Metacrime, Thoughtcrime And The Rise Of Scientific Authoritarianism:

Theodore PETRUS

Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Free State, South Africa

One of the key observations from the Covid-19 pandemic was the rise of scientific authoritarianism, in the wake of contesting narratives around scientific and government overreach in the management of the outbreak. The emergence of cancel culture and digital policing of voices criticising the dominant narratives of vaccination and imposed lockdowns, reflected the criminalisation of dissent. Opposition to government and scientific pronouncements on the pandemic was met with sanction. This article foregrounds the warnings from the pandemic, of the growing policing of metacrime and thoughtcrime in South Africa, as a response to criticism of scientific (and governmental) authoritarianism. The article presents an interdisciplinary perspective on metacrime, thoughtcrime and scientific authoritarianism, within the context of the global and local response to the pandemic, with specific reference to South Africa.

Keywords: Criminality, Variance Crime, Scientific Authoritarianism, Covid-19; South Africa

1.   Introduction

One of the most noticeable features of the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020, was the apparent rise in governmental and scientific authoritarianism in many countries across the world. The pandemic had ushered the global population into a previously unheard of scenario, with many governments and medical scientists scrambling to find ways to contain the spread of the outbreak. These efforts led to some of the most repressive and coercive measures being imposed on populations. Some of these included mask mandates, curfews and harsh national lockdowns. While some supported these interventions, others opposed

them, even going as far as questioning the scientific justification for these measures. Consequently, contesting narratives emerged around perceived governmental and institutional overreach in managing the outbreak. A direct result of these contesting narratives seems to have been, in turn, the rise of "cancel culture" and digital policing in the Metaverse.

On social media platforms, various competing opinions and perspectives on the pandemic, its origins and how it was being managed were populating the digital space. However, it also appears that those voices opposing governmental and government- affiliated scientific and authoritative pronouncements were deemed "conspiracy theorists", and hence cancelled or sanctioned in other ways.

This article explores the rising criminalisation of dissent within the context of contesting views about the pandemic. Through a review of relevant literature, the author discusses the emergence of metacrime and thoughtcrime as key features of discourses around the pandemic, and how these have impacted on changing notions of criminalisation and victimisation. With reference to these ideas both globally, as well as locally, that is, within the author's own context of South Africa, some key lessons from the pandemic are highlighted, specifically as they apply to perceptions of authoritarianism and the implications of this for individual and collective rights and freedoms in the future.

2.   Methodology

The article is based on an interdisciplinary social sciences perspective, relying on insights from the disciplines of anthropology and criminology. The data used in the discussion is taken wholly from secondary sources, including scientific articles, books, documents and media content. The value of using both disciplinary approaches is found in the specific perspectives contributed by each. Anthropology's emphasis on the particularities of context encourage a holistic interpretation of the aspects discussed. Criminology's perspectives on criminalisation and victimisation aid the author in defining and re-defining what these concepts could mean in the context of metacrime and thoughtcrime. By means of a selected literature review, as well as documentary analysis, the author sought to address the following key questions:

- What lessons (if any) can be learnt in global and local responses to the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What contesting perspectives or viewpoints emerged in reaction to the data and strategies provided by the authorities?
- How were contesting perspectives dealt with in the digital and real-world spaces?
- What are the implications of the above for future research regarding constitutional freedoms and human rights in a global pandemic scenario?

3.   Theoretical Framework

The interdisciplinary nature of this article informs the selected theoretical framework employed. The author draws from a range of perspectives based in Anthropology and Criminology. Some of these theoretical approaches include Bentham (Syeda, Akhtar & Alam, 2020) and Orwell's (1949) notion of the Panopticon and coercive surveillance; Peng's (2022) three levels of politico-ideological authoritarianism; and the notion of 'cancel culture' (Romano, 2019; Ng, 2020; Blench, 2021; Norris, 2023).

3.1   Deconstructing the digital Panopticon: Coercive surveillance both in and out of the Metaverse

The nineteenth century English social activist, Jeremy Bentham, along with his architect brother Samuel, conceptualised the idea of the 'Panopticon', which, for these brothers, was the symbol of total surveillance and power (Syeda, et al., 2020, p. 133). They described the Panopticon as a circular prison, designed in a way where a single person could keep watch over all the inmates, with the latter physically and psychologically aware of this permanent surveillance. This idea resonated with Orwell, who, in his novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), introduced the digital version of the Panopticon, that he referred to as 'Big Brother'. This was a digital technology that enabled the mass surveillance of people in both public and private spaces. The ultimate goal of the Panopticon was the complete control of subjects, by removing any chance for them to resist the governing authority (Syeda, et al., 2020, p. 134). That is, it enabled the destruction of all alternative "truths" that challenged that of the authorities (Syeda, et al., 2020, 138). Additionally, it also enabled the complete regulation of the lives of people, including thought patterns and behaviour.

