to meet policy goals.

The importance of narrative as a persuasive tool is evident across many disciplines; research shows not only its importance in the cognitive organization of new information but also that the more immersed the individual becomes in the narrative the more effective the direction of their beliefs and behaviors by the narrators (Jones et al. 2014; Green and Brock 2000). Cognitive and normative frames can function to produce a *collective* consciousness (Surel 2000), and it is the ambiguity of symbols that enables the transformation of the wants of individuals into collective decisions (Stone 2012). The conception of a collective consciousness is fundamental in persuading the public to *go with* a policy, and the construction of a social, political, and historical setting is fundamental in anchoring the narrative.

This article aims to address the research question: *How were narrative elements used by* the *UK government and media in communicating policy during the 2020–2022 pandemic*? and suggests that the government utilized the operation of narrative components, emphasizing a *moral duty* on the part of the citizen. What is significant in understanding the policy conflict is how *science* is aligned with the moral weight of the narrative; *biomedicine*, being cast first as *ally* and then as *hero*, stimulating the bifurcation between the public as a *hero* and the public as a *villain*. This study explores how a circular plot has value for understanding how narrative can be employed over time in communicating policy that responds to the dynamics of the policy event. This takes account of the acute nature of the pandemic, where policymakers were responding to developments in real-time, despite its relatively slow onset, which perhaps sets it apart from sudden *exogenous shock*-focusing events (De Leo et al. 2021). This analysis matters to a wider understanding of the pandemic because the longer-term social impacts of this dramatization are likely to be as profound as the impacts on public health (Sikali 2020).

2 | Objectives of Study

1. To provide a deeper understanding of how the UK government narrated policy during the 2020–2022 pandemic, through the (meso level)[1] lens of Jones and McBeth's (2010) Narrative Policy Framework (NPF).

2. To Contribute to the Future Development of the NPF Itself

   i. Regarding narrative *form*: to propound a conceptual narrative heuristic—Harmon's (2003) "Story Circles" (Harmon 2003) to explore how a *circular* narrative can advance a new understanding of the plot element in NPF scholarship. This article presents the policy narrative as a trilogy of "lockdowns" through which the narrator—*government*—manipulates the character dynamics in an expansion of conflict and aims to utilize theory from outside the extant NPF literature (see author's note below). The segmentation of the policy narrative is based on the UK government's key messaging regarding the *stay-at-home* orders.

   ii. Regarding narrative *content*: to advance a more nuanced understanding of the plurality or roles and multiple archetypes the roles can play within the narrative over time, and that, as the narrative is repeated and certain characters become more salient, the government will seek to expand the conflict through manipulating the *moralization* of the story. In this respect, this article examines the role of government in the NPF hypothesis: "*Groups or individuals who are portraying themselves as losing on a policy issue will use narrative elements to expand the policy issue to increase the size of their coalition*" (Jones and McBeth 2010, 346). This article also aims to show how the journey of the hero character *science* can be understood as the *angel shift* (Jones et al. 2022; Gronow et al. 2022) for the pharmaceutical industry and biomedicine, in a wider story of redemption.

3 | Author's Note

This article also responds to the space afforded by the framework for other theoretically grounded methods of defining plots (Shanahan et al. 2018, 176) beyond the operation of Deborah Stone's (2012) narrative plot lines. This paper employs the basic coding principles for NPF research as prescribed by Shanahan et al. (2018); however, it is important to note that while narrative form is easier to generalize than narrative content (McGovern and Jones 2024), the plot element based on Stone (1988, 2012) remains notoriously difficult regarding

coder agreement. Therefore, the author, as the single coder for the analysis, wishes to clarify that the conceptualization of the plot is subject to interpretation based on the policy outputs described in the Institute for Government—IFG (2022) timeline of the pandemic (see Appendix S1). This is particularly important as the article aims to demonstrate the possibility of understanding narrative plot dynamics using literary theory from outside the extant policy literature, drawing on Harmon (2003). It is hoped that future empirical research, with multiple coders, can explore the possibility of this ideation in a diverse range of contexts and time periods.

3.1 | Framing, Narrative, and the NPF

The NPF's central work is Jones and McBeth's (2010) "A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong?" responding to the challenge from Sabatier (2000) (also see Jones et al. 2014), the previous 20 years having been dominated by the theories of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993, Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1994), Kingdon (1995), and Jones and Baumgartner (1993). Despite increasing evidence to support the importance of narratives to both human communication and learning, and the demand from scholars (e.g., John 2003) for an alternative direction in policy research, narratives had remained on the periphery. While narrative had been addressed by the postpositivist school of public policy (e.g., Fischer 2003), positivists were not successful in providing any methodological alternatives; therefore, the NPF offers a "quantitative, structuralist, and positivist approach to the study of policy narratives" (Jones and McBeth 2010, 330).

The centerpiece of human information processing, according to the NPF, is *narrative cognition* (Peterson and Jones 2016, 112), which enables the individual: *homo narrans* to make sense of complexity, as well as execute communication and persuasion (Jones et al. 2014, 11, Jones et al. 2022). This model aligns with much of the conceptual agenda-setting literature, for example, Simon's (Simons 1990) work on the role of bounded rationality and punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) (Jones and Baumgartner 1993; Baumgartner et al. 2017), which focuses attention on information processing in the agenda-setting process (Peterson and Jones 2016, 112). Both framing and narrative fall within the *agenda setting*, or *intelligence*, stage, in Lasswell's (1956) stages model. Agenda setting provides structure to the way people think about the world through the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of information (Zahariadis 2017), and the role of media, as a conduit for the agenda of policy actors in this process, is not to tell the public *what to think*; however, it has proven effective in telling them what they should *think about* (Bernard C. Cohen 1963, 13; McCombs and Shaw 1972, 177; McCombs 2004; Crow and Lawlor 2016).

A frame, the definition of a policy's image (Cairney 2011), can be used to portray issues as technical and only relevant to an expert audience, or, to gain greater participation, with relevance to wider social values (Rochefort and Cobb 1993; Cairney 2011, 175). Drawing on Van Gorp (2002), Fischer (2003, 144) suggests that framing is a process of messaging where both producers and receivers "transform information into a meaningful whole." This ideation can be traced back to Goffman (1974),

who presents frames as the central organizing principle governing the application of subjective meaning to social phenomena. Framing is situated in the wider debate between the role of *ideas* (constructivism) and the role of *interests* (rationalism), Frames constitute the normative and cognitive ideas located in the foreground of policy debates (Campbell 2002) and are strategically crafted and employed by political elites to "legitimize their policies to the public and each other" (Anthony et al. 1994, in Campbell 2002, 27).

Fischer (2003) suggests, culturally, that narratives provide cohesion to a shared system of beliefs and are effective in the transmission of basic values. For individuals, narratives enable the understanding of both who we are and where we are headed (Fischer 2003, 162); policy communities utilize shared symbols in the construction of causation, and solutions for policy problems (Birkland 2016, 212). These symbolic devices, as Stone (2012) notes, are effective in persuading both policy elites, and the public, because the subtleties and poetry of the narratives are "so emotionally compelling that the normative leaps slip right past our rational brains" (Stone 2012, 177).

3.2 | Narrative Form and Content

Verweij et al. (2006) define narrative as a temporal sequence containing moments of drama, symbols, and character archetypes, culminating in *the moral of the story*, and, like frames, they offer a means of cognitive organization. Stone (1988, 2012) maintains that a narrative must have a structure, entail the occurrence of some form of change, contain *heroes*, *villains*, and *victims*, and are constructed to pit good against evil. Building on this frame, in adherence to a structural approach, narratives need to have characteristics that are agreed upon by *narratologists* in public policy. Jones and McBeth (2010) define a framework which, while compatible with interpretivism (Jones and Radaelli 2015), is amenable to structural methodology and scientific study and should possess the following components:

1. A *setting* or context.

2. A *plot* that introduces a temporal element (beginning, middle, and end) providing both the relationships between the setting and characters, and structuring causal mechanisms.

