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

Overview

As a response to the Covid-19 outbreak, Ofcom has commissioned an ongoing weekly online survey of c.2,000 respondents 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 ten research (the most recent covered in this report) took place between 29-31 May.

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. 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 10, we have explored a little further how people might categorise some particular types of misleading or false information, and which sources such stories are coming from. Our findings are below. Additional interactive data can be found on the Ofcom website.

Key findings

In week ten, four in ten respondents say they have come across misinformation

- 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 Coronavirus that you think has been false or misleading in the last week". By week ten this had decreased to 38% of respondents, the lowest percentage of all the weeks to date.
- In week one, six in ten (58%) of 18-34s reported that they had seen false or misleading information in the past week compared to a third (33%) of over 65s. By week ten this gap had narrowed, with 42% of 18-34s saying this compared to 38% of over 65s.
- In week ten, a quarter (25%) of respondents reported coming across misinformation 2-4 times a day, 22% said they came across it about once a day and just under a quarter (24%) came across misinformation a few times a week.

A majority of people say they do nothing after seeing misinformation

- When respondents were asked about their actions following seeing false or misleading information, the majority said that they did nothing – ranging from 55% in week one to 64% in weeks seven and nine.
- We asked about a range of other possible types of response to seeing such information. In week one, one in ten (10%) of people nominated using fact-checking websites or tools, rising to 18% in week two. In week ten, the figure was 12%, with younger respondents aged 25-34 more likely to use them (16%) compared to 9% of those aged 55 or over. Blocking or reporting the material to a social media platform was nominated by 7% in week one, and 9% in week ten.
- In terms of checking the misinformation with another person, in week one 13% said they checked with friends and family, compared to 9% in week ten. Again, younger people (16-24s) were more likely to do this (15%) than older people (6% of 55-64s).
- Few respondents said that they were forwarding or sharing the material – 7% said this in week one, and 4% in week ten.

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

- Some types of misinformation related to Covid-19 have been particularly prevalent. Respondents 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 10 this had decreased to 30%.
- In the first week of the survey "drinking water more frequently" was the most-selected theory from a list provided, with over a third (35%) of respondents reporting having seen it. This decreased to 9% in week ten.
- 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 (14%) nominated this in week ten.

Respondents are most likely to say that reports about 5G and injecting disinfectant are describing these as false theories, while reports about a Coronavirus vaccine are more mixed

- In week ten of the survey respondents were asked whether particular misinformation theories they had come across had been presented as true, false and/or unclear, in order for us to explore further how misinformation is accessed and perceived. Respondents were able to choose more than one answer, as the question asked them to think about all the times in recent weeks they had come across the theories. The theories we asked about were those

relating to 5G, injecting disinfectant, and the potential dangers of a Coronavirus vaccine. In week ten, three in ten (30%) respondents said they had come across theories linking the origins or causes of Coronavirus to 5G technology, 22% had come across theories about injecting disinfectant or bleach, and 14% had come across claims about the potential dangers of a Coronavirus vaccine.

Figure 1: How respondents perceive the way that misinformation is being reported or described
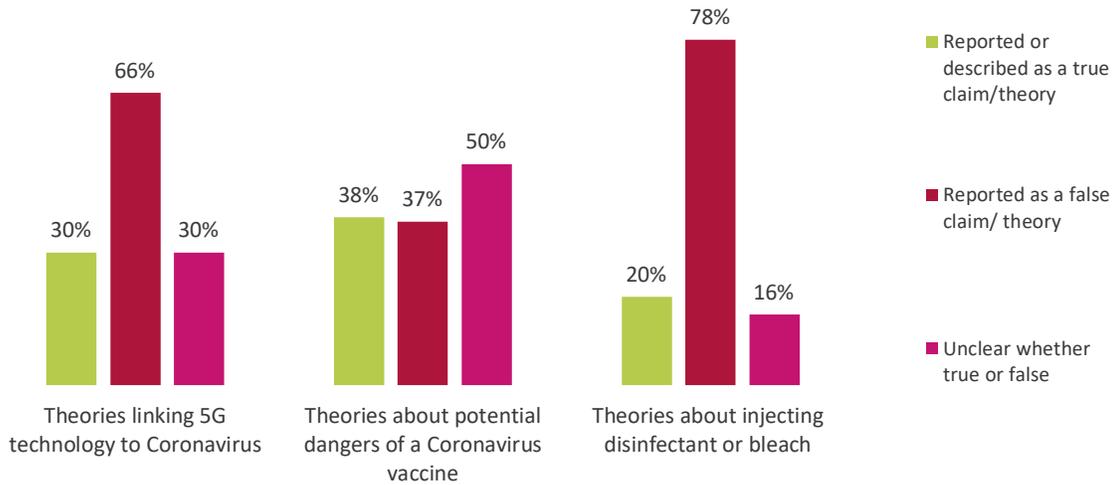

Figure 1 Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, May 2020. Q10b. Thinking about all of the times in recent weeks that you've come across this theory (linking Coronavirus to 5G technology/potential dangers of a Coronavirus vaccine/ injecting disinfectant), how has it been reported/described? You might have come across the theory in different places and being reported in different ways, so please tick all that apply. Unweighted base 5G -617/ Vaccination - 302/Injecting disinfectant – 45.

