
Covid-19 news and information: summary of views about misinformation

Publication date: 22 September 2020

Overview

As a response to the Covid-19 outbreak, Ofcom has carried out an online survey of c.2,000 respondents initially on a weekly basis and from August onwards on a monthly basis, to monitor how people are getting news and information about the crisis. This research is designed to support a range of stakeholders with their activities during this time. Fieldwork takes place at the weekend, asking people about their habits and attitudes of the previous seven days. Fieldwork in the first week of the research took place between 27-29 March, just after the Prime Minister had announced lockdown measures and week twenty-five's fieldwork (the most recent covered in this report) took place between 11-13 September.

This report summarises the findings from the questions we have asked about Covid-19- related misinformation, as a contribution to the ongoing debates around the topic. The topic of misinformation is of course a complex issue, and survey research can be challenging to carry out, not least because respondents can have different views on whether or not something is misinformation, and because top-of-mind responses about misinformation can mask more nuanced views.

Since the start of this survey, we have asked general questions about misinformation, the frequency with which people are seeing it, and what they tend to do as a result. We have also asked which particular types of misinformation they have encountered, from a provided list.

In our later surveys we have added to our understanding with questions about people's level of concern towards misinformation, about whether they believe misinformation should be shared on social media, and about whether seeing misinformation has made them 'think twice' about the issue.

Our findings are below, and [additional interactive data](#) can be found on the Ofcom website.

Key findings

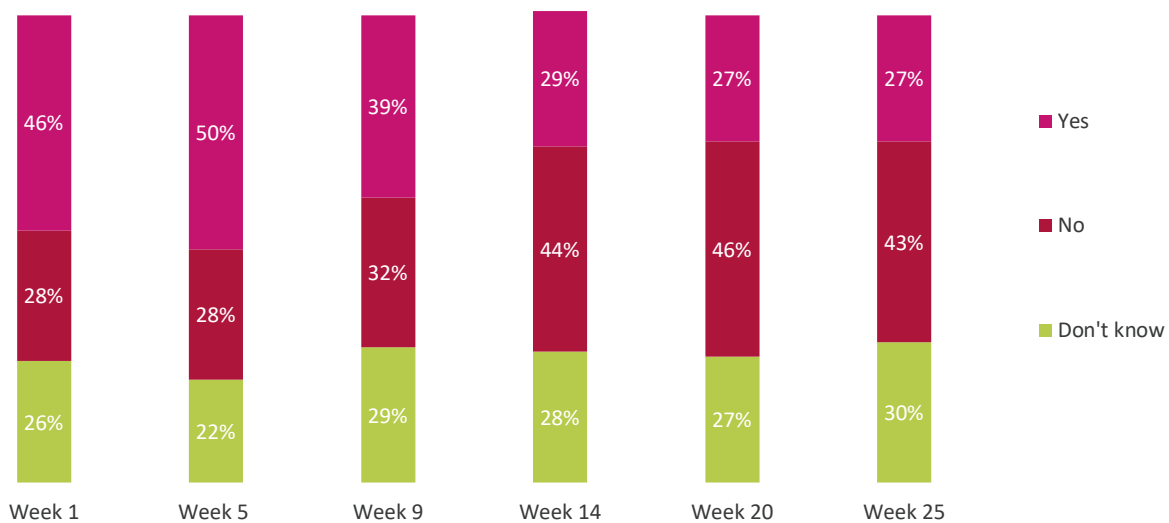
People say they have come across misinformation less frequently over time, although younger people are more likely to see it compared to older age groups

- In week one of the survey (which corresponded with week one of the UK 'lockdown' in late March 2020) 46% of respondents reported having "come across any information/ news about the coronavirus that you think has been false or misleading in the last week". Since week twelve, when 30% of respondents said they had come across misinformation, reported levels of misinformation have been steady with 27% of respondents saying this in week twenty-five. People aged 25-34 were the most likely to come across misinformation (36%), compared to those aged over 65 who were the least likely (21%). Male respondents are more likely (31%) than female respondents (23%) to report seeing misinformation. The decrease in seeing misinformation since the start of lockdown could be linked to a reduction in people's consumption of news about the coronavirus, with the proportion of

people accessing such news at least once a day decreasing from 99% in week one to 84% in week twenty-five.

