

Statement on Media Contributions: Travel & COVID19

Since 1997, Frank has presented opinion through media outlets, on a wide range of topics, from holiday sickness, suspicious deaths abroad, risk destinations, cabin air quality, general consumer rights, travel issues to general legal and policing matters.

Frank brings his experience into the media as a retired police officer, solicitor, consumer campaigner, along with his research skills, to deliver thoughtful and insightful analysis, beyond the normal gloss found in some subject matters; he hopes and believes that he delivers his opinion with professionalism, authority and integrity.

For 40 years Frank has been engaged with advocacy across the courts and other public fora. He enjoys debate and the cut and thrust of the argument. He considers that his willingness to engage in advocating Consumer Rights in the media, must come with a consideration of how the subject matter is handled, along with respect for that engagement.

Frank has for many years mostly supplied his research and media contribution, free of charge, because he believes that adding to public commentary, adds PR & informational value to the subject matter. His contributions are designed to provoke constructive thinking and analysis and at times, the humour of life and experience.

Media Trends and Consumer Issues:

Since 2016, Frank has detected a sea-change in the way some media outlets present themselves.

Some UK popular press previously presented thoughtful analysis; today they present narrow polemic and inaccurate SEO-type copy (best seen through the pandemic on Travel Consumer rights).

Some UK Television programming have developed a nervous timidity since the EU referendum. They demonstrate a fear, principally through producers, that seeks to define a balance that represents the new orthodoxy (this appears to openly welcome a wilder opinion that in another age would not have been tolerated); this disbars seasoned contributors who present a pragmatic and balanced opinion.

Some UK radio stations have carried across the same methodology from television, revealing stations that are unashamedly brash in their message of how society should operate.

Despite these new realities, Frank has nonetheless operated an openness to media appearances through whatever source.

Compare this 'new-age' landscape to Frank's current engagements with the many UK local radio stations (including two national radio stations) and International media outlets. His experiences are substantially different to the alternatives previously described. These outlets are probing, inquisitorial and seek facts to understand the nature and scale of a problem, with the object of informing their listeners and viewers. Such engagements are respectful both of the contribution and of the skill-set provided.

Frank also observes that UK Television and some Radio Consumer programming has become less investigative than that produced in the late 20th Century. There is a clear belief that short-sharp-shock programming delivers value. Such programming offers breathless presentation in an effort to blitz the public with a fast-paced information dynamic. The problems are here today and gone tomorrow. The reality is that many Consumer problems simply do not disappear; they take time and patience to resolve. The second reality is that many commercial enterprises are equipped to manage a media crisis and view such experiences as a passing moment; deeper scrutiny is no longer the norm. Such presentations do not empower Consumers as there is clear evidence that they seek their advices through social networks, utilising the 'best of 3' opinions from those they engage with. Consumer rights are now seen through the prism of the quick fix. This demonstrates the paucity of good informative Consumer programming.

How have other Campaigners responded to the media world post-2016?

It is evident from the many statements or social commentary from other Campaigners (non-Travel), that they have considered their engagements with media outlets and broadcasters and have withdrawn their contributions, sometimes as a result of very public spats between them. Others have quietly confided with Frank that they will not engage with the media to deliver their message and so therefore lose the opportunity to present rational opinion to any debate.

Has the debate on COVID19 now become polarised?

Whatever about the continuing and evolving debate on Brexit, there is now a troubling debate surrounding COVID19 and its affect on our daily lives, particularly in relation to Travel. Like Brexit, this debate not only offers exhaustion but demonstrates the same polarisation of opinion.

It is clear that there is frustration within the UK over the UK government's poor response to the crisis, but equally there are those who criticise those who advocate a tighter set of restrictions, against their orthodoxy that there should be a swift lifting of lockdown or a rejection of other measures.

Facts stated are challenged, almost as if they represent inaccuracy or a contribution to a project of fear. Tolerating inaccuracy in public dialogue only promotes the potential for further inaccuracy and poor information.

What are the prospects of Travel through 2021?

It is Frank's opinion that we have to be realistic on Travel through 2021, irrespective of the UK's apparent success in its vaccination roll-out. We should remember that the airline industry is not predicting a return to 2019 passenger and traffic levels until 2023, with some predicting a longer timeframe, depending on vaccine roll-out and efficacy of those vaccines. He believes that we should temper our desires to hop on that plane and recognise that COVID19 is not yet done with us!

How will countries seek to restart tourism?

Countries are looking toward creating a herd-immunity through their vaccination programmes in order to return their citizens to some form of normality. A country that is more successful in vaccinating its citizens is not the benchmark of when people will be able to travel. In the scale of a pandemic, national considerations or success will be tempered by what is happening in other countries, as we have recently seen in the debate on tourism in Spain. The question of a tolerable herd-immunity could arise when 70-80% (the threshold) of a countries population has been vaccinated. This could mean that interaction could be restarted with any onward risks being passed to a smaller population-load. It is important to remember, achieving thresholds may start to open up lives and borders, but this will not be led by one country; it is an International initiative and motivation. It is also important to remember that restrictions will still exist because COVID19 still continues to surprise! Failure by the UK government or other governments, to recognise these realities, does not lead to an intelligent response or strategy to the crisis and does not ultimately help an Industry that so badly needs assistance and clear direction at this time.