In the current context of the (post) pandemic world, echoes of the Panopticon and its pervasive influence in society have been highlighted in the notion of "cancel culture". The concept itself is fairly new, and appears to have emerged with the rise in social and digital media. According to Saint-Louis (2021), cancel culture is 'a phenomenon where individuals transgressing norms are called out and ostracised on social media and other venues by members of the public' (see also Norris, 2023; Ng, 2020; Romano, 2019). It is a form of public humiliation aimed at shaming individuals who are deemed to have contradicted dominant (and apparently) accepted views and behaviours. Along with doxing, which is the deliberate online exposing of someone's personal details and information, cancel culture is one of several forms of online shaming. In reference to this framework, Blench (2021) argued that cancel culture has resulted in views and opinions that contradict the dominant orthodoxy in gender, political and even medical/scientific orientation suddenly being declared crimes. Within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the

global(ist) Panopticon, as represented by the globalist controlled public and social media platforms, global authority institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as local medical authorities such as the US' Centre for Disease Control (CDC) or South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), has policed opinions and perspectives on the pandemic, as well as responses to it. Thus, individuals, medical experts and even public figures and politicians speaking against coercive Covid-19 policies such as mask and vaccine mandates, found themselves cancelled for contradicting the dominant narratives pertaining to the pandemic.

The ideologically driven debates, contestations and cancellations on social media and in public discourse exposed three main forms of authoritarianism. According to Peng (2022), these three positions seemed to influence public perceptions about the pandemic and its management. The three ideological authoritarianisms were 'left- wing authoritarianism', which was characterised by conformity to authority mandated rules, as well as harsh, punitive social control; right-wing authoritarianism, characterised by an 'anti-science' attitude and scepticism towards data and information provided by government-affiliated institutions; and lastly, libertarianism, which valued individual freedom and rejected government intervention. All three of these ideological positions were contested during the pandemic. The main point is that each group viewed the other as authoritarian. However, it appears that the left-wing authoritarian group held the dominant position, which is why much of the cancellation was done on those representing views against the mainstream (hence dominant) view.

The above theoretical outline frames the following discussion. It supports the arguments and questions raised about the potential rise in scientific and governmental authoritarianism.

4. Discussion

4.1 The relationship between government control, science and authoritarianism during Covid-19: Some examples

One of the prominent examples of the relationship between government control, science and (potential) authoritarianism that emerged during the height of the Covid- 19 pandemic, is found in the so-called 'Freedom Convoy', also known as the Trucker Protest, that occurred in Ottawa, Canada in 2022 (Dyer, 2022; Gillies, Raynauld & Wisniewski, 2023). In short, the truckers and their supporters occupied the Canadian capital of Ottawa in February 2022, as a demonstration of protest against the Canadian government's Covid-19 regulations, specifically the enforcement of vaccine mandates for truckers travelling across Canada's borders. The Trudeau administration's response was to invoke the Emergencies Act of 1988, which empowered the government to

ban gatherings and other forms of support for the protest. The matter was taken to court by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) and the Canadian Constitution Foundation. Subsequently, the court found that the government had overstepped (Cecco, 2024). This example illustrates what many other governments did, which was to enforce vaccine mandates, thereby removing people's freedom of choice in an authoritarian manner.

A recent publication by Watteel (2023) detailed the argument that the Canadian government utilised 'fraudulent' studies (in fact, the author calls them 'pseudoscience') to 'justify discrimination, sow hatred and reinterpret the notion of inalienable rights.' She argues that the subsequent harsh pandemic policies pertaining to lockdowns, vaccine passports, travel restrictions and forced vaccinations were the result of 'financially-driven researchers and politicians' who sought to impose these restrictions on the Canadian people. Even the Freedom Convoy mentioned above was a reaction to the government's over-reaction to the pandemic, based on fraudulent science, while ignoring science that pointed to the contrary to the use of lockdowns and forced vaccinations to curb the spread of the pandemic. The most concerning aspect is that "science" was manipulated and weaponised by those in authority to marginalise (and even criminalise) a specific group of people (the unvaccinated).