- Interestingly, three in ten (30%) responded “don’t know” to the question, slightly higher than the number of “don’t know” responses in week one (26%). This suggests that a sizeable minority of people are feeling unsure about the truthfulness of the information they are coming across. Those aged 16-24 were the least likely to be uncertain (23%) compared to over-65s who were the most likely (34%).
- Those who come across misinformation do so fairly frequently: in week twenty-five nearly two-thirds (64%) reported coming across it at least once a day, and one quarter (25%) a few times a week. Male respondents were more likely (70%) to report seeing misinformation at least once a day than female respondents (57%), and 35-44s were the most likely to see misinformation at least once a day (75%) compared to over 65s (55%).

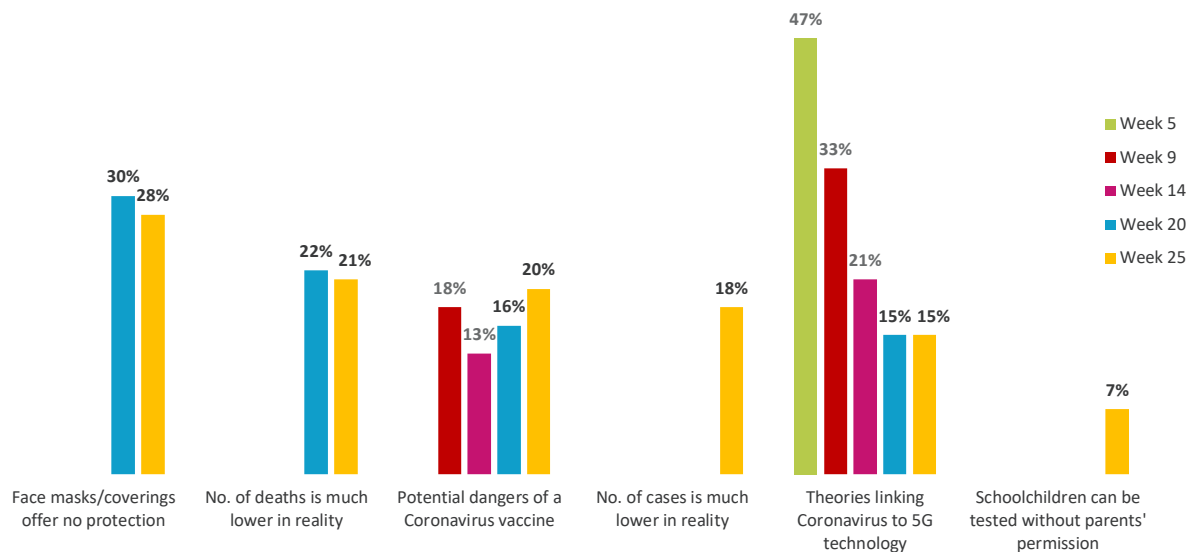
Figure 1: Consumption of misinformation, selected weeks



Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news and information tracker, March – September 2020, Q8 Have you come across any information/news about Coronavirus that you think has been false or misleading in the past week? Base: week 1 – 2226, week 5 – 2077, week 9 – 2071, week 14 – 2126, week 20 - 2063, week 25 – 2058

Respondents are most aware of claims about face masks offering no protection or being harmful

Figure 2: Selected types of coronavirus misinformation encountered in previous week



Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news and information tracker, March – September 2020, Q10 Have you come across any of these false or misleading recommendations about aspects of the coronavirus in the LAST WEEK? Base: week 1 - 2226, week 5 – 2077, week 9 – 2071, week 14 – 2126, week 20 - 2063, week 25 – 2058

