

Covid-19 news and information: consumption and attitudes

Results from weeks one to three of Ofcom's online survey

[Covid-19 news and information: consumption and attitudes](#) – Welsh translation

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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. This report summarises results from wave three of our research (fieldwork between 10-12 April 2020), which corresponds to week three of the UK 'lockdown'. The report also compares wave three findings against the two previous waves of our research, conducted between 3-5 April (wave two) and 27-29 March (wave one).

It should be noted that as it is an online panel methodology, the survey findings are representative of the views and habits of the 87% of the UK population that are online¹.

Key findings

- Official sources (such as the NHS and government), as well as traditional broadcasters, remain the most trusted sources for information on Covid-19, with social media and closed groups continuing to be the least trusted.
- During the third week of the 'lockdown' half of all respondents (50%) say they have come across false or misleading information² about Covid-19 (up from 46% in week one).
- The most common piece of misinformation that people have come across in week three (from a selected list) was *'theories linking the origins or causes of Covid-19 to 5G technology'* (50%). Nearly all other theories common in week one of the 'lockdown' have decreased in subsequent weeks.
- The proportion of respondents using a fact-checking site has increased over time, from 10% in week one of the 'lockdown' to 18% in week two (although this decreased slightly to 15% in week three).
- Furthermore, the proportion of respondents who say they are 'finding it hard to know what's true and what's false about Covid-19' has decreased from 40% in week 1 to 32% in week three.
- Respondents aged 25-34 are most likely to say they are *'trying to avoid news about Covid-19'*, with four in ten (39%) agreeing with this statement in week three (up from 30% in week one).

Consumption of news and information about Covid-19

- During the third week of the 'lockdown', almost all the UK online population (97%) are still accessing news and information about Covid-19 at least once a day. There is some indication that people are not accessing news and information as frequently as they did in the initial two

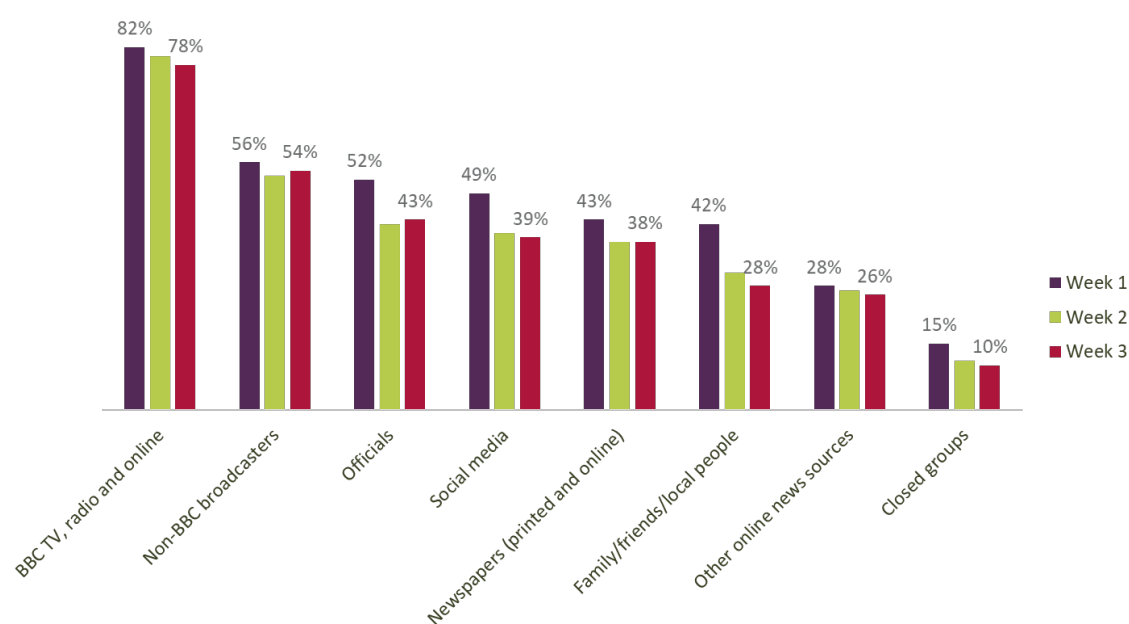
¹ Ofcom, [Online Nation](#) 2019

² The wording of the survey question does not distinguish between misinformation that is being reported as such, and misinformation that is being spread deliberately.

weeks of lockdown with 14% in week three saying they were getting news 20 or more times a day which is less than in week one (24%) and week two (17%).