3. *Characters* who are fixers of the problem (heroes), causers of the problem (villains), or victims (those harmed by the problem)

4. *The moral of the story* is where a policy solution is normally offered. (Jones and McBeth 2010, 340–341)

These components constitute a narrative *form* that conceptualizes that which is theoretically generalizable, i.e., these components are identifiable within policy narratives, regardless of context (Jones et al. 2022; McGovern and Jones 2024). In the context of this study, narrative is defined as the dynamic relationship between the components of narrative form. Drawing on Stone's typology (Stone 2012), the NPF plots are defined by a series of six archetypes (see Shanahan et al. 2018, 16–17). However, Shanahan et al. (2018, 176) acknowledge that while the NPF has "leaned on operationalizing Stone's (2012)

narrative plot lines," the potential for other theoretically grounded methods of defining plots, grounded in theory, exists. The plot, situating characters temporally and spatially, provides "the arc of action" where the characters relate to the policy event; this sometimes being arranged sequentially—beginning, middle, and end (Shanahan et al. 2018, Jones et al. 2022; Roe 1994; Somers 1992). This paper aims to show how the temporal line—*beginning, middle, end*, can be made into a circular narrative. While Downs (1972) famously conceived the "Issue Attention Cycle" to explain the dynamics of attention to policy issues, there is a lack of NPF literature that attempts to conceptualize a circular narrative, therefore this paper will employ narrative theory from outside the field of the extant policy literature.

Narrative *content* constitutes the more specific (although potentially generalizable) conceptualizations and relationships that can be observed within policy narratives: paradigms and narrative strategies, which include managing the scope of the conflict, causal mechanisms, and the "devil/angel shift" (Shanahan et al. 2022). The *devil* shift refers to the tendency for policy actors to amplify the power and malevolence of opponents; whereas the *angel* shift defines the tendency to overstate the power and virtues of allies (Gronow et al. 2022) and the glorification (Merry 2017) of one's own coalition. The NPF hypothesizes that actors "*who are portraying themselves as losing on a policy issue will use narrative elements to expand the policy issue to increase the size of their coalition*," and vis-a-vis—those who are performatively winning will seek to contain it (Jones and McBeth 2010, 346). In another UK (Scottish) government-based study, Sarah Pralle's conflict management model is used to revise assumptions regarding this NPF dichotomy of *winning and losing* coalitions (Stephan 2020, also see Gottlieb et al. 2018). In this case study of the Scottish fracking debate, both pro and anti-fracking coalitions attempt to affect the policy outcome through expansion strategies, whereas the only actor that seeks containment is the Scottish government (the main regulator). Stephan (2020) also suggests a more nuanced casting of character archetypes which includes *allies*; not lionized as *heroes* but having the potential to become them; the Scottish government is sometimes being constructed as *ally*. In the pandemic narrative, as this paper argues, the importance of *allies* becoming *heroes* is a significant character development—as is the emergence of deviants who are abetting the main *villain*—the (albeit non-human) virus itself. Shanahan et al. (2018) lean toward the author's intention, in treating abstractions or non-human characters as elements that can possess agency, and, as such, retain character status in the majority of NPF applications.

3.3 | Narrative, the NPF, and COVID-19

In the NPF literature, Peterson et al. (2022) explore partisanship, narrative attention, and agreement between a focus on *problems*: narratives of fear, and *solutions*: narratives of hope, in the context of COVID-19 in the US. The authors find that Democrats preferred to focus on stories of fear, where it was perceived their voting base would be more likely to support restrictive policy; however, while the findings show that agreement with narratives and restrictions is related, neither

narrative treatment altered support for restrictions, which points to the potential limits for narratives to affect existing preferences in issues of high salience such as COVID-19 (Peterson et al. 2022).

A comparative study of localization of policy narratives between Germany and the UK finds that while both country's leaders used a "crisis" frame as a narrative setting the use of *war* as a setting is far more prevalent in the UK (Mintrom et al. 2021). *Security*, having expanded beyond actual military matters over time, now includes policy issues such as public health (MacFarlane and Khong 2006). The identified existential threat, emergency measures, and breach of the normal rules regarding the governance of behavior, effectively "securitize" a policy issue (Buzan et al. 1998, 5–6), and thus the acute nature of the crisis in March 2020, warranted a "martial" discourse aiming to prevent deaths "by countering enemies" (Huysmans 1998, 236). In the wider literature on narrative (McCormick 2020; Jarvis 2021; Kettel and Kerr 2022), the constructed nature of UK pandemic discourse is examined, and Musolff et al. (2022) explore the use of war as a metaphor and the militarization of policy discourse in a wide range of contexts. Part of the findings show that most countries presented COVID-19 as either an *enemy of the state* or a temporary medical crisis and promoted narratives that imbued responsibility on citizens to protect public health institutions pitched against the demand for civil liberties. In a comparative study of the US and UK, Baele and Rousseau (2023) find that it is not purely the metaphorical use of war—hard security—which can be used to securitize an issue; the *biopolitical* repertoire employed by the UK government centered on the purpose of *saving lives*; this constituted more linguistic securitization than the US war repertoire, directed at China, for example. Securitizing language and the use of war as a metaphorical frame are key in creating a strong *setting*, a stage on which policy actors can operate (or be operated).

Mintrom and O'Connor (2020) determine the common characteristics in the policy narratives of different political leaders and their response to COVID-19 in the US. As part of their findings, they conclude that the narrative around policy needs to be both recognizable and appealing to a range of the population, and, while the narrative that accompanies implementation must distinctly elucidate the policy decision, the important *moral elements* of that narrative need to be recognizable in both the purpose and impacts of those policies (Mintrom and O'Connor 2020). Aligning social norms, are important in functioning to condition "the thoughts and actions of broader populations," and attempts to control specific behaviors, for example, will only succeed if they are framed as being "consistent with prevailing social norms" (Mintrom and O'Connor 2020, 206).

4 | Methodology

A quantitative, structuralist, and positivist (Jones and McBeth 2010, 330) approach underpins the empirical research methodology; using both content and discourse analysis to present narrative components qualitatively. Coding was designed using the NPF codebook (Shanahan et al. 2017, 12) to produce a metric that illustrates the patterns dynamic in the narrative. The data are based on two sources: firstly (and primarily), direct

public statements from policy elites; these are televised briefings, (either made from 10 Downing Street or in the House of Commons), made by government ministers (chiefly the Prime Minister, but also including the Health Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer). Secondly, the front pages of UK newspapers reporting on policy issues (as a conduit to the main narrator—government). The front page is an important indicator of what newspapers consider to be the most critical information for public discourse (Reisner 1992): for agenda setting (Pasternack and Utt 1995) and therefore usefully measure the relative space afforded to policy issues and the power and importance of political actors (Ban et al. 2019). The rationale for using these two sources is to provide an analysis of the most salient texts in the communication of the policy narrative across those televised direct communications by the government: *speeches* and those summarized by private media: *front pages*. It is beyond the scope of this research to analyze other sources of communication, such as online media or television news broadcasts; however, it does attempt to capture both in the macro textual projections—*front pages*, as well as the micro textual detail of the actual narrations—*ministerial speeches*. In addition, the content and discourse analysis include the following: the Department of Health and Social Care's (DHSC) (2021a) "Stay at Home" and "Stay Alert" mantas, and the (2021b) campaign "Look them in the Eyes." These texts form evidence of the government's manipulation of narrative elements to expand conflict and moralize the narrative.

The time period for the study is the Institute for Government's—IFG (2022) timeline of the pandemic (see Appendix S1), spans March 16, 2020 to December 15, 2021 (although the pandemic officially lasts until February 24, 2022, the date at which all legal restrictions were lifted in the UK (UKHSA 2022)). It highlights key dates significant to the introduction and easing of social distancing/lockdown measures, legislative actions, and key government announcements. These events are used to structure the plot (see Figure 3) to provide an objective presentation of outputs throughout the policy event, to which Harmon's (2003) model is mapped. The primary sources for analysis are those policy announcements published on, or pertaining to, these dates. The timeline is divided into three subdivisions (parts 1, 2, and 3), the first beginning on the March 16, 2020, the beginning of the IFG (2022) timeline; the second beginning on November 5, 2020 (second national lockdown comes into effect in England); and the third beginning on the January 6, 2021 (England enters the third national lockdown).