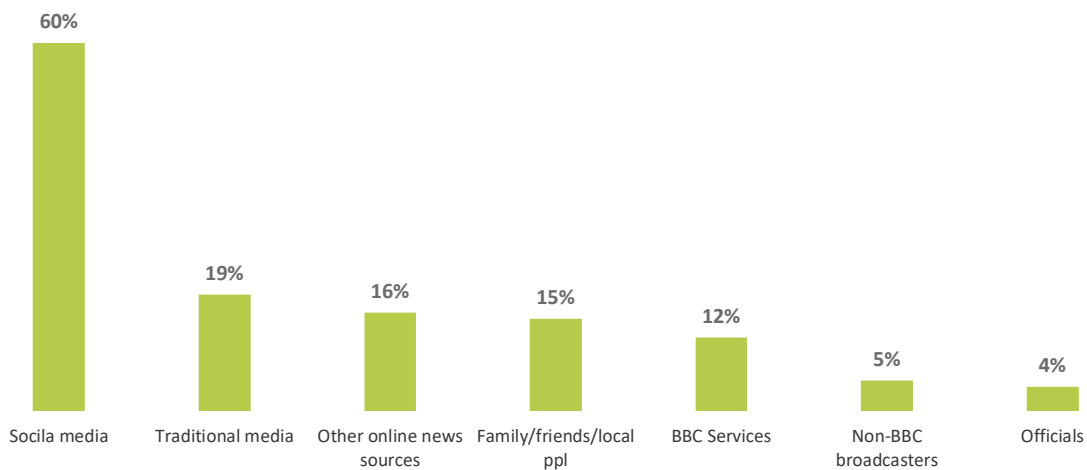
- Some types of misinformation related to Covid-19 have been particularly common during the pandemic. Respondents are asked to select which false or misleading theories they have come across from a list provided, and this list has changed over the weeks of the survey according to the different theories that have surfaced.
- “Face masks/ coverings offer no protection/ are harmful” was the most common theory in week twenty-five from a select list, with almost three in ten (28%) respondents reporting that they had come across it. Those living in Scotland (36%) and the North West (35%) were more likely to see theories about face masks/coverings.
- “The number of deaths linked to Coronavirus is much lower in reality than is being reported” was the second most common theory seen by respondents during week twenty-five with 21% of respondents having come across it. A similar proportion (18%) reported coming across the theory “The number of cases linked to Coronavirus is much lower in reality than is being reported” which was asked for the first time in week twenty-five.
- One in five (20%)¹ respondents said they had come across “claims about potential dangers of a coronavirus vaccine” in week twenty-five, this is an increase from 16% in week twenty.

¹ As additional context we asked respondents whether they would be “comfortable to be vaccinated against the Coronavirus if there was a vaccine approved by the NHS available tomorrow”. Seven in ten (68%) respondents

- Those living in Scotland were more likely (31%) to come across theories about the potential dangers of a coronavirus vaccine.
- “Theories linking the origins or causes of coronavirus to 5G” was the most-selected theory when it was introduced into the survey in week three, with 50% of respondents reporting that they had come across it in the last week. In week twenty-five this had decreased to 15% and was only the fifth most popular theory.

Social media remains the main source for misinformation being presented as true

Figure 3: Source of claims about masks offering no protection or being harmful as true



Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news and information tracker, September 2020, Q10i. Source of claims about masks offering no protection or being harmful as true? Base: 254.²

- We wanted to explore the ways that these types of misinformation were being reported, as people could be accessing such claims in a number of ways, such as through a news report about the

agreed that they would be comfortable, 17% disagreed and 15% neither agreed nor disagreed. Over-65s were the most likely to agree that they would be comfortable to be vaccinated (82%) compared to 25-34s (56%) who were least likely.

² Groupings are as follows: Traditional media = newspapers, broadcasters and radio. Newspapers = “Broadsheets”, such as The Times or Guardian (printed), Mid-market tabloids”, such as The Daily Mail or Daily Express, “Red-top tabloids”, such as The Sun or Daily Mirror (printed), Broadsheets”, such as The Times or Guardian (online), “Mid-market tabloids”, such as MailOnline or Express, “Red-top tabloids”, such as The Sun or Mirror (online). Broadcasters = BBC -TV, BBC – Radio, BBC – Online/ app, BBC Alba, ITV, STV, UTV, ITV Wales, Channel 4, Channel 5, Sky, S4C, RTE. BBC Services include BBC -TV, BBC – Radio and BBC – Online/ app. Other online news source = Websites/apps of online news organisations like BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, Vice, etc., Websites or apps that bring together news from different news providers, Non-mainstream news sources such as Russia Today, Breitbart, Swawkbox etc. Social media = Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, WhatsApp. Closed groups = WhatsApp group(s), Facebook messenger, Apple iMessage.

prevalence of misinformation about face masks or through seeing a post that directly propounded the view that face masks are dangerous.