- The majority of sources have seen a change in usage since week one. BBC services are still the most-used source by some margin (see Figure 1). Four in five (78%) say they use the BBC as a source of news/information, but this is a decrease from week one (82%). Just over half use non-BBC broadcasters (54%) which is no change from the previous two weeks. This is followed by officials (43%), social media (39%), newspapers either online or printed (38%) and family, friends or local people (28%) which have all seen a decrease from week one. 10% say they use closed groups, such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook messenger compared to 15% in week one and 11% in week two.

Figure 1: Sources used for news/information about Covid-19



Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, March-April 2020. Q3a. Which, if any of the following sources have you used to get information/news about the Coronavirus outbreak in the last week?

Base: All respondents who are getting information/news about the Coronavirus outbreak Week 1 (2226), Week 2 (2110) and Week 3 (2105)

Note: 'Other online news sources' combines three aggregated types of source: websites/apps of online news organisations like BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, Vice, etc; websites or apps that bring together news from different news providers; and non-mainstream news sources such as Russia Today, Breitbart, Swawkbox etc

- When asked to nominate their most important source for news/information about Covid-19, 35% say BBC TV, 15% nominate direct from official sources (such as WHO, NHS, Govt, etc), 14% non-BBC broadcasters, 11% BBC Online, and 5% social media. These are all unchanged from the previous two weeks. The pattern among 18-24s is slightly different, with 10% nominating social media (unchanged from previous two weeks), although BBC TV (22%) is still the most important (which has decreased from 29% in week one).
- In general, people say they are using media organisations more than they were before the outbreak of the virus: 57% claim to be using UK-wide organisations (a lot or a little) more than

before, and 33% that they are using local media organisations more. These have both decreased from week one.

- Almost one in five (18%) respondents say they aren't sharing information about Covid-19 which is an increase from week one (11%). The vast majority are still doing so, mostly in person/by phone (73%), although this is a decrease from week one (81%). Similarly, there has been a decrease in sharing via written communications in closed groups (from 34% in week one to 25% in week three), Zoom, Teams etc, and via social media posts (from 25% to 20%). One in five (20%) say they are sharing via video which is unchanged.