Data set one ($n = 43$) consists of whole documents, the transcripts of ministerial briefings or statements to the House of Commons: $n = 23$ period one, $n = 7$ period two, $n = 13$ period three. The number of samples reflects both the length of the period and the intensity of policy announcements, changes in restrictions, and changes in legislation.

The second data set ($n = 343$) consists of newspaper front pages (49 editions of 7 newspapers). Divided into the same periods as above, the division of data is as follows: One: $n = 183$, two: $n = 56$, and three: $n = 104$. The scope of the study limits analysis to newspapers published at the time of these key policy events and is limited to 7 UK newspapers: *The Daily Mail, The Daily Express, The Daily Mirror, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Independent*, and *The London Evening Standard*, which reflect the political spectrum and demographic of newspaper readership in England (Smith 2017; MBFC 2021). The scope of the study is limited to England, and while only six of the newspapers are national, *The London Evening Standard* is a publication with a large readership. Future research should include a wider coverage of the press in devolved nations of the UK. The scope is limited to testing for evidence of the explicit use of the following elements by the authors of the source (coded 1). Where there is no evidence of this code it is recorded as 0. Where the document source is a newspaper headline, the source is recorded as 0 if the headline does not refer to the policy issue or refers to the policy issue but does not contain any of the following narrative components. All data are recorded in the NPF codebook (See Appendix S2) and example coding for empirical data is provided in Appendix S4.

4.1 | Setting

This can be understood as both the spatial and the broader social–economic–geographic–political context that the audience is to focus on (Shanahan et al. 2018), and therefore understand the narrative. The key settings presented by the government are *crisis* and *war*. While the original NPF codebook did not include a sheet for this component, to support the qualitative analysis, this is the most appropriate way to provide a quantitative metric.

4.2 | Characters

Heroes are *the NHS* (including social care workers), *the public*, *science* (including government scientific advisors, researchers, and pharmaceutical companies), *government, the Prime Minister, and other individuals*.

These heroes are framed in direct struggle with *villains*: *the virus, deviants* (including people not obeying the social distancing rules imposed and stay-at-home orders), *the unvaccinated*, and *political elites* (including ministers and advisors).

Victims, those under threat from villains, and in need of salvation from *hero* agents, are *the NHS* and *the public* (particularly *the elderly* and *children*). The clear evidence of the positioning of the virus as the main villain aligns with the architecture of most NPF applications, which give non-human characters agency and maintain character status (Shanahan et al. 2018).

4.3 | The Moral of the Story

Coded 1 if the following policy solutions offered or instructed are present: *social distancing* (including stay-at-home orders), *vaccination, testing, mask wearing*, and *unity* (including references to collective action and resolve).

For presentation of the empirical data for *Setting—Characters* and *The Moral of the Story*, see Figures 3–7 in Analysis—Government briefings are labeled as "Gov" and Newspaper
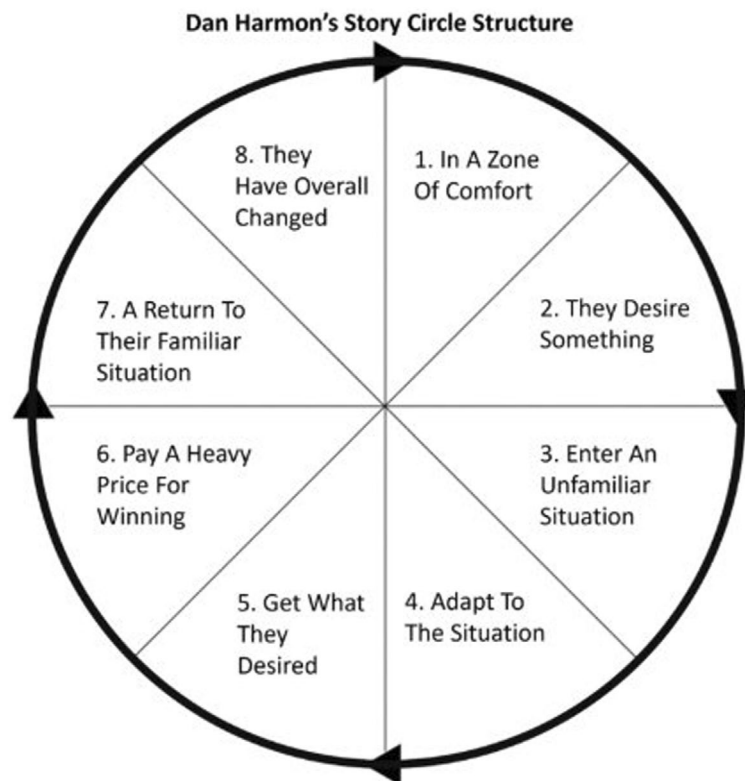
Dan Harmon's Story Circle Structure

FIGURE 1 | Dan Harmon's Story Circle structure (Taylor 2021).

front page headlines are labeled as "Press;" for more detail see Tables S1–S5 in Appendix S3.

4.4 | Plot

Drawing on Joseph Campbell's (1990) theory of the monomyth in *The Hero's Journey*, Dan Harmon (2003) asserts that the "S*tory Circle"* is an algorithm that is the embryo of all satisfying narratives (Myers 2018); a circular journey of eight stages. The vertical line (see Figure 1) is the axis between the status quo of the character *in a zone of comfort* (1) and the depth to which they need to go to *get what they wanted* (5); the horizontal line represents the boundary between the *ordinary world* and the *upside down*, through which the character must journey from the *breach of familiarity* (3) until their return (7); this rhythm is hardwired into the human nervous system and can be identified in biology, psychology, and society (Harmon 2003). It is important in the analysis of the pandemic for two reasons: Firstly, this model shows us how, to commit to the policy narrative, the central character—*the hero citizen*—must enter the unfamiliar "upside-down"[2] world of "lockdown," for the government to achieve its policy outcomes. Secondly, once the hero returns from the upside-down world to a *new normal*—the cycle will repeat in a trilogy of *lockdowns*.

The plot innovation uses the policy events as presented in the IFG timeline (see Appendix S1) mapped to Harmon's (2003) Story Circle (see Figures 1 and 2). The plot is the central dynamic of the narrative—and it follows the period before the lockdowns (in the story circle stages 1 and 2)—the moment that a national lockdown is declared (stage 3), through stages 4, 5, and 6 until the

national lockdown is lifted at stage 7—the return to normalcy. The circular plot then follows policy outputs through stage 8 and back through 1 and 2 as the policy narrative descends again into lockdown (stage 3). Therefore, the fixed points in this narrative mapping of the policy narrative are stages 3 and 7, which are the entrance and exit points for the *hero citizen* into and out of the *upside down* (Harmon 2003) of the national lockdown. This circular narrative is repeated three times and, as can be seen from Figure 2a–c, there is an overlap of the timeline in parts 1 and 2 of the circle as events draw the *hero* character from a zone of (relative) normalcy and *comfort*—to the need for stronger policy solutions—and eventually to the decisive moment of lockdown (3).