- We therefore asked respondents to say whether the misinformation they came across was being reported as true, as false, or unclear. Respondents could select more than one answer as they might have seen the theory reported several times in different ways.
- We found that respondents were coming across a range of types of reporting. Of those who had come across claims about face masks/ covering offering no protecting/ being harmful, 28% said they had seen them reported as false claims, 44% said they had seen them reported as true claims, and 45% said it was unclear (figures do not sum to 100% as respondents were able to select more than one answer: they were asked to think about every time they had come across the claim).
- Of those who came across claims about the potential dangers of a coronavirus vaccine, one in four (23%) said they were being reported as false claims, 46% said these were being reported as true, and 48% were unclear. For those that came across theories about 5G, 40% had seen it reported as a true theory, 43% as a false theory and 37% were unclear whether it was true or false.
- The most common source for theories about masks being presented as true was social media (60% of those perceiving it this way), compared to 19% on traditional media, 16% on other online news sources, 15% by family/ friends/ local people, and 12% by BBC services . There was a similar pattern of sources for claims about the potential dangers of a coronavirus vaccine and theories about 5G.

A majority of people who use social media are seeing banners, pop-ups and upfront notices about the coronavirus

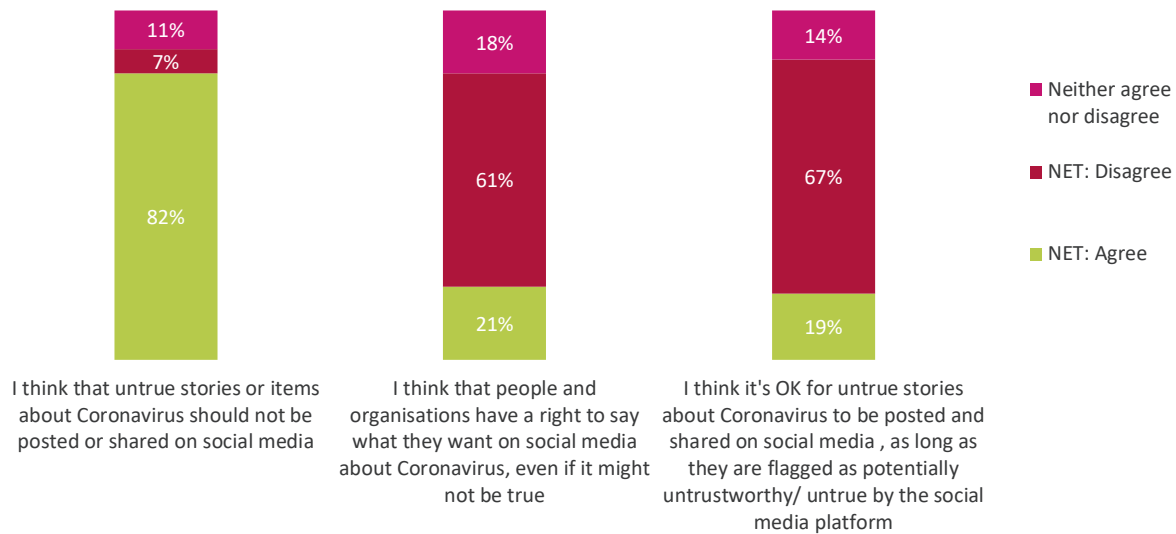
- Given that social media is where many respondents encounter misinformation, we asked people about their awareness of some of the ways that the social media platforms are addressing the issue. These measures include the promotion of official sources of information about coronavirus, and “flagging” potentially untrue or misleading posts.
- Typically, eight in ten (80%) of respondents say that they use social media at least once a day. We asked respondents that use social media how often they were “coming across/seeing information in the form of banners, pop-ups and upfront notices about the coronavirus from official sources, such as health organisations or the government”. In week twenty-five, 82% of social media users said that they were seeing these banners (either each time (15%), most times (27%) or sometimes (41%) when going on social media). 14% said they had “rarely” seen these banners and 2% said they had “never” seen them.
- We also asked social media users how often they were “coming across news or information that have warnings or notices from the social media platform attached to them, saying that the information may be untrustworthy/untrue”. In week twenty-five, half (49%) of social media users said they were coming across such warnings or notices (either each time, most times or sometimes). 31% of respondents said they had “rarely” seen these notices and 21% had “never” seen them.