- Of those who had come across claims about the role of 5G in Coronavirus, two thirds (66%) said they had seen them reported as false claims, three in ten (30%) said they had seen them reported as true claims and three in ten (30%) 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).
- In terms of theories about potential dangers of a Coronavirus vaccine, there was more uncertainty about the positioning of the information, with 50% saying they were unclear about whether or not a story was true or false, and equal proportions coming across stories describing the issues as true (38%) and as false (37%).
- There was more certainty about the stories around injecting disinfectant or bleach, with most saying that the reporting had described it as a false theory (78%). One fifth (20%) said the claims were reported as true and 16% said the reporting was not clear.
- Given this range of responses, we wanted to explore the sources of information used. We focused on sources that respondents said were reporting these theories and claims as true.

Figure 2: Sources of information about misleading claims or theories being described as true
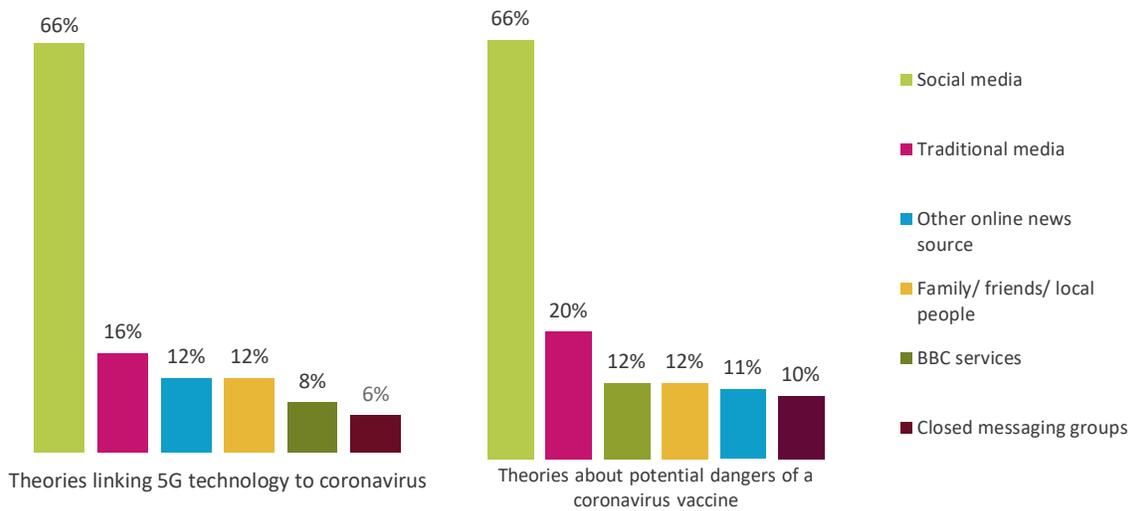

Figure 2 Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, May 2020 Q10e. And on which of these sources was it being reported/described as true? Please tick all that apply. Unweighted base 5G -181/ Vaccinations – 120.[1]

- As Figure 2 shows, the most common source for respondents reporting 5G theories being presented as true was social media (66% of those perceiving it this way), compared to 16% on traditional media, 12% on other online news sources, 12% by family/ friends/ local people, 8% by BBC services and 6% on closed groups.
- This pattern is broadly similar to that for responses about potential dangers of a Coronavirus vaccine.

In conclusion

- These findings provide an overview of perceptions about misinformation about Covid-19 to date. They show that misinformation is a regular aspect of the news and information consumption for around four in ten respondents, although there has been a gradual decrease over the period of the lockdown.

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[1] 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.

- While the majority tend to ignore what they come across, around one in ten now check with friends and family, use fact-checking sites or tools, or block or report the material. Only a small proportion say they forward it on.
- When we ask questions about the way that a particular theory or claim is reported, people indicate that some of their exposure to such claims is from reporting which identifies the material as false.
- Furthermore, when asked about the sources of reporting which put forward the theory or claim as true, we see that social media is the main place where people see misleading claims presented as true. And some respondents nominate traditional news sources as doing this.
- We have provided this overview as a contribution to the ongoing debates about the forms and nature of misinformation, and how it is consumed. Concepts and definitions of misinformation can be partial and subjective, and often depend upon the respondent's own sets of beliefs and affiliations. We acknowledge these challenges, and welcome further exploration of these issues.