Will we have Vaccine Passports?

Frank has believed and advocated for Vaccine Passports for several months. There are already examples of such passports being created by airlines and trade industry bodies. Vaccine Passports are the fast-approaching new reality which will require a rapid International solution, not the fragmented national or industry initiatives. Data-protection and privacy are key in the creation of this product, but such a product also has a cost in terms of potential discrimination.

What do you mean by discrimination?

Discrimination will manifest itself through those who accept the vaccine and those who do not; it will also include those who for physiological/psychological reasons cannot receive the vaccine.

There are already signs that those who are vaccinated may be able to travel, provide services/ work and visit pubs and restaurants. This suggests that those who are not vaccinated will not be able to enjoy the same benefits or freedoms as the rest of their fellow citizens. This is a highly sensitive area and will produce some very strong opinions. Unfortunately, this is already a polarised debate as government(s) fails to grasp the issue. It is Frank's view that society as a whole may have to accept a short period of such 'discrimination' because of the nature of the pandemic; health is one of the major rights that we enjoy and this will become the primary consideration.

Can such discrimination be allowed; can it be limited?

The UK is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights and it will be here that the question of discrimination will be answered, whether that discrimination exists in the provision of services, employment or travel.

So for example, Article 8 protects our rights to a private and family life, but it is conditioned by allowable interference to that right where it is deemed necessary for the protection of public health.

Article 9 allows us to express freedom of thought or conscience (beliefs) in our communities, but with the same caveat as Article 8.

Article 14 prevents discrimination where 'other opinion' is held.

Article 15 allows a country to derogate from these rights (the aforementioned Articles are not precluded), in times of 'public emergency'.

Therefore it is logical that where countries see an opportunity of achieving herd-immunity through vaccination, consideration of these rights will become apparent. Derogation from rights should be expected, but, when the threshold for herd-immunity is reached, then there can be no justification to continue with any form of discrimination against those who do not agree with or cannot receive vaccination. It must therefore be a short-term form of discrimination, with an absolute and formal recognition, along with very clear and necessary safeguards to end that discrimination, and to present clear pathways for those who remain discriminated against once thresholds have been passed.

Frank recognises that this is just his analysis and opinion of this key area; there will be more informed opinion that will no doubt join this debate.

Concluding thoughts on Travel in 2021?

The Pandemic has challenged all are notions of life and how that life is organised.

The logic follows ironically, that to protect the health rights of the majority and that of our economic models, we shall all have to tolerate a level of discrimination for example on travel. This may have to continue until such time as the individual choices or personal restrictions, can be once again respected and that they too can enjoy full participation in daily life. We also have to recognise other countries benchmarks and tolerate and challenge accordingly. That is the nature of how our societies should operate. Frank considers that these are difficult questions that we face and we must do so without prejudice, but with a sense of purpose and realism - his base point is that no-one should be discriminated against, whatever their views or personal restrictions. For our societies, the present Pandemic reveals an approaching clash between utilitarianism and human rights; we must be alert to this conflict!

Remember: The summer you expect may not happen in 2021; it will be different; it will be local and subject to restrictions!

Frank Brehany states:

"I have never considered myself or my opinions to be indispensable nor absolute, nor that I have an absolute right to enjoy the showcase that is the media. I have had many positive media engagements over the last 24 years and thankfully few that have been not so positive"

He adds:

"Engaging as a contributor is both complex and requires a heavy due diligence through research. It teaches you respect for the media process and of the many fine broadcasters that engage with this craft. I have been fortunate to have received an equal respect for my contributions over many years, whilst experiencing appropriate challenge to the views and opinions that I express. It has allowed me to express the real issues underpinning travel issues, that affect so many Consumers"

Frank concludes:

"However, there have been encounters this past 12 months that have revealed the nature and change of the composition of the media, that does not in my opinion, represent the balance or respect I am so often asked to present. Commentary presents a heavy duty both on media outlets, broadcasters and contributors, to ensure that all shades of opinion are heard and not in an environment that would not be tolerated in the workplace. I have come to the conclusion that for the sake of the integrity of the message that I wish to deliver, it is necessary, regrettably, to reconsider how I engage with some aspects of the media. I realise that in the scale of things this will not make one jot of a difference to such media outlets, but it is necessary to deliver a message of what is or is not tolerated. I am clearly joining a lengthening queue of Campaigners who have previously reconsidered their engagements with such outlets. I hope one day that we shall return to a more respectful media environment that serves the needs of its listeners. In the meantime I am hopeful that this release will help educate and direct the nature of the debate that surrounds the many substantial issues we now face with regards to Travel and COVID19".