4.5 | Analysis: *Plot*

The plot of the story follows a trilogy of stay-at-home orders; three turns of a cycle (see Figure 2a–c). Following Hancock's (2020a) declaration of war, the eve of the first lockdown aligns with the need for something (a policy solution), which could successfully be achieved within 12 weeks, but only if we *all* took the steps into a *new normal* (Johnson 2020a). The dawning of "Lockdown Britain" (Groves 2020) represented the crossing of the boundary between the *ordinary world* and the *upside down*. Both moral obligation and agency are given to the *citizen hero* to—"*Stay at home—Protect the NHS—Save lives*" (DHSC 2021a). The short-term aim of the policy to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed (Johnson 2020d) and for the daily number of deaths to stop climbing is achieved and the peak of the pandemic is declared (Johnson 2020e)—the policy achieves its desired outcome stage 5—but then pays a heavy price stage 6—the economy requires the opening up of society again. After the plot had reached the end of the first phase of the conflict
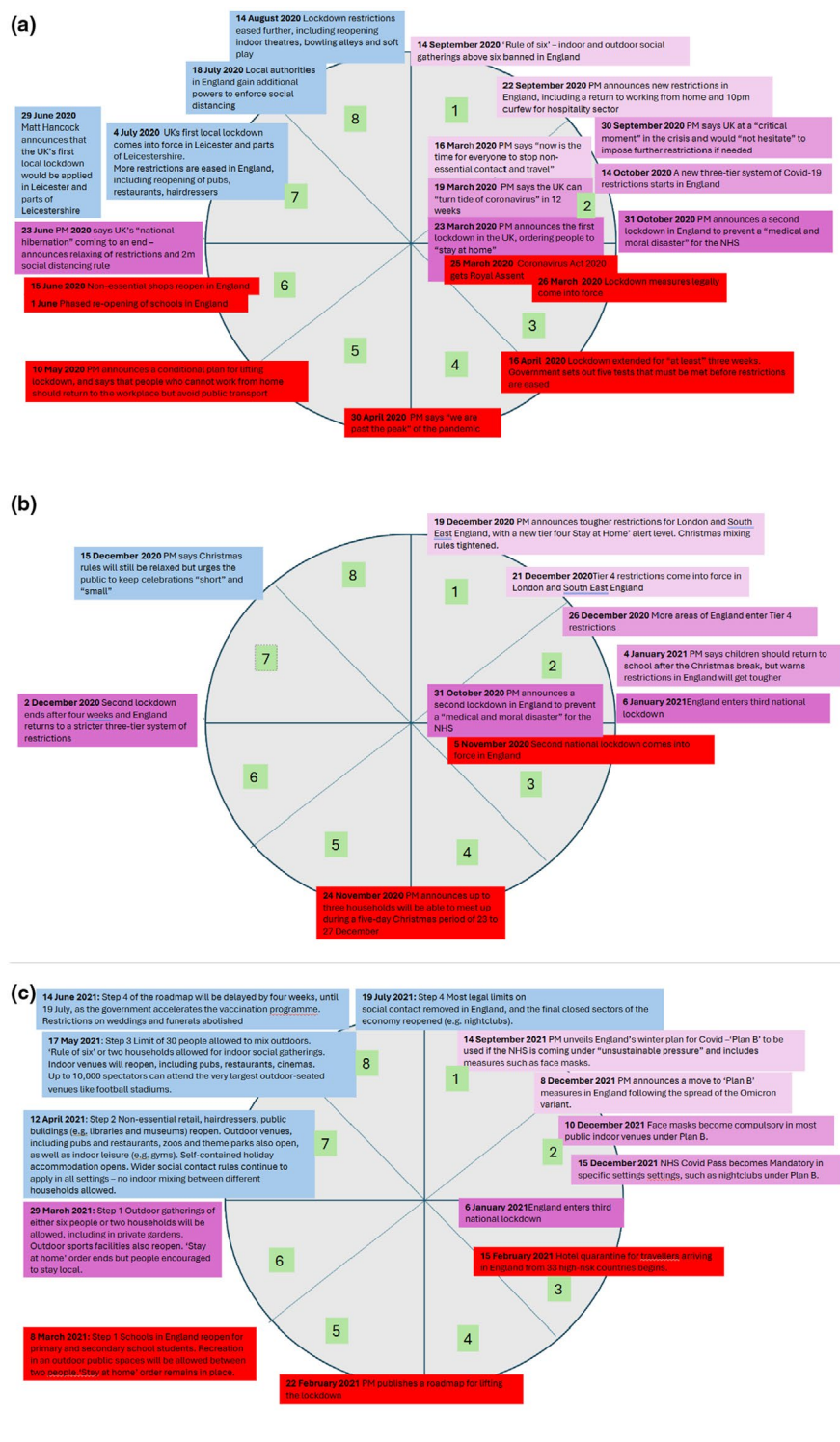
FIGURE 2 | (a) Part 1 Mapping events in the IFG (2022) "UK government timeline of coronavirus lockdowns and measures" March 16, 2020—October 31, 2020, to the "Story Circle" (Harmon 2003; Taylor 2021). (b) Part 2 Mapping events in the IFG (2022) "UK government timeline of coronavirus lockdowns and measures" October 31, 2020–January 2, 2021, to the "Story Circle" (Harmon 2003; Taylor 2021). (c) Part 3 Mapping events in the IFG (2022) "UK government timeline of coronavirus lockdowns and measures" January 6, 2021–December 15, 2021, to the "Story Circle" (Harmon 2003; Taylor 2021).

(Johnson 2020d) at stage 7, the mantra was changed to the less cogent: "*Stay alert—Control the virus—Save lives*" (Conservative Party 2020). Alternation between these two mantras can be observed through the three episodes of the story circle; the 2020 November lockdown and the January 2021 lockdown both saw the reinstatement of the mantra of the stay-at-home order—*protecting the NHS and saving lives.*

As we come back to the *ordinary*, stage 7, we are reminded that the virus has not gone away (Johnson 2020i), the fight is far

from over (Johnson 2020h), and by October 2020, we were entering a crucial stage in the fight that would necessitate crossing the threshold once more (see Figure 2b), and the policy obtains a win with the declaration of a family plan for Christmas (an objective of October lockdown being to avoid a Christmas lockdown). The point of return from this shorter lockdown is December 2nd; however, the situation deteriorates and mixing rules are tightened in the run-up to Christmas. Despite plans to reopen schools for the new term, the cycle is to repeat a third time, as the threat would soon return and the situation, "alas" is worse than had been hoped (Johnson 2020s), had deteriorated (Johnson 2020t) to the extent that we must once more cross the threshold on January 6, 2021, entering the *upside down* to face a new yet familiar enemy: a terrifying variant of the virus (Johnson 2021a). After Delta, there was yet another incarnation: Omicron, which despite most restrictions having been lifted by mid-July, threatened to run a fourth cycle, as can be seen in the increasingly restrictive and prescriptive policy announcements through the autumn and winter of 2021 (see Figure 2c).

The use of the story circle functions to illustrate how the patterns are repeated until the narrative reaches a satisfactory outcome—escaping the circle at the end of 2021, with the end of all restrictions in February 2022. The government needs to use the emergency lockdown measures to control the virus, and while this is successful in the short term, the need to re-open the economy—which pays the *heavy price* for this policy—necessitates their lifting. The loss of control over the virus—as presented by the scientific data requires the return to lockdown. This is representative of government's response in real-time to the event; however, its framing of the *characters, setting*, and *moral to the story*, and how these elements relate to *the plot*, reveal the constructed nature of the narration of the "crisis."

4.6 | Setting

Crises have been prevalent in 21st century policy discourse; the *credit crisis* 2008–9, the European *migrant crisis* 2016, not to mention the ongoing global *climate crisis*. However, COVID-19 was described as the "single biggest crisis the world has faced" (Johnson 2020m), "the biggest single challenge"—"since the war" (Johnson 2020d), requiring restrictions on freedom of a kind that we had "never seen before in peace *or* war" (Johnson 2020f), and as Hay (1996) suggests the construction of a crisis, through its linguistic and rhetorical narration, help condition the public to accept decisive intervention, and even paradigm change. Crisis requires an identifiable story which outlines the challenge itself and who the players are within it; this frame can be effective in mobilizing political action, promoting collective values, and fostering solidarity (Millar et al. 2020).

When the first cases of coronavirus were reported in England on January 31, 2020, Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty (2020), reassured the public that the NHS was "extremely well prepared and used to managing infections;" however, a month later, the threat assessment had changed and so too had the framing of the issue. Now presented in military terms: the PM would chair a COBRA meeting to prepare

a *battle plan*, and a cross-government *war room* would be set up to meet the challenge (McCormick 2020). On March 16, the Health secretary declared: "We are in a war against an invisible killer, and we have got to do everything we can to stop it" (Hancock 2020a), the NHS being "the front line of the fight" (Johnson 2020c). This "NHS front line" (Hancock 2020b) was a recurrent theme in ministerial briefings in the first period of the pandemic.

