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

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## Overview

As a response to the Covid-19 outbreak, Ofcom has carried out an online survey of c.2,000 respondents every week 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 each 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 fourteen research (the most recent covered in this report) took place between 26-28 June.

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 week fourteen, we have carried out some further exploration around people's views on whether misinformation should be shared on social media, and about how concerned people are about the topic, for themselves and for others. We also ask whether coming across misinformation has made people think twice about the issue being reported. Our findings are below, and additional interactive data can be found on the [Ofcom website](#).

## Key findings

### **People have come across less misinformation 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 five, when 50% of respondents said they had come across misinformation, there has been a gradual decrease, with 29% of respondents saying this in week fourteen. Younger people aged 16-24 were the most likely to come across misinformation (38%), compared to those aged over 65 who were the least likely (23%).
- This decrease could be related to a reduction in people's consumption of news about the coronavirus since the start of lockdown, with the proportion of people accessing such news at least once a day decreasing from 99% in week one to 85% in week fourteen.

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- Interestingly, almost three in ten (28%) responded “don’t know” to the question, in line with the number of “don’t know” responses in week one (26%). This suggests that a significant minority of people are unsure about whether or not they are coming across misinformation – a factor that we explore further below. Those aged 16-24 were the least likely to respond “don’t know” to the question (20%) compared to 35-44s who were the most likely to do so (32%).
- Those who come across misinformation do so fairly frequently: in week fourteen more than six in ten (62%) reported coming across it at least once a day, and one quarter (25%) a few times a week. Male respondents were slightly more likely (66%) to report seeing misinformation at least once a day than female respondents (58%), but there were no variations by age group.

**Figure 1: Consumption of misinformation, selected weeks**

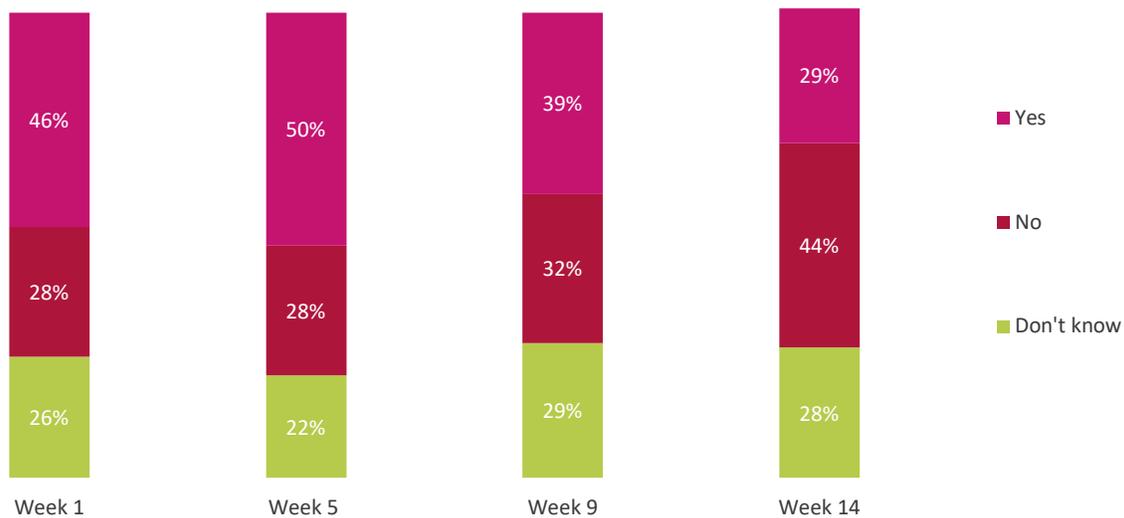


Figure 1 source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, March - June 2020, Q8 Have you come across any information/news about Coronavirus that you think has been false or misleading in the past week? Base: week 1 – 2226, week 5 – 2077, week 9 – 2071, week 14 - 2126.

## Respondents are most aware of claims about 5G as a form of misinformation

- Some types of misinformation related to Covid-19 have been particularly common during the pandemic. Respondents are asked to select which false or misleading recommendations 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.
- “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 fourteen this had decreased to 21%, albeit remaining the most common theory.

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- Almost one in five (18%) of respondents said they had come across “claims about potential dangers of a coronavirus vaccine” in week nine, which was the first week this was asked about. One in seven (13%) nominated this in week fourteen.

