

# Data journalism in the time of Covid

Pamela Duncan  
[@porcelinad](https://twitter.com/porcelinad)



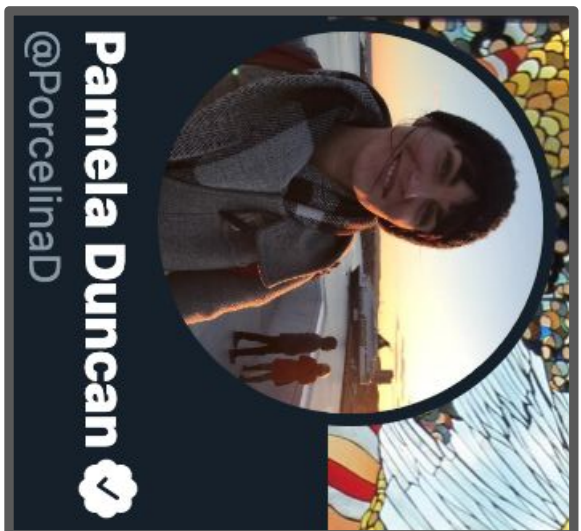


# The Guardian Data Projects team



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# The role of @guardiandata pre-Covid

- Lots of room for coding/innovative approaches
- Collaboration (data specialists + correspondents) + graphics
- Investigations
- Outside collaborations CIJ and OCCRP
- Some short-term but generally medium- and long-term focus
- Teaching/training - skills, stats as well as what we do



**Pamela Duncan**   
@PorcelinaD

⋮

"Three months ago, if you'd met someone at a party and they told you they were a data journalist, you might have moved swiftly on. Today...data journalists have become the rock stars of the news business."

a) Listen out for [@caelainbarr](#) and [@jbm](#) who are on [@BBCRadio4 NOW](#)

4:21 PM · May 13, 2020 · Twitter Web App

 View Tweet activity

**5** Retweets   **3** Quote Tweets   **57** Likes

# When Covid came along

- Sheer volume of data → newsdesk needed our skill set almost daily
  - 5 years - 338 stories -  $\frac{1}{3}$  since March - 106 of 112 about Covid
- Audience developed an appetite for statistics
- Data/science journos act as translators both for newsdesk & readers
- Too many figures confuses more than illuminates
- Statistics = nuance...very hard to put across in 400-700 words



# The trouble with Covid data

- Very early on we discovered holes in the data - e.g. just hospital deaths



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- Very early on we discovered holes in the data - e.g. just hospital deaths
- Realised the data itself wasn't always the story but what was missing

# Early April



## Coronavirus

## Coronavirus UK death toll: why what we think we know is wrong

The figure we are all watching is likely to be an under-report, which is skewing the curve

- [Coronavirus - latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

Caelainn Barr, Pamela  
Duncan *and* Niamh  
McIntyre

Sat 4 Apr 2020 11.38 BST



2,054



[bit.ly/PDCCovid1](https://bit.ly/PDCCovid1)





# The trouble with Covid data

- Very early on we discovered holes in the data - e.g. just hospital deaths
- At this point we realised the data wasn't always the story
- We found problems with how the government were presenting figures

# Early May



**UK news**

## Why No 10's Covid-19 death toll slides don't tell the whole story

Charts are regular feature of daily press briefing but there is little scrutiny of data

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

**Pamela Duncan and Niamh McIntyre**

Tue 5 May 2020 18:42 BST



648



[bit.ly/PDCCovid2](https://bit.ly/PDCCovid2)

# The trouble with Covid data

- Very early on we discovered holes in the data - e.g. just hospital deaths
- At this point we realised the data wasn't always the story
- We found problems with how the government were presenting figures
- And reported on the very real life implications of data errors
  - 16,000 cases → 50,000 contacts → 1,500 deaths



## Health

### How does the PHE statistics error change the UK Covid picture?

15,841 coronavirus cases were not included in official figures, in latest testing data controversy