On April 27, to control the narrative, Johnson (2020d) declared his belief that "we are coming now to the end of the first phase of this conflict;" on April 30, although "the data" showed "we're winning the battle," Hancock (2020b) reminded us that we were still "in the midst of a war against an invisible enemy." The PM rallied the public in the summer months that "we must carry on waging this long, hard fight" (Johnson 2020h), the "community spirit of the British people" in following the rules, would "see us to victory over this virus" (Johnson 2020i). The war frame was echoed on the front pages of UK newspapers in the first period of the pandemic. On March 25, both the *Mail*: "Now here's how YOU can help Britain" (Borland, 2020a), and the *Independent*: "Medics giving their all on the front line—Your NHS needs you" (Lintern and Buchanan 2020), used Lord Kitchener's 1914 "Britons—wants YOU: Join Your Country's Army" frame (IWM 2022). The *Evening Standard* ran with "New Dawn for London" (Murphy et al. 2020), with a full-page image of military trucks crossing Westminster Bridge. Heading the call to arms, the following day, the *Daily Express* led with "505,303 Join army of kindness" (Cutler 2020), the *Mirror* with "Army of Kindhearts" (Hawkins 2020). By July, the *Express* channeled the government communication: "We're winning battle against Covid-19" (Geissler 2020), and the *Mail*, in August, with the promise of "90-minute tests to transform the war on Corona" (Borland 2020b). Following the second lockdown at the beginning of November, the war narrative is absent from the front pages sampled (see Figure 3); however, it was still very much present in the executive communications, Johnson (2020q) returning to the "NHS frontline" and heralding the coming of an important character in this war narrative, in reference to the government's securing of 350 million doses of the vaccine:

> We are not out of the woods yet, we can hear the drumming hooves of the cavalry coming over the brow of the hill, but they are not here yet.
>
> (Johnson 2020p)

This is indicative of how biomedicine—*science*—became a key hero in the militarized narrative—coming to save the British people. In December, after "waiting and hoping for the day when the searchlights of science would pick out our invisible enemy," Johnson (2020q) declared that the breakthrough had come, "the scientists" had "done it;" and after 138,000 citizens had received the first dose of the vaccine—with "more joining them every minute," there was no doubt we would "win our long struggle against this virus" (Johnson 2020p). On December 19, as more restrictions were introduced, the PM explained that "when the virus changes its method of attack, we must change our method of defence" (Johnson 2020s). The third national lockdown reprised the "great national effort to fight Covid" (Johnson 2021a) and, as Omicron advanced in the last quarter of 2021, the "great national fight back" had begun
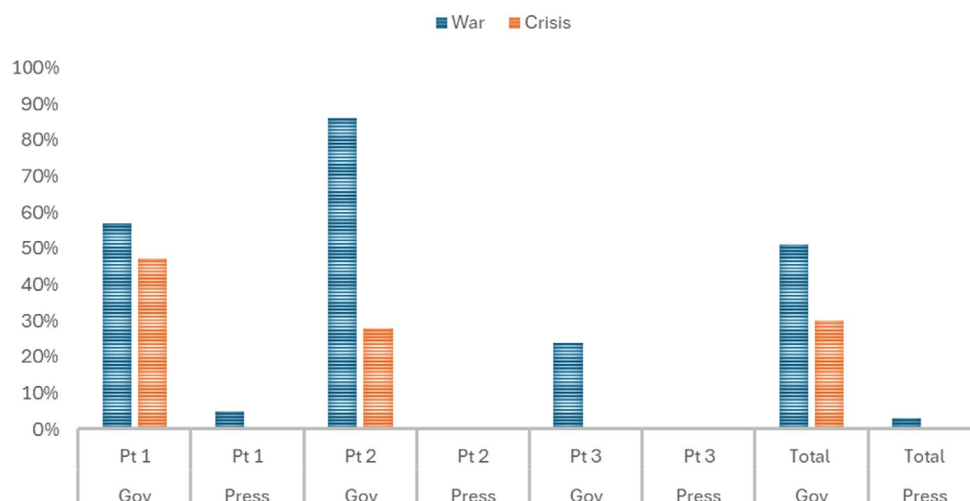
SETTINGS

FIGURE 3 | *Settings*—percentage of ministerial briefings and newspaper headlines.

again: citizens responding "with an amazing spirit of duty and obligation to others;" everyone rolling up their sleeves "to get jabbed" assisting the "national effort" (Johnson 2021d). The public were urged to continue wearing face masks and get tested, so we can "carry on giving Omicron both barrels" and achieve the final victory through booster vaccinations (Johnson 2021d). The rhetoric of war and crisis dissipated in the period following the third lockdown in early 2021, and the sample of UK newspaper headlines on the 24th of February, the day at which all restrictions were lifted, is almost entirely focused on the impending real war in Ukraine, which replaces both media and government discourse. Significantly February 24th was also the day that Russia invaded Ukraine, definitively reorientating the agenda.

The world wars remain a highly effective script (Calder 1991), and through the invocation of this political myth, government could attempt to control the narrative. The war setting created a context in which the character archetypes could be cast and importantly imbued with the same moral purpose for which the nation had fought two world wars, the agent of the story being the *hero* character.

4.7 | Characters: Heroes

The National Health Service (NHS) has endured as an essential symbol and anchor of British social and political life (Katwala 2013); in the pandemic, it played two fundamental roles. The *superheroification* of the NHS was visually evident in abundant street art (Mitman 2020), and the government was keen to utilize this alignment. Ministers paid "tribute" (Hancock 2020a) to the "amazing work" of the NHS (Johnson 2020a), and as the number of fatalities grew among the staff, tribute was given to those who "have given their lives in service, in sacrifice—we salute you" (Hancock 2020b); "their sacrifice" would "not be forgotten" (Patel 2020). *The Independent* (2020) rallied: "Clap for our carers—show your support for the NHS at 8 pm," the *Mirror*: "Nation salutes NHS heroes—Your country loves

you" (2020), and yet, while the analysis shows that the NHS is clearly framed as hero, it is not the only role it played; it was also a key *victim*, in need of salvation by a *hero*—the British public (also see Chalaya et al.'s (2024) study into *audience as hero*). The public themselves are also presented as victims and the relationship between the two is described thus: "We created a human shield around the NHS and in turn our doctors and nurses have protected us" (Johnson 2020i). For data on these multiple roles, see Figures 4 and 5. The aligning *hero* and *victim* in the narrative is essential in affirming its *moral* purpose.

Science, an important ally in the war against the enemy, becomes a key *hero*—particularly in the period following the second lockdown. A breakthrough was made possible by the "ingenuity of British scientists" (Johnson 2020o). Following the "good news" that Pfizer, BioNTech, Moderna, Oxford University and the "Great British company" Astra Zeneca, had begun clinical trials; we could hear those "drumming hooves of the cavalry" (Johnson 2020p); the scientists had performed "a kind of biological jiu-jitsu" (Johnson 2020q). Following "the science" was now more crucial to victory than ever (Johnson 2020t). On the eve of the third national lockdown, thanks to the "miracle of science," not only was "the end in sight" but now we knew exactly how we would get there (Johnson 2021a). This emphasizes the importance of controlling the narrative through looking both *back* and *forward to outcomes*.