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

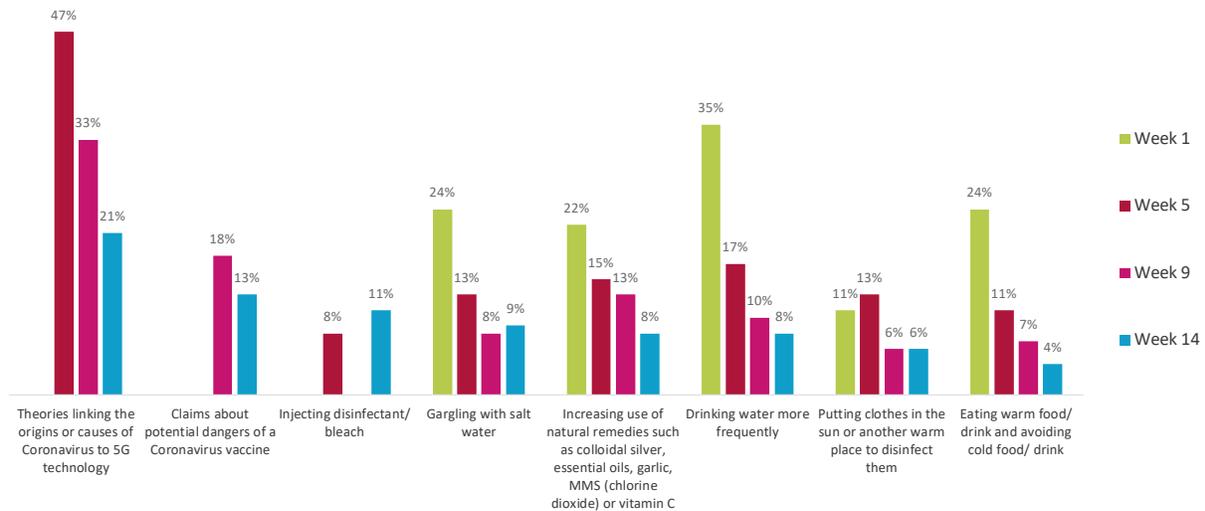


Figure 2 source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, March - June 2020, Q8 Have you come across any of these false or misleading recommendations about aspects of the coronavirus in the LAST WEEK? Base: week 1 - 2226, week 5 - 2077, week 9 - 2071, week 14 - 2126.

## 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 asked people whether they were concerned 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 (60%) 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.

Figure 3: Levels of concern about misinformation around the coronavirus

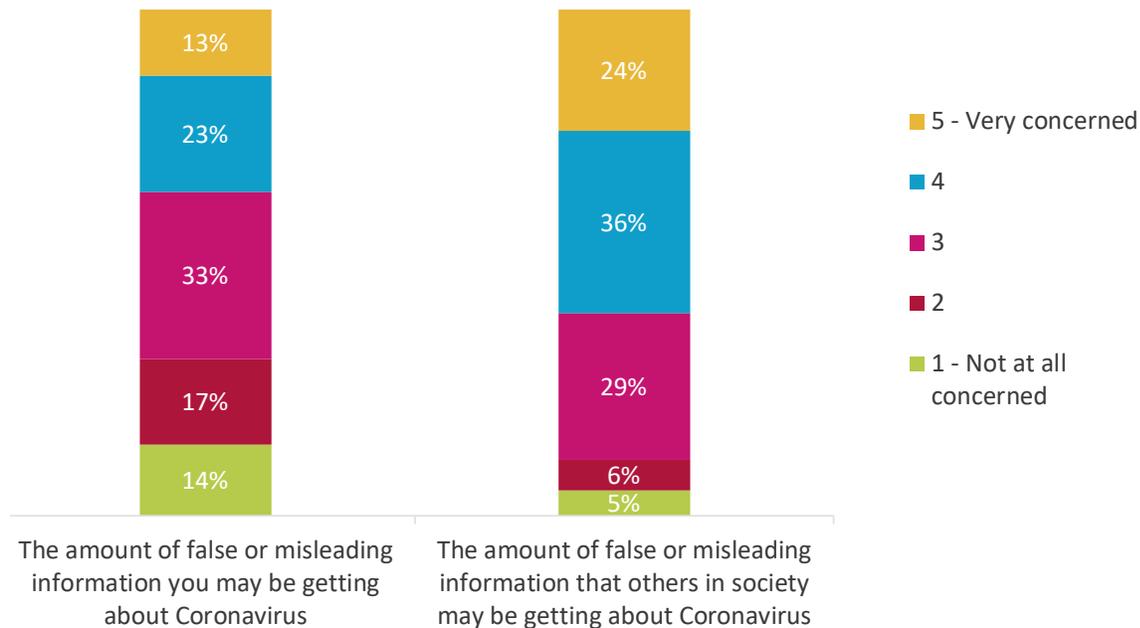


Figure 3 source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, June 2020, Q10k, To what extent are you concerned or not concerned about the following statements? Base: 2173.

## Social media is the main source for misinformation being presented as true

- In order to explore the different ways that misinformation can be represented, we 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 the role of 5G in the coronavirus, 45% said they had seen them reported as false claims, 37% said they had seen them reported as true claims (an increase from 30% in week ten), and 36% 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<sup>1</sup>, three in ten (29%) said they were being reported as false claims, 37% said these were being reported as true, and 50% were unclear.
- The most common source for 5G theories that were being presented as true was social media (58% of those perceiving it this way), compared to 13% on traditional media, 12% on other online news sources, 13% by family/ friends/ local people, 5% by BBC services and 5% on closed groups. There was a similar pattern of sources for claims about the potential dangers of a coronavirus vaccine.