Many governments made pronouncements and decisions related to the pandemic that disadvantaged many of their citizens in various ways. Lockdown regulations, social distancing and mask mandates forced the closure of many businesses, as well as the inability of people to visit relatives, or even attend family gatherings. This has been alluded to by various scholars (see, for example, Naseer, Khalid, Parveen, Abbass, Song and Achim, 2023; Onyeaka, Anumudu, Al-Sharify, Egele-Godswill and Mbaegbu, 2021; Verschuur, Koks and Hall, 2021). African, and southern African countries were not exempt from the devastating socio-economic impact of lockdowns either (see, for example, Schotte, Danquah, Osei, and Sen, 2023; Pillay, Museriri, Barron and Zondi, 2023; Grant and Sams, 2023). In South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, a special committee, called the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCC) was undemocratically set up, chaired by the President, and composed of several key Ministers (Pillay, Pienaar, Barron and Zondi, 2021; Singh, 2020). This committee was responsible for unilaterally (and secretively) deciding on the imposition of lockdowns and mandates, with little to no input from citizens (see Taylor, Le Feuvre and Taylor, 2021), but basing its decisions on the advice from scientists and scientific bodies such as the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD).

The NCC also decided on the deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) throughout the country to enforce lockdown regulations (Rakubu, Dlamini and Modipa, 2023; Staunton, Swanepoel and Labuschaigne, 2020; Langa and Leopeng, 2020).

Globally as well as locally, the decisions made by governments to impose restrictive control measures and policies to curb the spread of Covid-19, were justified and defended in terms of scientific data to support these regulations. However, as Kreps and Kriner (2020) pointed out, the lack of credible scientific data about the pandemic, coupled with accelerated research timelines pertaining to the pandemic, led to public uncertainty about the science around Covid-19. Furthermore, the authors argued that, despite this uncertainty, political, medical, and pharmaceutical elites continued to push for restrictive measures and policies, using this same limited data. The skepticism was exacerbated when the restrictions started to negatively impact on the social and economic lives of citizens. One of the unforeseen consequences of this situation was the public divisions that emerged, specifically between those sections of the citizenry that believed the "science" and the reality of the pandemic (as communicated via governments and public media), and those who questioned the science, as well as the policies and mandates that were implemented. These divisions reflected the differing public attitudes and levels of credibility towards governmental and scientific authorities. Even medical experts and scientists disagreed about the scientific evidence presented on the pandemic (Eichengreen, Aksoy and Saka, 2021), including the efficacy and safety of the so-called vaccine (Stecklow and MacAskill, 2021).

Government officials and members of the public who believed the science, were quick to label those who took the opposite view as "conspiracy theorists". This, despite evidence provided by whistleblowers about questionable research practices and data integrity around the pandemic and vaccines (Thacker, 2021). Those questioning the reality of the pandemic argued that it was a planned event, citing what would become one of the most common references used as evidence by the skeptics. Event 201 was one of dozens of planned simulation exercises, and was held in New York in 2019. The purpose of the high-level exercise was to simulate an outbreak of a novel zoonotic coronavirus, and to test the readiness of various political and public healthcare management and containment institutions and organisations, should the outbreak become a global pandemic (Maxmen, 2020). Western public and social media were quick to label those who illustrated a connection between Event 201 and the Covid- 19 pandemic as conspiracy theorists spreading misinformation. In addition, various fact checking sites sprang up on popular search engines to discredit these views. Even in online forums and social media, the skeptical minority were ridiculed, doxxed and banned from various platforms (Smith and Reiss, 2020).

As a result of these divisions, in the US, various politico-ideological camps emerged that influenced public perceptions about the pandemic and its management. Peng (2022) identified three political-ideological positions that seemed to influence perceptions about the pandemic and its management. The

first, 'left-wing authoritarianism', was characterised by 'deference to established authorities, conformity to group norms, and endorsement of harsh, punitive social control' (Peng, 2022:1), such as lockdowns and mandatory vaccination and mask wearing. The second ideological position, and in direct opposition to the first, was 'right-wing authoritarianism', which took a more 'cautious' approach to Covid-19, associated with an 'anti-science' attitude, and 'obedience to conservative leaders' (Peng, 2022:2). In between these two extremes, but leaning more towards right-wing authoritarianism, was 'libertarianism', an ideological position that favoured 'individual freedom' and rejected government intervention (Peng, 2022:2). All three ideological positions were represented in public and social media discourses pertaining to the pandemic. However, those critical or skeptical views were criminalised in the court of public and social media opinion through cancellation. In the non-digital world, those who publicly opposed mandates were charged with violating "laws" enforcing Covid-19 mandates.