Misinformation related to Covid-19

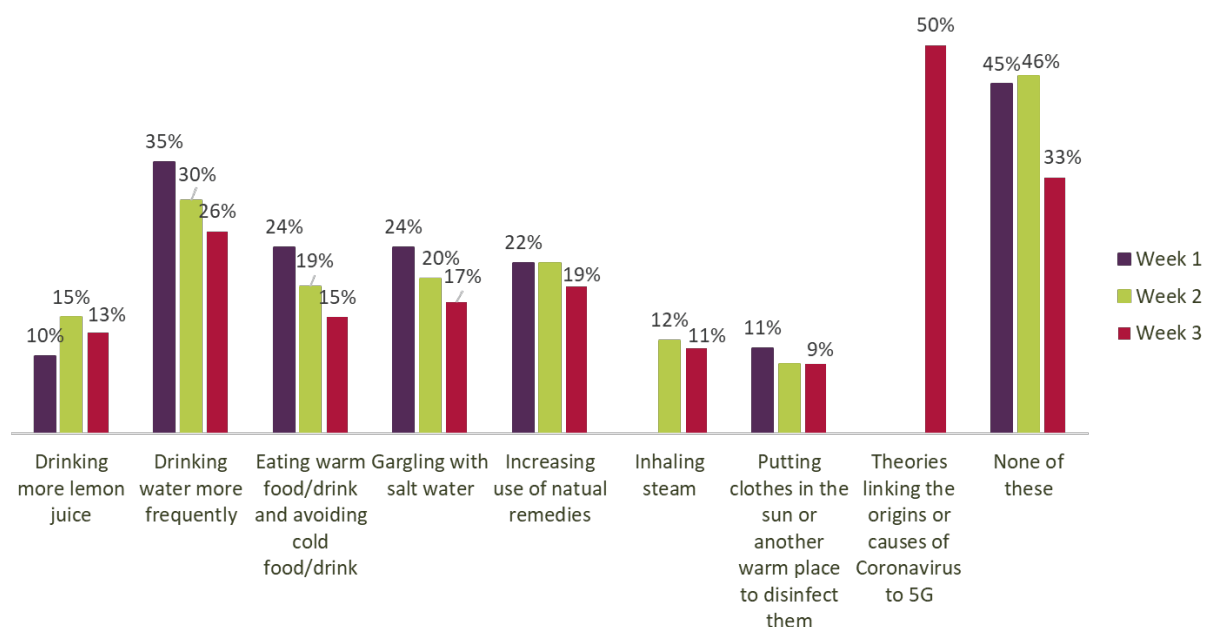
- During the third week of the 'lockdown' half of all respondents (50%) say they have come across false or misleading information³ about Covid-19 (up from 46% in week one). This increase is driven by a rise in the number of respondents aged 65 and over who say they have come across false or misleading information, which increased from 33% of respondents in week one to 46% in week three. However, this may be due in part to mainstream media raising awareness of certain information being false as part of their reporting of the pandemic. Those aged 16-24 are the most likely to have come across false or misleading info, with 59% agreeing with this statement in week three.
- There has been little change in the frequency of accessing misinformation. Among those who saw misinformation in week three of the 'lockdown', almost two thirds (62%) say that they are seeing it at least once a day (compared to 66% in week one). The most common piece of misinformation that people have come across in week three (from a selected list) was '*theories linking the origins or causes of Covid-19 to 5G technology*'⁴ (50%)⁵. However, as shown in figure 2 below, nearly all other theories common in week one of the 'lockdown' decreased in subsequent weeks, for example, '*drinking water more frequently*' (26%), '*gargling with saltwater*' (17%), whilst the percentage who had seen "*eating warm food/drink and avoiding cold food/drink*" decreased to 15%.
- Over half (57%) of those seeing misinformation in week three said they did nothing about it (unchanged versus week one). However, the proportion of respondents using a fact-checking site has increased over time, from 10% in week one of the 'lockdown' to 18% in week two (although this decreased slightly to 15% in week three). Furthermore, the proportion of respondents who said they forwarded or shared the misinformation decreased to just 4% in week three (from 7% in wave one). Twelve per cent said they used tips from media such as the BBC website, whilst 14% checked it with friends and family (15% and 13% respectively in week one).

³ The wording of the survey question does not distinguish between misinformation that is being reported as such, and misinformation that is being spread deliberately.

⁴ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/ofcom-update-on-5g-vandalism>

⁵ This statement was not included in wave 1 and 2 so no comparison is available

Figure 2: False or misleading information about Covid-19 that respondents have come across