Most people say that untrue stories about the coronavirus should not be shared or posted on social media, even if they are flagged as potentially untrue

- In week twenty-five, we asked people whether or not they think it is acceptable to share or post misinformation related to the coronavirus on social media. Responses provide us with an indication of “top of mind” views about this issue³.
- A clear majority of respondents agreed that “untrue stories about the coronavirus should not be posted or shared on social media” (82%) with only 7% disagreeing. Conversely, 21% of respondents agreed that “people and organisations have a right to say what they want on social media about the coronavirus, even if it might not be true”. There are differences in opinion by age: a third (34%) of 18-24s agreed with the statement compared to only 9% of over 65s. And male respondents (26%) were somewhat more likely than female respondents (17%) to agree.
- We looked at how respondents’ views about whether they would be “comfortable to be vaccinated against the Coronavirus if there was a vaccine approved by the NHS available tomorrow” corresponded with their other opinions. We found that respondents who would not be comfortable to be vaccinated were more likely to agree that “people and organisations have a right to say what they want on social media about the coronavirus, even if it might not be true” (32%) compared to only 16% of those that said they would be comfortable to be vaccinated.
- We also asked people whether they think it is “OK for untrue stories about the coronavirus to be posted and shared on social media, as long as they are flagged as potentially untrustworthy/ untrue by the social media platform”. One in five (19%) agreed with the statement. A third (33%) of 16-24s agreed with the statement compared to 11% of over 55s. Responses to these attitudinal questions on misinformation have been consistent since week thirteen when they were first asked.

³ We asked respondents for their views on these statements at an early point in the survey, before we had asked them whether they had come across misinformation etc.

Figure 4: Whether untrue stories about the coronavirus should be shared/ posted on social media

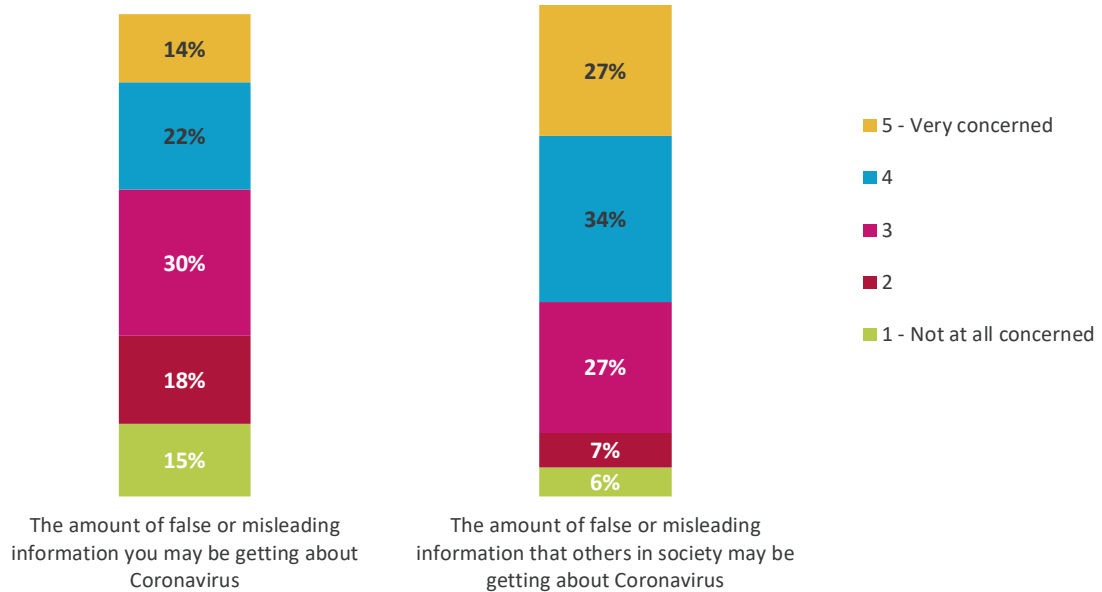


Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news and information tracker, September 2020, Q4b3, To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Base: 2098