In the South African context, the unelected NCCC, and its affiliated scientists and scientific bodies, were responsible for providing the data and management of the outbreak. However, as was the case in other countries, South African citizens were divided in their responses and attitudes towards the "science" and the government's containment measures. Also, those who expressed skepticism, or who intentionally chose to not follow mask mandates, or who violated lockdown protocols, were "criminalised" in the digital and public spaces. In fact, there were reports of such individuals being violently dealt with by the lockdown enforcement agencies. They were labelled Covid-19 "denialists" or "anti-vaxxers", labels that became popular to use by government officials, pro-Covid-19 science "experts" and citizens who believed the science. The emergence of these labels led to the creation of a new stigmatised and marginalised group, with many of these people refused entry into public spaces such as restaurants and shopping malls, and even being denied access to doctors' surgeries, clinics and hospitals. In the most extreme cases, many had their employment contracts terminated because of their refusal to either conform to the mask, or vaccination mandates. Even those who provided arguments and evidence against the effectiveness of lockdowns and mandates found themselves cancelled or silenced.

The above are a few examples of what was happening worldwide. Thus, the response of governments, scientific bodies and those who agreed with them towards those who did not, raises questions about the criminalisation and victimisation of dissent. Were those who opposed the dominant narratives of government and scientific authorities victimised and criminalised because they disagreed? The evidence seems to suggest yes. Furthermore, what does this mean for dissenting voices when it comes to other dominant narratives propagated by those in power or institutions of authority? It seems that what it

could possibly mean, is the emergence of metacrime and thoughcrime as the future of victimisation and criminalisation.

4.2 The criminalisation of dissent: Metacrime, thoughtcrime and the (potential) future of criminalisation and victimisation

In order to address the questions raised above, at this point of the discussion it is necessary to introduce several concepts that are relevant. It is worth noting that while these concepts may have been around for some time, it is really only during the last few years, most specifically since the Covid-19 pandemic, that they have taken centre stage, garnering interest and stimulating debates in the public and digital realms, as well as among scholars. The relevance of these concepts is that they speak directly to the fundamental point of this discussion, namely the issue of the criminalisation of dissent of those opposed to perceived government and scientific overreach.

The first concept that can be identified is what could be called metacrime. Various recent scholarship has provided a diversity of views about what metacrime is. For example, several scholars define metacrime as 'crimes that may occur within the Metaverse' (Seo, Seok and Lee, 2023:9467). Another definition views metacrime as an 'augmented reality space where the Metaverse could represent a tool for, or an object of, the perpetration of a crime' (Bovenzi, 2023:565). And a third definition sees metacrime as 'the use of the Metaverse's reality-altering capabilities to inject political or dangerous messages or trigger false alarms and disasters that look real' (Umar, 2022:n.p.).

The second key concept is one that is often associated with visions of a dystopian authoritarian society, where those who express opinions, views or behaviours contrary to the dominant system, are outlawed and sanctioned. At least since George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, the concept of thoughtcrime has become a popular means to refer to contesting ideas that do not conform to popular public opinion, or those supported by recognised sources of authority, and where those ideas are criminalised, that is, the crime of thought. Todirica (2017) defined thoughtcrime as 'any thought that does not coincide with the dominant narrative'. In other words, throughtcrime includes all politically or socially unorthodox beliefs, doubts or opinions that contradict the dominant political or social ideologies of those in power, potentially leading to criminal and/or social sanction.

The discourses around the pandemic created an environment characterised by a previously unknown intensity of contestation within the virtual space, with ideas and narratives about the pandemic fuelled by political and social ideological positions. However, depending on which ideological positions dominated, some have argued that this environment also created an opportunity for authoritarians to grab more power. Those who sought to control the narrative around the pandemic, and who controlled the public and digital

platforms, forums and other media, ensured that their interpretation and narrative, supported by their "science" dominated these platforms, while at the same time, sanctioning those who came with alternative interpretations. Bozoki (2022:26) referred to this as 'a new authoritarianism based on big data and close surveillance...[that led to] an emerging bio-dictatorship [medico-scientific dictatorship] [that] might be the new enemy of freedom.' Hence, in the public and digital media spaces, the narratives of government and scientific authorities were promoted as "truth", while those providing a counter-narrative were victimised, and, in some instances, even criminalised. In large part, the silencing, and even criminalising of dissenting voices, was driven by the fear propaganda in the mainstream news and digital media. According to Razaq (2020:451), 'Well-respected epidemiologists predicted, from the outset, that the societal, economic, and psychological harm from the unprecedented lockdowns were likely to be far greater than the perceived risk of death. However, such views were lost in the narrative of fear that predominated the early discussions on the matter and treated like an Orwellian Thoughtcrime.'