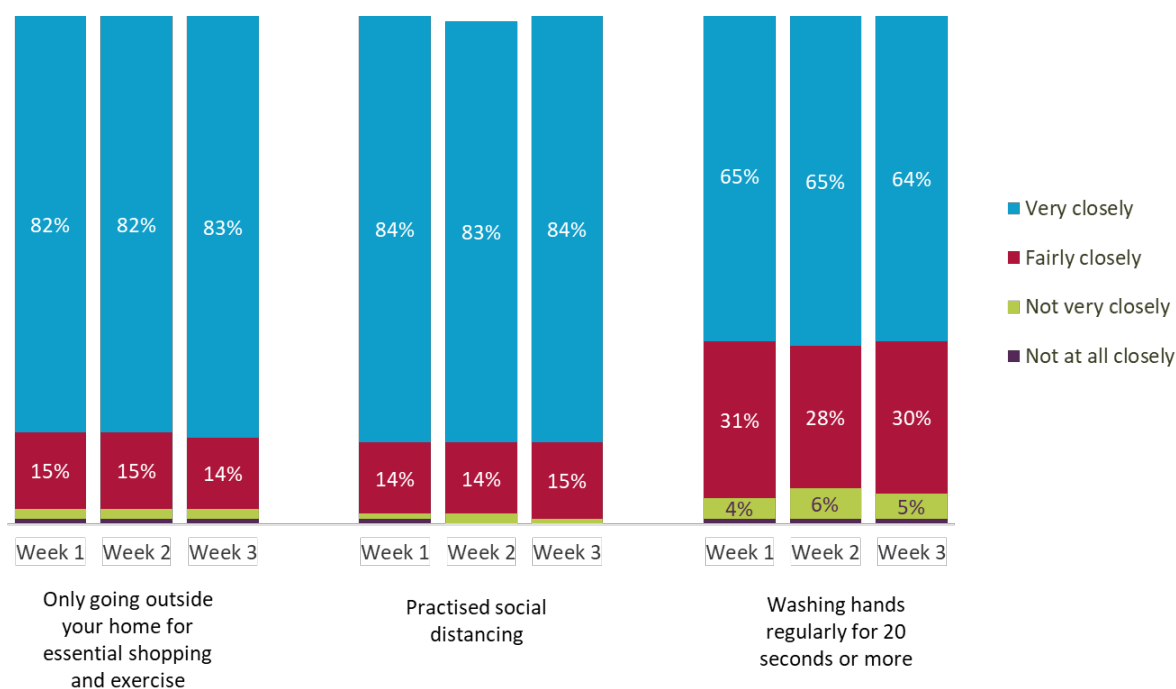
Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, March-April 2020. Note: Some additional false/misleading information were introduced to the survey in subsequent waves. Q10. Have you come across any of these false or misleading information about avoiding the coronavirus in the last week?

Base: All respondents who are getting information/news about the Coronavirus outbreak Week 1 (2226), Week 2 (2110) and Week 3 (2105).

Official advice about Covid-19

- There has been no change in the proportion of respondents who say they are following official advice regarding Covid-19 between week one, two and three of the 'lockdown'. Virtually all respondents say they are (either very or fairly) closely following the official advice of practising social distancing (98%), only going outside for essential things (97%) and washing hands regularly (94%) (see Figure 3). However, a higher proportion of 16-24s continue to say they are only 'fairly closely' following official advice on washing hands regularly (43% compared to 30% among all respondents in week three).

Figure 3: Extent to which people are closely following official advice



Source: Ofcom Covid-19 news survey, March-April 2020. Note: Percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding. Q13. In the last week, how closely would you say you are following official advice on the following aspects of Coronavirus? Base: All respondents Week 1 (2223), Week 2 (2105) and Week 3 (2113)

Attitudes towards Covid-19 and media coverage

- Official sources continue to be the most trusted source for information on Covid-19. Nine in ten or more of those using the official sources trust the NHS (93% in week three vs. 95% in week one), local health services (88% vs. 91%), official scientists (87 vs. 90%), and the government (81% vs. 89%). Although the majority (83%) of respondents say they trust the World Health Organisation (WHO) as an information source, this has decreased from week one (94%).
- Traditional broadcasters also continue to remain highly trusted, although all have recorded a decrease, with 79% of users trusting BBC TV in week three (83% week one), 77% Channel 4 (84% week one), 76% ITV (82% week one), and 72% Sky (75% week one). Social media and closed groups continue to be the least trusted media with a fifth of respondents in week three (22%) saying they highly trust news and information about Covid-19 found on twitter (19% Instagram, 17% Snapchat, 14% Facebook). Just under a quarter of (24%) of respondents in week three said they highly trusted the information found on WhatsApp.
- The proportion of respondents who say they are ‘finding it hard to know what’s true and what’s false about Covid-19’ has decreased from 40% in week 1 to 32% in week three. Furthermore, the proportion who say they are ‘confused about what they should be doing in response to Covid-19’ has also decreased (from 17% in week one to 12% in week three).
- An increasing proportion of respondents say they are ‘trying to avoid news about Coronavirus’, with three in ten respondents (29%) agreeing with this statement compared to 23% in week one.

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Respondents aged 25-34 are most likely to say they are 'trying to avoid news about Coronavirus', with four in ten (39%) agreeing with this statement in week three (up from 30% in week one).

- Finally, respondents in our survey continue to agree almost universally (93% in week three) that the crisis has shown positive sides to society (with no change compared to previous weeks).