<sup>1</sup> The base for responses to this question is 99 and therefore just under our usual reporting threshold, so figures should be treated as indicative only.

## **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.
- 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 fourteen, 75% of respondents said that they were seeing these banners (each/most times and sometimes). One in five (20%) of respondents said they had “rarely” seen these banners and 4% said they had “never” seen them. This is similar to the results in week nine when the question was first asked.
- 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 fourteen, four in ten (41%) social media users said they were coming across such warnings or notices (each/most times and sometimes). 35% of respondents said they had “rarely” seen these notices and 24% 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 fourteen, 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 issue<sup>2</sup>.
- It is of note that the vast majority of respondents agreed that “untrue stories about the coronavirus should not be posted or shared on social media” (84%) with only 6% disagreeing. Conversely, only 17% 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: almost one quarter (24%) of 25-34s agreed with the statement compared to only 9% of over 65s. And male respondents (20%) were somewhat more likely than female respondents (14%) to agree.
- 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 (18%) agreed with the statement, rising to 23% among social media users. Almost one quarter (24%) of 35-44s agreed with the statement compared to 13% of over 65s.

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<sup>2</sup> 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

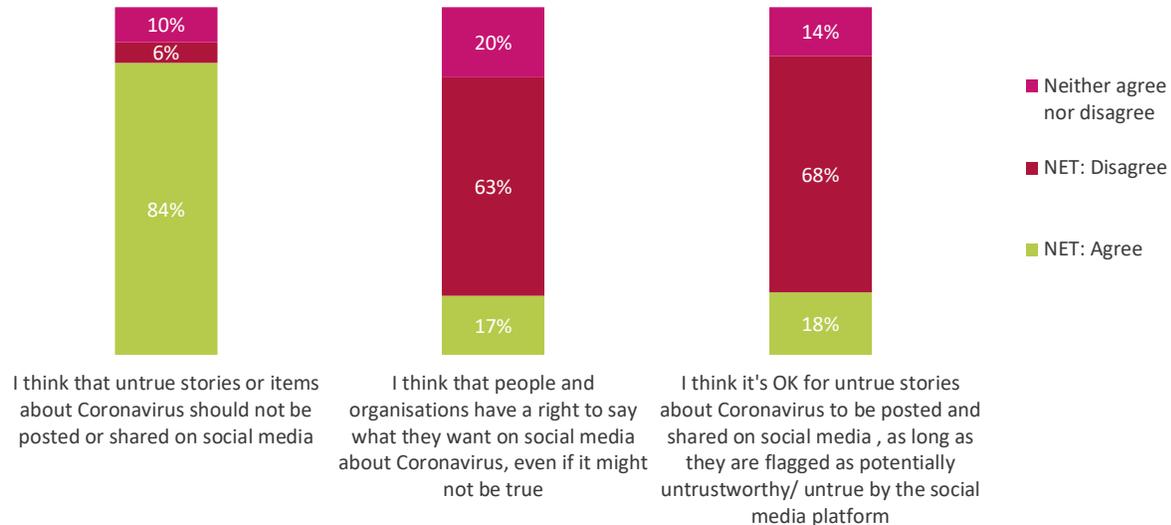


Figure 4 source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, June 2020, Q4b3, To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Base: 2173.

## 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.
- Younger people (16-24s) were most likely to say that false or misleading information had made them think twice (35%) compared to 21% of over 65s.

## In conclusion

- The amount of people seeing misinformation appears to be reducing (29% in week fourteen compared to 46% in week one), with theories relating 5G to the coronavirus remaining the most common misinformation theory (21%). This reduction could be related to a decrease in overall news consumption about the coronavirus.
- Levels of concern about the impact of the amount of misinformation in circulation are predictably higher for others than for ourselves. One third have concerns about their own consumption of misinformation, which rises to six in ten concerned about the impact on others. This suggests that people recognise misinformation as a potential threat, but have greater faith in their own ability to be unaffected by it than they do in others'.

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- It can be difficult to define misinformation, especially in a climate where new and sometimes conflicting pieces of information about the coronavirus become available. This is demonstrated by the significant minority of people answering both that they don't know whether they have seen misinformation (28%) and that have seen it but they don't know whether it was reported as true or false.
- Despite the high proportion of people that do not think that misinformation should be allowed on social media, a quarter of people say that seeing misinformation has made them think twice about the issue, suggesting that it has an impact on how some people perceive the issues, whether that be about 5G or the potential dangers of a coronavirus vaccine. It is of note that among those who have come across misinformation related to a vaccine, half weren't sure whether the story was being reported as true or false. This may be due to some wider confusion about the details of a coronavirus vaccine.
- Younger people are more likely to come across misinformation, which is in part an outcome of their greater use of social media compared to older people. They are also more likely to be more accepting of its presence on social media, and to say that seeing false or misleading information has made them think twice about the issue.
- We will continue to track the spread of misinformation theories as we move out of lockdown, and people's attitudes and levels of concern about them, in order to contribute to the ongoing debates about the forms and nature of misinformation and how it is consumed.