The criminalisation and victimisation of those who opposed the dominant narrative also manifested in the brutal acts perpetrated against them in the real world. In South Africa, the special lockdown policing units deployed throughout the country became the "Covid thoughtpolice", paying more attention to citizens who violated lockdown protocols than to actual crime. Several reports in the South African media confirmed the violence perpetrated by the state's lockdown enforcers. According to Khumalo, Masauabi and Nyathi (2020:n.p.), 'The enforcement of lockdown regulations has resulted in 38 reported incidents against the police, ranging from murder, assault and rape to discharging of a firearm.' In addition, the allegations also included eight deaths, in which 'six were deaths owing to police action and two emanated from deaths in police custody' (Khumalo, Masuabi and Nyathi, 2020:n.p.). In another reported case, a man was beaten to death by the lockdown enforcers 'for allegedly violating the national lockdown announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa.' (Rampedi, Ngoepe and Manyane, 2020:n.p.) According to the report, the deceased and a friend were first assaulted by the Covid police, following which he fell unconscious, and later died. These incidents illustrated the disregard of the state's enforcement agents for the constitutional right of citizens to freedom of movement, let alone their right to bodily integrity.

Globally as well as locally, those who questioned the dominant official narrative and propaganda around the pandemic, were also stigmatised and dismissed as "Covid denialists", "anti-vaxxers" and "conspiracy theorists", including non-conforming academics and experts. According to Natsios (2022:95), despite the significant consequences of the pandemic, 'some people denied the virus existed at all, chose to minimize the threat it posed, or spread misinformation about it.' There appears to have been a global polarisation on

the scientific merits of the studies on the pandemic, as well as the efficacy of mandates and vaccination. Even among medical experts there were those who questioned the "science", and were thus labelled as deniers and anti- vaxxers (see, for example, Gesser-Edelsburg, Zemach and Hijazi, 2021). In South Africa, pro-vaccine experts expressed amazement at the high vaccination hesitancy rate. For example, Muthoni, Otwombe, Thaele, Choge, Steenberg, Cutland, Madhi, Sokani and Myburgh (2023:n.p.) found a 'staggering hesitancy rate of 79.2 percent' among a total of 380 surveyed youths in the South African townships of Soweto and Thembelihle. These scholars described the vaccination hesitancy as stemming from 'negative attitudes' among the youth, 'fuelled by medical mistrust and misinformation'.

Within the medical fraternity, one of the high profile controversies involved South Africa's first female heart surgeon, Dr Susan Vosloo, who criticised both the Covid vaccine, as well as the government's management of the pandemic. Vosloo's criticisms, despite being supported by evidence, were labelled as 'dangerous' and 'utter rubbish' by other medical experts, and she found herself with two complaints lodged against her by the People's Health Movement of South Africa (Ebrahim, Mccain and Lakay, 2021). But, perhaps the most telling evidence of the dismissal, and even outright attacks on non-conformists, was the highly publicised controversy around Prof Glenda Gray, a medical expert who served on the South African Covid- 19 ministerial advisory committee. According to reports, Gray was attacked in the public and on social media, by journalists, and even by the Ministry of Health, for disagreeing with the use of lockdowns as a scientifically justifiable strategy to curb the pandemic (Keeton, 2020), this despite her support for the Covid-19 vaccination strategy. Ordinary citizens opposed to lockdowns and vaccine mandates were also vilified in the local media, and harshly treated by the Covid enforcers of the state. During a peaceful protest in Sea Point, Cape Town, two arrests were made on protesters who were described as 'anti-vax' and 'anti-mask' protesters. The two protesters were arrested on charges of 'failing to wear a mask in public and contravening the Disaster Management Act' (Meyer, 2021).

In addition to the vilification of non-conforming medical experts and citizens, workplaces also stigmatised employees who were opposed to vaccine mandates. In many instances, both worldwide and in South Africa, employees were terminated from their workplaces due to refusal to conform to mandates (see, for example, Niles, 2021; Gur-Arie, Jamrozik, and Kingori, 2021; Mokofe and Van Eck, 2022). All of these examples raises questions about the criminalisation and victimisation of dissent. Those who oppose the dominant narratives supported by government and affiliated scientific authorities, could find themselves both victimised and criminalised, potentially with severe consequences.

5.   Socio-Legal Implications

In the final part of this discussion, it is necessary to briefly reflect on what kinds of lessons are to be learnt from the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in relation to issues of governmental and scientific authoritarianism, and the potential rights and freedoms of citizens. It may perhaps be more accurate to see these "lessons" as critical questions to ask, based on the experiences of the pandemic, and what is relevant to the South African context.