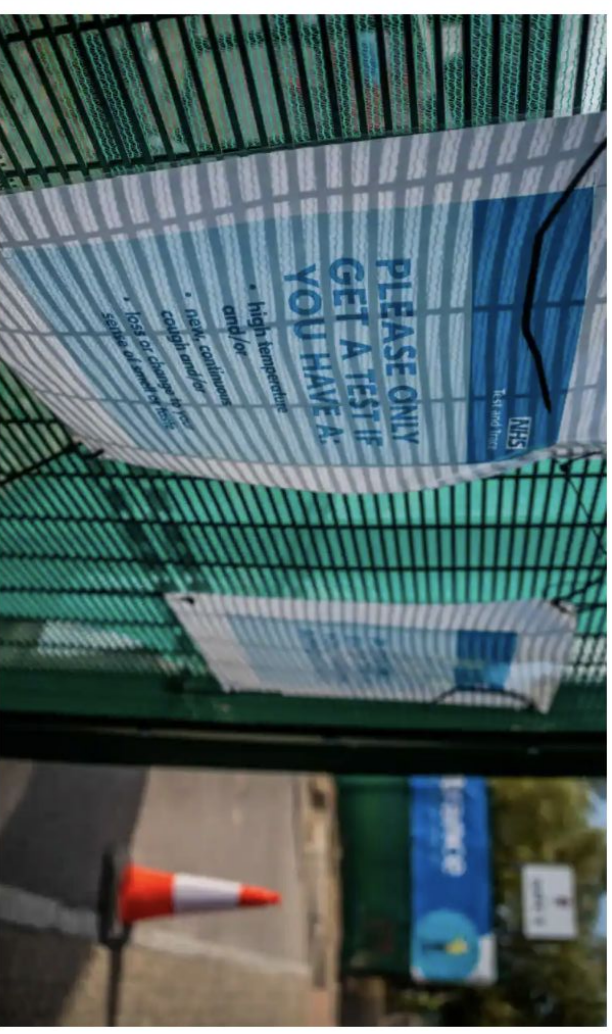
- [Coronavirus - latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

**Niamh McIntyre and  
Pamela Duncan**

Mon 5 Oct 2020 17:09 BST



21



[bit.ly/PDCCovid3](https://bit.ly/PDCCovid3)



# The trouble with Covid data

- Very early on we discovered holes in the data - e.g. just hospital deaths
- At this point we realised the data wasn't always the story
- We found problems with how the government were presenting figures
- And reported on the very real life implications of data errors
  - 16,000 cases missed → 50,000 contacts → 1,500 deaths
- Data errors give fuel to those who say Covid deaths are exaggerated



# August



**Peter Hitchens** @ClarkeMicah · Aug 12

...

A first admission that Covid death totals have been exaggerated. But a more severe examination would cast even deeper doubts: Coronavirus death toll in England revised down by more than 5,000



Coronavirus death toll in England revised down by more than 5,000  
Moves comes because people who may have recovered from virus before they died were still counted in total number  
[theguardian.com](https://theguardian.com)

212

1.3K

2.4K





**How hard can it be to count deaths?\***



**How hard can it be to count deaths?\***

**\*surprisingly hard**



# How hard can it be to count deaths?\*

- From the very beginning we knew deaths (not cases) best metric
- Identified statistical bodies as best count (but with a time lag)
- NOT United Kingdom of data (DHSC, PHE, NHSE, ONS, NRS, NISRA)
- Covid deaths vs excess
- International counting methods (Johns Hopkins)
- Confusion and pushback from readers
- Politicisation of data? Culture wars?



# Late October

“...the author mentions that the quoted death toll of 61,469 includes all deaths that mention Covid on a death certificate - which is a discredited method of counting Covid deaths...”

**The outdoor socialising survival guide**  
What to drink, what to wear, how to stay warm



Wednesday  
28 October 2020  
£2.20  
From £1.75 for subscribers



# The Guardian

## Calls for national lockdown grow as UK death toll exceeds 60,000

**Aamna Mohdin**  
**Pamela Duncan**

The number of people killed by the coronavirus in the UK passed 60,000 yesterday as the country hit a 200-a-day death toll weeks earlier than feared by the government's chief scientific adviser.

The two alarming milestones bolstered calls for a national "circuit breaker" to halt an exponential rise in cases.

A further 367 Covid deaths were confirmed yesterday - the largest number since May, and 265 higher than the previous day. While numbers often fluctuate during and after weekends, this brings the rolling weekly death toll to 200 a day, with 61,469 deaths now reported UK-wide, according to analysis of official data.

More than 9,000 people were in hospital with Covid, with Leeds teaching hospitals NHS trust the latest to cancel some non-urgent operations, saying it had more virus patients than at the peak of the first wave.

Last month, Sir Patrick Vallance, England's chief scientific adviser, warned that the pandemic was growing exponentially and the UK was on course to see 50,000 cases a day by mid-October and 200 deaths a day by mid-November without a significant change in direction. His warning, which he insisted was not a prediction, was criticised by some scientists as "implausible". Confirmed daily cases have not exceeded 27,000.







**Every scientific advisory group has told the government you need to have a circuit breaker'**

**Dr Zubaida Haque**  
Independent Sage group

[bit.ly/PPDCovid4](http://bit.ly/PPDCovid4)

# The positives

- ONS/NRS/NISRA have all been solid, transparent and helpful
- Government API (maintained by PHE) a vast improvement
- Scientific community (inc SMC) - so generous with their time
- Increased data awareness among the public
- Data journalists + statisticians have gone from   to  

# Questions?

**Pamela Duncan**

**@porcelinad**