Individual heroes play a fundamental role in the narrative; most notably, centenarian Captain Tom Moore, who raised 33 million for the NHS by walking lengths of his garden. Johnson (2020d) promised that victory over the virus was possible, but only if we as a country could "show the same spirit of optimism and energy." Captain Tom's central *purpose*, his "cultural script" drawing on "powerful symbolic elements" (McCormick 2020, 336), was crucial to the meaning of *the hero*; defining "an arc stretching from the past to the future via the present" (Alexander 2010, 64), propelling the narrative from despair through redemption and toward glory
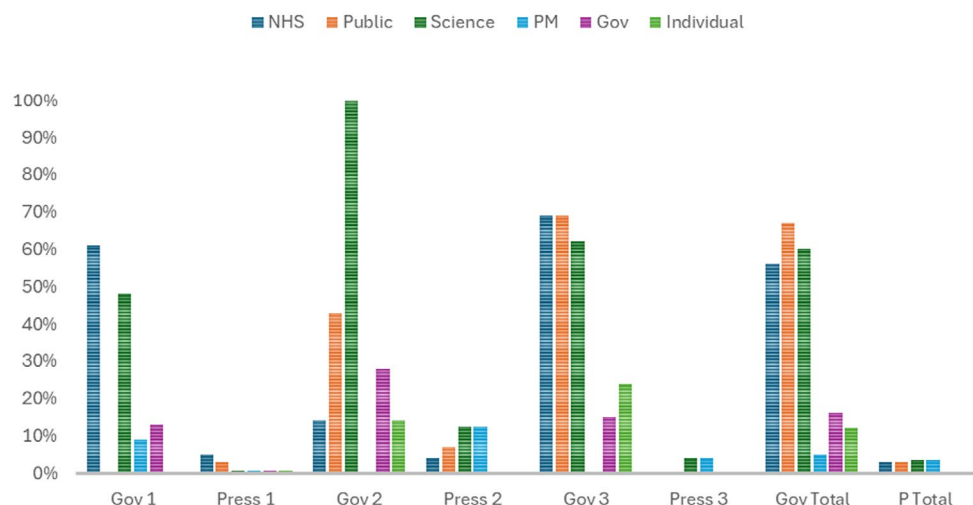
HEROES

FIGURE 4 | *Hero* archetypes—*percentage* of ministerial briefings and newspaper headlines.
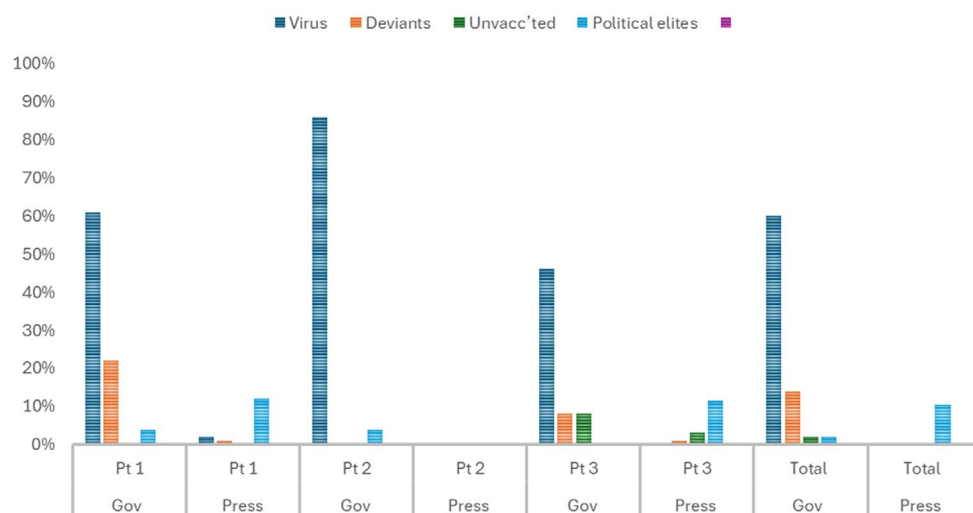
VILLAINS

FIGURE 5 | *Villain* archetypes—*percentage* of ministerial briefings and newspaper headlines.

(McCormick 2020). This symbolism operated on multiple levels; firstly, substantiating the parallels between WWII and the pandemic through a hero from that "sacred time in British history;" but not simply *representing* cherished national characteristics, but *embodying* them through his walk (McCormick 2020). This also points toward the importance of *agency*; we as individuals *can* make a difference in the collective outcome. Individuals also featured at the end of 2021 as the vaccination booster campaign was underway, Johnson (2021d) praised individual "Jab heroes" like Kim Kirk delivering "80,000 jabs and counting." In terms of narrative transportation, it is easier for us to identify with a single character as hero, and, as we ourselves had been given the role of hero citizen, we would require a role *model*.

The Prime Minister was also framed as a hero, following the hero's journey of his own story circle (Harmon 2003; Taylor 2021, see Figure 1). At first, the premier was reluctant to commit to the coming policy narrative, laughing off the threat, and shaking hands with coronavirus patients (Reuters News Agency 2020), but is later struck down by the virus, where he enters the *upside down* (2003) and must fight the enemy directly, nearly dying in the process. Meanwhile, on April 20, the *Express* led with "We need Boris!—Race to put PM back in charge" (Brown 2020). On his return, he was able to fuse his personal experience with the political moment and use his recovery as a metonym for the national resilience required to defeat the virus (Jarvis 2021). Johnson (2020d) thanked the NHS, but also the public for their "sheer grit and guts," asserting that we were now turning the tide in the battle, and hypothesized with this vivid metaphor:

> If this virus were a physical assailant, an unexpected and invisible mugger, which I can tell you from

personal experience it is, then this is the moment when we have begun together to wrestle it to the floor.

Johnson embodies the hero, in hand-to-hand combat with the invisible assailant—significantly the *citizen hero* is embraced in the wrestle too. This theme continues, whereby the government and the heroic public are not only on the same side but are *as one*. This again strengthens the alignment between the heroic and victim elements, which must, of course, be juxtaposed with *villains*.

4.8 | Characters: Villains

The predominant *villain* is the virus itself (see Figure 5). On March 16, Hancock (2020a) defined it as "an invisible killer," and the solution was "to remove the cloak of invisibility" (Johnson 2020a); through the hero *science* "shining the light" on the enemy (Johnson 2020f). The casting of the virus as the *villain* is an obvious counterpoint to understand the purpose of the *hero*, however aside the non-human virus, there are, of course, humans within the narrative that become highlighted as enemies to the *heroes*, in the sense that they are aiding (and abetting) the *villain*.

The deviants to social distancing rules, the "small minority," were threatened with increasing sanctions (Johnson 2020f), the *Express* communicated the message from the Home Secretary: "Patel warns selfish rulebreakers" (Hall 2020), and, as the lockdown was eased, the *Mail* led with the government's promise: "We will lock up Super Saturday hooligans" (Walters and Borland 2020). As the second lockdown approached, the PM focused blame on deviants: "while the vast majority have complied with the rules there have been too many breaches—too many opportunities for our invisible enemy to slip through undetected" (Johnson 2020m). At the beginning of 2021, the Home Secretary increased fines and gave the police more power to deal with the "small minority" who refused to "do the right thing;" this juxtaposed with "the

sacrifices that millions" were "making day in, day out" in contribution to the "national effort" (Patel 2021). In this following speech, the public is positioned as both *villain* and *victim*, where *science* and *state* (in the form of the police) are both defined as *heroes*.

> The science is clear: such irresponsible behaviour poses a significant threat to the public—not only to those in attendance, but also to the wonderful police officers who attend to shut down these events.
>
> (Patel 2021)

As social distancing rules were relaxed and the booster vaccination program was rolled out, the focus of deviancy from the new normal shifted to the more complicated issue of vaccination. By July 2021, it was the three million "completely unvaccinated" 18–30-year-olds who posed the greatest threat to the public and the NHS (Johnson 2021c). These deviant groups became, in contrast to the compliant *hero citizen*, "folk devils" in the narrative, to use the lens of Stanley Cohen's (1972, 2002) moral panic theory (also see Panchev 2013; Garland 2008; Ben-Yehuda and Goode 2008). The polarization of society is a plausible outcome of this framing strategy—whereby the audience of government communications—the *citizen*—is fractured between the roles of *hero*, *victim*, and *villain*. However, it is worth noting that the predominant *villain* character present throughout the whole period in the newspaper front pages sampled was political elites (see Figure 6); this was generally on the topic of government inadequacy (Hayward 2020; Crearer 2020) or hypocrisy (Line and Groves 2021; Groves and Bagot 2021; Crearer 2021).