Six in ten people are concerned about the amount of false or misleading information that others in society may be getting about the coronavirus

- We also asked people for their general levels of concern about the amount of false information that they and others in society may be getting about the coronavirus.
- Across all groups, people reported being more concerned about the amount of misinformation that others in society were getting than about their own exposure to it. Six in ten respondents (61%) reported being concerned (4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5) about the amount of false or misleading information others in society may be getting, compared to just over a third of respondents (36%) who were concerned about the amount of false or misleading information they were getting themselves.
- Those that use social media report being more concerned about the amount of misinformation they are getting about coronavirus (42%) than those that don't use social media (33%). This trend is in line with the proportion of social media users that report seeing misinformation (36%) compared to non-social media users (22%).
- People that reported seeing misinformation presented as true were more likely (68%) to say that they were concerned about the amount of misinformation others in society may be getting than those that did not (59%).

Figure 5: Levels of concern about misinformation about the coronavirus



Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news news and information tracker, September 2020, Q10k, To what extent are you concerned or not concerned about the following statements? Base: 2098

A quarter of people who came across false or misleading information say that it has made them think twice about the issue

- Finally, we asked respondents who had come across any false or misleading information whether any of it had made them think twice about the issue. Just over a quarter (27%) said that it had made them think twice about the issue (4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5), and a similar proportion said this in week thirteen when the question was first asked. Those living in London were more likely (36%) to say that seeing misinformation made them think twice.
- 25-34s were most likely to say that false or misleading information had made them think twice (42%) compared to 19% of 45-55s.

In conclusion

- Although the amount of misinformation people say they are seeing compared to the start of lockdown has decreased (which is likely to be linked to the reduction of consuming news about the pandemic), one in three people are still reporting having seen it in the past week, which is in line with week twenty. This suggests that there is still a significant amount of misinformation in circulation.

- The types of misinformation respondents say they have seen has changed significantly over the past six months. Theories about face masks/covering offering no protection/ being harmful have remained the most popular since week twenty, the first week it was asked about. Theories about 5G have become far less popular, from a height of 50% in week three to only 15% in week twenty-five. This demonstrates how theories can circulate at different times and as face masks became more common place, theories about their effectiveness were popularized.
- The sources where respondents are seeing misinformation have also remained largely similar, with the dominance of social media remaining. However, one in five people report seeing theories about face masks being presented as true on traditional media, which suggests news articles about the merits of face masks may have been either unclear or misunderstood.
- Respondents' attitudes to misinformation as demonstrated by their levels of concern about misinformation on themselves and others in society has been consistent. Six in ten people (61%) reported being concerned about the level of misinformation others in society are getting in both week twenty and week twenty-five. This is the same for people's attitudes towards misinformation and whether it should be shared on social media which have remained largely unchanged.
- There has been a consistent significant minority of around three in ten people that report having come across misinformation that they do not know whether it is being presented as true or false. This again highlights the challenge in defining misinformation. Furthermore, if a person believes a piece of misinformation, they might not categorise it as 'misinformation' but rather 'information'.
- The challenge of asking questions about misinformation continues as we must consider that if we report higher numbers of respondents coming across misinformation it could suggest that people are correctly identifying pieces of content as misinformation. The fact that people say that have seen misinformation and identified it as being presented as true suggests that they may have a greater media literacy awareness.
- Those that report seeing misinformation presented as true said they were more concerned about the impact of misinformation on themselves than those said they had not. This again points to the possibility that identifying misinformation presented as true could be an indicator of media literacy.
- Misinformation theories will continue over the coming months, and it is likely that new theories will gain prominence. These may well be related to the later stages of the pandemic, possibly in relation to a vaccination programme, and our research will continue to explore the connections between attitudes, news consumption habits, and behaviour.