The first question to consider is, given the manner in which many governments chose to respond to the pandemic, in particular with restrictive measures, what are the implications of these policies for constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens in the future? South Africa is often praised worldwide as having one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. However, as shown in this discussion, the constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens seemingly took a backseat, with the pandemic used to justify the violation of the constitutional rights to freedom of movement, freedom of association, and the right to bodily integrity. Mandates, including lockdowns and forced vaccinations, had negative consequences for people's livelihoods, as well as their quality of life, thereby violating the clause in the Preamble of the South African Constitution: 'We therefore...adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic [of South Africa] so as to...Improve the quality of life of all citizens...' (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996:1243). The ease with which the authorities infringed on the constitutional rights of citizens suggests that, in the right circumstances, these rights and freedoms can be suspended, if not outright ignored. This could potentially set a dangerous precedent as, in the future, even more constitutionally protected rights and freedoms could be trampled on, and justifiably so, if the crisis is big enough.

The second question is to consider whether the reactions to the pandemic created a new form of victimisation and criminalisation, based on the Digital Panopticon, where thoughts, ideas and opinions are policed, especially if they are contrary to the dominant narrative? The examples provided throughout this discussion would suggest that there is indeed a new form of victimisation and criminalisation that has been created. In both the digital space and in the real world, opponents of the dominant narrative are likely to be victimised, even despite the use of evidence that contradicts the dominant view. In the case of the pandemic, even experts were silenced or cancelled when providing arguments and data that were not in line with the view of the governmental and scientific authorities.

The third and final question, in relation to the above, is whether the perceived authoritarian manner in which pandemic policies were imposed opens the door for greater authoritarian overreach by governments and medico-scientific institutions in the future? One of the most telling developments that may shed a light on this issue is the emergence of the World Health

Organisation's (WHO) Pandemic Treaty. According to Schwalbe, Hannon and Lehtimaki (2014), the Pandemic Treaty is an international agreement between the WHO member states focusing on pandemic preparedness, in order to better deal with future pandemics on a global scale. As such, the WHO would hold member states accountable for enforcing relevant policies and regulations, as advised by the WHO. Skeptics argue that this agreement would, firstly, enable the WHO to dictate what constitutes a pandemic, as well as what regulations and restrictions whould be put in place; secondly, it will also be able to force member states to implement these measures, would could include lockdowns, travel restrictions and forced vaccinations. In other words, the WHO and member states would be able to override constitutional rights of citizens, and implement authoritarian measures, using the threat of a pandemic as the justification to do so.

6.   Conclusion

In this article, the author has raised several questions emanating from the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. First, did the pandemic create a new form of victimisation and criminalisation based on the Digital Panopticon, where citizens police each other's thoughts, ideas and opinions? Secondly, if so, does this open the door for greater authoritarian overreach by governmental, scientific and medical institutions?

In the first instance, it has been argued that the pandemic did indeed create a new form of victimisation and criminalisation. With reference to documented examples globally, as well as in the South African context, it was shown that the cancelling of voices of dissent in the digital (and even the real) world can have very real and significant consequences, especially for those, often in the minority, who choose to oppose the dominant governmental and scientific authorities. What would be the implications of this for notions of free speech, freedom of expression and freedom of association going forward? Can populations expect similar consequences in the event of future pandemics, or even other forms of global threats?

On the question of whether perceived metacrimes and thoughtcrimes open the door for greater authoritarian overreach, this also can be answered in the affirmative. The stigmatisation and dismissal of opposing views as conspiracy theories, and the outright cancellation of proponents of these opposing views, suggest that those who control public and digital platforms can use their authority to silence voices that contradict the dominant narrative(s) that these platforms wish to promote. And in the twenty-first century, those who control the promotion of information in the public and digital spaces have the power to shape and influence the dominant narrative, and the means to impose it, thus increasing the risk of authoritarian overreach, even in democratic societies. These are the key lessons to be learnt from the experiences over the last two to

three years of the pandemic. Unless these lessons are heeded, global populations may find themselves sliding deeper and deeper into the quagmire of authoritarianism, and the erosion of their rights and freedoms.

References

Blench, R. (2021). No more heroes: Trophic cascades and cancel culture. Academia Letters, https://doi.org/10.20935/AL2235.

Bovenzi, G.M. (2023). MetaCrimes: Criminal accountability for conducts in the Metaverse. WWW '23 Companion, April 30-May 4, 565-567. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Bozoki, A. (2020). After Orwell: Some thoughts on the post-pandemic world. European Journal of Transformation Studies, 8, 26-35.

Cecco, L. (2024). Judge rebukes Trudeau for 'not justified' use of Emergencies Act to break convoy. The Guardian, 23 January, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/23/canada-trudeau-emergencies-act-trucker-protest-covid (Accessed 29 January 2024).

Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108, No. 32 (1996).

Dyer, O. (2022). Covid-19: Ottawa declares emergency as truckers' protest continues. BMJ, 2022, 376, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o352. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Ebrahim, Z., Mccain, N. and Lakay, B. (2021). Complaints to be laid against leading heart surgeon after "problematic" video on Covid-19 vaccines, News 24, 13 August, https://www.news24.com/life/wellness/body/condition-centres/infectious-diseases/coronavirus/complaints-to-be-laid-against-leading-heart-surgeon-after-problematic-video-on-covid-19-vaccines-20210813 (Accessed 9 April 2024).

Eichengreen, B., Aksoy, C. G., & Saka, O. (2021). Revenge of the experts: Will COVID-19 renew or diminish public trust in science? Journal of Public Economics, 193, 104343.

Gesser-Edelsburg A., Zemach M. and Hijazi R. (2021). Who are the "real" experts? The debate surrounding COVID-19 health risk management: An Israeli case study. Risk Management Healthcare Policy,14, 2553-2569.

Gillies, J., Raynauld, V., & Wisniewski, A. (2023). Canada is no exception: The 2022 Freedom Convoy, political entanglement, and identity-driven protest. American Behavioral Scientist, doi: 10.1177/00027642231166885.

Grant, C. and Sams, K. (2023). Global narratives on unequal outcomes produced by lockdown in Africa: A social science perspective on the "one-size-fits all" COVID-19 response. Frontiers in Public Health, 11, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1046404. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Gur-Arie, R., Jamrozik, E., and Kingori, P. (2021). No jab, no job? Ethical issues in mandatory COVID-19 vaccination of healthcare personnel. BMJ global health, 6, 2, e004877.

Keetoen, C. (2020). Dr Glenda Gray gets candid on lockdown controversy. Sunday Times, 5 July, https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/opinion-and-analysis/2020-07-05-dr-glenda-gray-gets-candid-on-lockdown-controversy/ Accessed 29 January 2024).

Khumalo, J., Masuabi, Q. and Nyathi, M. (2020). Soldiers and police face the heat over lockdown brutality. News24, 5 April, https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/soldiers-and-police-face-the-heat-over- lockdown-brutality-20200405 (Accessed 26 March 2024).

Kreps, S.E. and Kriner, D.L. (2020). Model uncertainty, political contestation, and public trust in science: Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic. Science Advances, 6, 43, https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abd4563. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Langa, M., and Leopeng, B. B. (2020). COVID-19: violent policing of black men during lockdown regulations in South Africa. African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention, 18, 2, 116-126.

Maxmen, A. (2020). Two decades of pandemic war games failed to account for Donald Trump. Scientific American, August 6, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/two-decades-of-pandemic-war-games- failed-to-account-for-donald-trump1/. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Meyer, W. (2021). Police arrest 2 anti-vax protesters in Cape Town. News 24, 9 October, https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/pics-police-arrest-2-anti-vax- protesters-in-cape-town-20211009. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Mokofe, W.M. and Van Eck., S. (2022). COVID-19 at the workplace: What lessons are to be gained from early case law?, De Jure Law Journal, 155-172.

Muthoni, J., Otwombe, K., Thaele, D., Choge, I., Steenberg, B., Cutland, C., Madhi, S.A., Sokani, A. and Myburgh, N. (2023). COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy among youths in Soweto, South Africa. Vaccines, 11, 5, 960,

https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines11050960. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Naseer, S., Khalid, S., Parveen, S., Abbass, K., Song, H., and Achim, M. V. (2023). COVID-19 outbreak: Impact on the global economy. Frontiers in Public Health, 10, 1009393, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.1009393. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Natsios, A.S. (2022). Pandemic denialism: The case of COVID-19. South Central Review, 39, 2, 95-116, https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2022.0025. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Ng, E. (2020). No grand pronouncements here...: Reflections on cancel culture and digital media participation. Television & New Media, 21, 6, 621-627.

Niles, Z. A. (2021). The jab or my job? COVID-19 vaccine mandates in healthcare. Missouri Medicine, 118, 6, 488.

Norris, P. (2023). Cancel culture: Myth or reality?. Political studies, 71, 1, 145-174. Onyeaka, H., Anumudu, C.K., Al-Sharify, Z.T., Egele-Godswill, E. and Mbaegbu, P. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic: A review of the global lockdown and its far-reaching effects. Science Progress, 104, 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/00368504211019854. Accessed 29 January 2024).