4.9 | Characters: Victims

In government briefings, both NHS and public were presented as both heroes (see Figure 4) and victims (see Figure 6). In the beginning, the focus on protection of the elderly was significant in newspaper headlines: "Let's pull together for our elderly
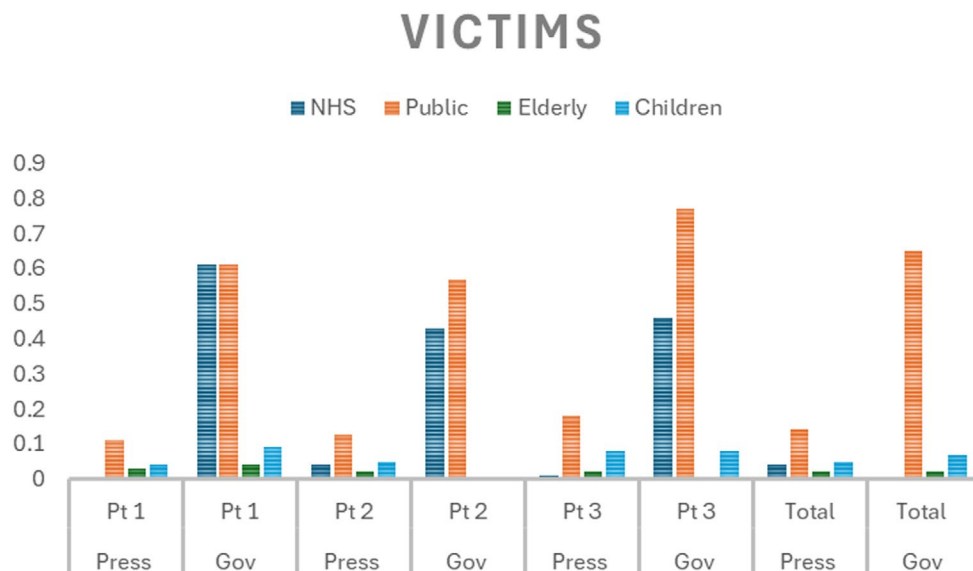

FIGURE 6 | *Victim* archetypes—*percentage* of ministerial briefings and newspaper headlines.

Britain" (Keogh et al. 2020); "Save our elderly" (Bagot 2020). The image of vulnerable children was also utilized by the press to appeal for adherence to the stay-at-home order, e.g., "Please stay at home for me" (O'Leary 2020), with an accompanying photo of a clinically vulnerable child. Children were key victims of the virus, which threatened to "damage our children's futures" (Johnson 2020n). The individual victims used in the Department of Health and Social Care's (2021b) "Look them in the eyes" campaign were named (Anthony, Lorna, Tony) to emphasize that they were real people, suffering as a direct result of the actions of a deviant public—emphasizing the moral purpose of the narrative through the roles of *victim* and *villain*.

4.10 | The Moral of the Story

The moral of the story is where a solution to the policy problem is offered (Jones and McBeth 2010). The primary solution in the first period is social distancing—including the stay-at-home order (see Figure 7). Social distancing, which became stay-at-home orders, would "send coronavirus packing" but only if we all took "the steps" (Johnson 2020a) "collectively" (Johnson 2020b). The appeal for a unified approach is manifest in the government briefings throughout the first phase of the crisis. The chancellor asserted "we are all in this together," the "unprecedented" economic support package would get the nation "through it together and emerge on the other side both stronger and more united" (Sunak 2020). As the decisive quick win over the virus became more unlikely, the public were urged that "together, united, we must keep up this national effort for a while longer;" it had been "an incredible national team effort," and, to prevent the coronavirus from having "a second chance," the public were rallied to "stick together" and "see this through" (Raab 2020); "when the world unites against a common foe, we will always prevail" (Hancock 2020b). The *moral of the story* was clear: due to "collective national resolve" the "first clear mission" of the policy response, "to prevent our national health service from being overwhelmed," was achieved (Johnson 2020d). The next phase of the war could only be won by maintaining this "collective discipline."

> I know we can do it, because we did it, we've shown we can do it, in phase one of this disease. This country came together in a way few of us have seen in our lifetimes.
>
> (Johnson 2020e)

The public was urged to "embrace that spirit of national unity" through continuing adherence to the gain framing mantra: "to stay at home, to protect the NHS and save lives" (Patel 2020). Freedoms were earned through "collective effort" (Johnson 2020h), because we had "persevered together and stuck to our path" (Johnson 2020j). Progress was made "together, as a country" (Johnson 2020k) and if we continued "to pull together" (Johnson 2020l), maintaining "the basic disciplines as people have done so heroically," we would "beat it together" (Johnson 2020p). A phenomenon in the early stage of the crisis was *clap for carers*, which was embraced by political elites (Dodsworth 2021), and the press: the *Independent* (2020) leading with "Clap for our carers—show your support for NHS at 8 pm." Public and political elites stood on their doorsteps every Thursday to clap for carers and the NHS for 10 weeks, sustaining attention on the need for national unity.

In the government briefings sampled, starting with Johnson (2020p), on November 23, heralding the coming of the vaccine "cavalry," getting vaccinated was framed as the *moral* solution: if the NHS contacted you "then get your vaccine" and "as sure as night follows day" we would "beat back this virus" (Johnson 2020s). Vaccination was "the means of our escape" (Johnson 2021b), and was kept in the public agenda via the press, particularly the pro Conservative *Express*, which begins 2021 by channeling the government messaging "PM: Jabs give hope to 10s of millions" (Geissler and Turril 2021), and later in the year, highlighting the campaign as a policy solution, "We need a shot in the arm now" (Hall 2021). By the end of the year, they were giving the full moral weight behind this advocacy in quoting the new health secretary on the front page: "Dear unjabbed—give Britain the best Xmas gift ever (book your vaccination now)" (Javid 2021). In the first period (March to October 2020), the predominant policy
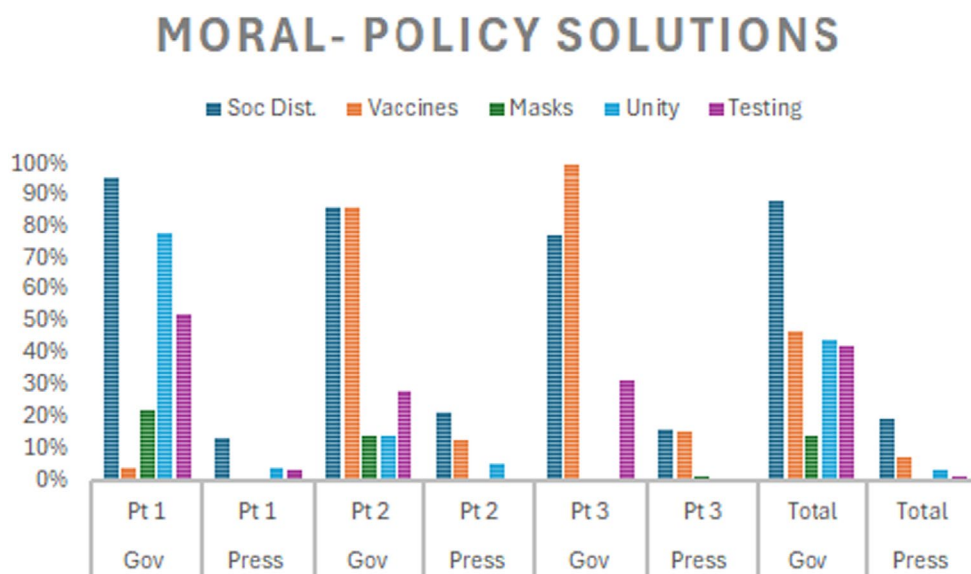

FIGURE 7 | Moral of the Story/Policy Solutions—percentage of ministerial briefings and newspaper headlines.

solution advocated via government briefings is social distancing, including stay-at-home orders (96%), although the explicit appeal for unity is also a key moral to the story (78%). In the middle period (November 2020–January 2021), the advocacy of social distancing and vaccination have equal weighting (86%), and in the final period (January 2021–February 2022), although social distancing remains important (77%), vaccination as the *moral of the story* is manifest in 100% of the communications. This is indicative of how *biomedicine*—in the form of mass vaccination—became the *moral* solution to the policy problem (see Figure 7).

The irony of the moralization strategy was the revelation of double standards between policy elite narrators and the public as both *audience* and key *character*. Johnson's (Johnson 2020g) assurance that, while the hero public was asked to "make sacrifices, to obey social distancing, to stay at home" policy elites had *not* "been flouting those rules" themselves, was to prove false, and ultimately necessitated the downfall of the Johnson premiership.

5 | Discussion

The lockdown mantra: "*Stay at Home—Protect the NHS—Save Lives*" (DHSC, 2021a), which adorned the podiums at the briefings and was also verbally communicated in the briefings themselves, is not only the command, but also the *call to action* for the *hero citizen* to protect the victim—in this case the NHS, crucially with the outcome of *saving lives*. Experiments in equivalence framing (Tversky and Kahneman 1981), and during the pandemic (Hameers 2021; Olmastroni et al. 2021), show the public is more likely to comply with stricter pandemic policies when they are *gain framed*. The agency of the hero *saving lives through compliance* was juxtaposed with the tragedy of the climbing death toll, as presented via the televised briefings. When this death toll was finally in retreat, Johnson (Johnson 2020h) claimed it had only been made possible "thanks to the character and fortitude" of the British people.

The value for policy learning can be observed in the messaging choices of the government; the sequelization through the *story circle* model allowed for the evolution of the character archetypes. In the first cycle, the enemy was clearly identified as the non-human *virus* that we, the public, the NHS, the government—the nation— were facing in this new era of *war* and *crisis*, and would remain the primary *villain*. The wartime setting and linguistic architecture of *war* was an opportunity for an outlet for the martial discourse designed to rally unity and, crucially, compliance with policy. While crisis frame counter-narratives were perpetuated by various populist and far-right movements (Kinnvall and Svensson 2023), the hyperbolic and rhetorical nature of the *martial* communications of *government* may well have led to an erosion of trust in the official narrative, fostering a strengthened belief in counter-narratives and conspiracy theories (Musolff 2022).

By the time we enter the second cycle, the government has at least learned it is possible to achieve compliance through the narrative established in the first phase; w*e could do it again because we had done it before*. What had *changed* was that the human characters— actors in the policy debate—had become consolidated; the focus of antagonism within the *hero—villain—victim* triangle, would now also exist directly between human entities—the *compliant* and the *noncompliant*—those who had chosen to take the *moral* path and those who were stymying the progress of the *hero*, and were therefore to blame for the return to restrictions. In this respect, this aspect of the narrative can be said to reflect Deborah Stone's (2012) plot line—*stymied progress*, where "things were terrible, got better due to a hero, but are getting worse because someone/thing is interfering with the hero's work" (Shanahan et al. 2018, 16–17). It was during the third national lockdown, the government released its hard-hitting media campaign, featuring images of NHS staff and COVID-19 patients, challenging the viewer: "Can you look them in the eyes and tell them you're helping by staying at home?" (DHSC 2021b). An accompanying billboard poster campaign simply demanded that the viewer look the victims (COVID-19 patients with breathing apparatus), in the eye and tell them that "you always keep your distance," "you never bend the rules," or that "the risk isn't real" (Mullen Lowe Group UK 2021). At the bottom of each poster was the reprised lockdown mantra "Stay at Home—Protect the NHS—Save Lives" of the *hero* citizen, but the most salient message was that directed at the *deviant* public. In this campaign the guilt of the citizen was assumed, cleaving the role of the public into *hero* and *villain*.

The alignment of *hero public, NHS*, and *government* with the ally *science* in the first episode of the narrative, which brings us through the *upside-down* world of an end to freedom and liberties to (an albeit new) normality, comes to fruition in the policy narrative of the second cycle with the *coming of the cavalry*—the second cycle of the story which sees the D-Day moment for the global pharmaceutical industry. While being *guided by the science* was framed as transparent and objective (Jarvis in Musolff et al. 2022), government communications effectively expanded conflict through binding the character *science* with the moralized coalition, which, through each new iteration of the story circle, is made stronger.

The purpose of the narrative (McClosky 1990; Fischer 2003) and *moral weight* placed upon the citizen, is essential to understanding its potential political and sociological consequences. Pharma had been framed as hero—savior (Kuchler and Moony 2020), and immunization had been transformed into a *moral* issue. Through the development of Western medicine, the globally dominant paradigm is "biomedicine;" neoliberalism's "deep core" (Rushton and Williams 2012, 147; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Campbell 2002) and biomedicine converging in what can be understood as "biopower" (also see King 2002). While frames operate in the "cognitive foreground" (Rushton and Williams 2012, 156), biomedicine had maintained a "value-neutral techno-scientific" frame avoiding "normative" status (Rushton and Williams 2012, 157), previously not even possessing the latency to become a *moral* issue, being defined as *non-morality* policy in Knill's (2013) typology.

Through the analysis of the pandemic policy narrative, regarding *narrative content*, it is possible to suggest that biomedicine—*science* had achieved the *angel shift* to provide the of *moral of story*: mass vaccination.

6 | Conclusion

Through a process of collective narrative transportation, the *science* frame was brought out of the background of the policy

debate into the foreground through its binding with the *moral* elements in the first *story circle*—thus in the second—and later third iteration of the narrative cycle, the complexity of the character archetypes had become defined—and with clear lines of antagonism between them. The government's communication strategy was effective in expanding the conflict; despite the government's attempt to control the narrative through emphasizing the message that *we were winning the war*, they also needed to emphasize the role of *villains* in juxtaposition to *heroes* to strengthen their coalition.

The relationship between the frames constructed in the policy foreground and the *rationalist* forces of the background emphasizes the Weberian postulation of the crucial importance of *ideas*, which profoundly impact the chain of events in policy evolution, "serving like switchmen who direct interest-based action down one track or another" (Weber 1946 in Campbell 2002, 21).

This paper maintains that narrative components aligned policy and citizen through binding them with *moral* duty, and policy actors would play multiple roles within the narrative over time. The alignment of narrative components serves as a strategic device, affecting profound policy change. This matters because it not only demonstrates the potential for understanding a mechanism of cyclical narrative, but it also highlights a necessary dynamic of this process: this being the *casting* of policy actors in roles pitched against one another. March 2025 marks 5 years since the UK and much of the world first entered the *upside down* of lockdown; the full impact of the COVID-19 policy narrative is yet to be fully evaluated; however, a deeper understanding of the effects of narrative framing *in* and *of* this policy process should be part of that evaluation.

6.1 | Limitations of Study

Due to the small-scale nature of the study, a single coder (the author) analyzed the data, adhering to the framework guidelines; however, any future study which analyzes a wider source of textual analysis should employ multiple coders for the purposes of greater reliability. The range of media texts was also limited to the headlines of newspaper front pages; however, future empirical research would benefit from a wider range of sources.

While this article has attempted a conceptual demonstration of how the narrative can be understood via the agent of the *hero* and the dynamic role of the characters, future empirical research is required to test the validity and limits of this conceptualization. There is much scope, for example, for further research at the micro level, into the impact of these narrative cycles on the *individual*, as well as at the *institutional* (macro) level.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in UK Government at https://www.gov.uk/government.

Endnotes

[1] NPF research at the meso level focuses on the role of policy narratives in the *agora narrans*—from ancient Greek—a space for citizens to reflect, take action and implement policy goals through compelling narratives (Shanahan et al. 2018).

[2] Aficionados of the Netflix series "Stranger Things" (IMDb n.d.) will be familiar with "the upside down;" a subconscious world made manifest in the narrative, which exists parallel to the "ordinary world," through which the characters must journey and escape back into the conscious world.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.