Orwell, G. (1949). Nineteen Eighty-Four. London: Secker & Warburg.

Peng, Y. (2022). Politics of Covid-19 vaccine mandates: Left/Right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and libertarianism. Personality and Individual Differences, 194, 1-7.

Pillay, Y., Museriri, H., Barron, P., and Zondi, T. (2023). Recovering from COVID lockdowns: Routine public sector PHC services in South Africa, 2019-2021. South African Medical Journal, 113(1), 17-23.

Pillay, Y., Pienaar, S., Barron, P., and Zondi, T. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on routine primary healthcare services in South Africa. South African Medical Journal, 111(8): 714-719.

Prichard, E.C. & Christman, S.D. (2020). Authoritarianism, conspiracy beliefs, gender and Covid-19: Links between individual differences and concern about Covid-19, mask wearing behaviors, and the tendency to blame China for the virus. Frontiers in Psychology, 11, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.597671.

Rakubu, K., Dlamini, S., and Modipa, M. (2023). Ramifications of the lockdown on community police relations during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147- 4478), 12(1): 233-241.

Rampedi, P., Ngoepe, K. and Manyane, M. (2020). SA lockdown: Soldiers accused of beating Alexandra man to death with sjambok. IOL News, 12 April, https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/sa-lockdown-soldiers-accused- of-beating-alexandra-man-to-death-with-sjambok-46619454 (Accessed 26 March 2024).

Razaq, S. (2020). COVID-19, Orwell, and the media. British Journal of General Practice,

70(698), 451.

Romano, A. (2019). Why we can′t stop fighting about cancel culture. Vox, 30 December.

Saint-Louis, H. (2021). Understanding cancel culture: Normative and unequal sanctioning. Firstmonday, 26, 7.

Schotte, S., Danquah, M., Osei, R. D., and Sen, K. (2023). The labour market impact of COVID-19 lockdowns: Evidence from Ghana. Journal of African Economies, 32 (Supplement_2), 10-33, https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejac039. Accessed 20 March 2024

Schwalbe, N., Hannon, E. and Lehtimaki S. (2024). The new pandemic treaty: Are we in safer hands? Probably not. BMJ, 384: q477, https://doi:10.1136/bmj.q477. Accessed 20 March 2024

Seo, S., Seok, B., and Lee, C. (2023). Digital forensic investigation framework for the Metaverse. The Journal of Supercomputing, 79(9), 9467-9485.

Singh, J.A. (2020). How South Africa′s Ministerial Advisory Committee on Covid-19 can be optimised. South African Medical Journal, 110(6): 439-442.

Smith T.C. and Reiss, D.R. (2020). Digging the rabbit hole, COVID-19 edition: Anti-vaccine themes and the discourse around COVID-19. Microbes Infect, 22(10):608-610.

Staunton, C., Swanepoel, C., and Labuschaigne, M. (2020). Between a rock and a hard place: COVID-19 and South Africa′s response. Journal of Law and the Biosciences, 7(1): lsaa052.

Stecklow, S. and MacAskill, A. (2021). The ex-Pfizer scientist who became an anti-vax hero. Reuters, March, 18, https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/special-report-ex-pfizer-scientist-who-became-an-anti-vax-hero- 2021-03-18/. Accessed 20 March 2024

Syeda, F., Akhtar, R. & Alam, K. (2020). Panopticon: An automation of power mechanism. JRSP, 57(2), 133-139.

Taylor, A., Le Feuvre, D. and Taylor, B. (2021). COVID-19: The South African experience. Interventional Neuroradiology, 1, 50-53.

Thacker, P. D. (2021). Covid-19: Researcher blows the whistle on data integrity issues in Pfizer′s vaccine trial. BMJ, 375, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n2635. Accessed 20 March 2024

Thomson, S. & Ip, E.C. (2020). Covid-19 emergency measures and the impending authoritarian pandemic. Journal of Law and the Biosciences, 1-33, doi: 10.1093/jlb/Isaa064.

Todirica, D. G. (2017). Language influencing reality and reality influencing language in George Orwell′s 1984. Unpublished thesis. http://hdl.handle.net/10234/169940. Accessed 20 March 2024

Umar, A. (2022). Metaverse for UN SDGs–an exploratory study. In Science-Policy Brief for the Multistakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs, 5 May.

Verschuur, J., Koks, E. E., and Hall, J. W. (2021). Global economic impacts of COVID-19 lockdown measures stand out in high-frequency shipping data. PloS One, 16(4), e0248818, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0248818. Accessed 20 March 2024

Watteel, R. (2023). Fisman′s fraud: The rise of Canadian hate science. RainSong Books