Adults' Media Lives: Covid-19 Early-Lockdown Interviews

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1. Introduction

Ofcom's Adults' Media Lives study was set up in 2005 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy. Whereas the surveys seek to quantify in a statistically robust way different levels of media access, awareness, skills and understanding, Adults' Media Lives aims to provide a human face to the data.

This 15-year ethnographic video study has tracked the changing nature of individuals' relationships with digital media – how it fits into their lives, what motivates them to adopt new technology and learn new skills, their usage habits, levels of understanding, issues and concerns about media. We conduct extended in-home face-to-face interviews with the 19 participants each October.

Given the current extraordinary circumstances, Ofcom asked us to re-contact some of the participants to discuss how the lockdown is affecting them, how their media behaviour has changed and how they are staying informed at this difficult time.

We recorded a total of ten c.15-minute video interviews using the Zoom online video conferencing platform. The interviews were conducted by Mark Ellis and Tony Harbron in the early part of the lockdown period, between 30th March and 6th April 2020. This was the second week of the lockdown, which had been imposed by the UK government on 23rd March. (At the time of interviewing, the lockdown had been set for a minimum of three weeks, to be reviewed on 16th April.)

The sample represented a broad cross section of individuals aged 20-75 across England, Scotland and Wales, affected in different ways by the lockdown.

- One key worker (a railway engineer), whose wife works for the NHS and whose children had been sent home from school;

- Two primarily home-based workers (a tutor and a charity fundraising manager) who were operating largely as normal, albeit with others at home;

- A student who had been sent home from university and who was combining studying at home with working part-time stacking shelves in a local supermarket;

- A bar manager who had been furloughed;

- A trainee solicitor who had switched to home working;

- Two retired people who were self-isolating;

- Two people (aged 46 and 58) with underlying health conditions, who were also self-isolating.

2. Summary of key findings

The key findings from these interviews, conducted in the early-lockdown period, were as follows:

- Most, but not all, participants were consuming more news, from a variety of sources and platforms.

- BBC News in particular was being used more often than usual by most participants.

- The UK Government's key messages were reaching people and participants felt confident that they could distinguish between official Government messages and information from unofficial sources.

- Most participants felt well-informed about what was happening, and claimed to be confident in their ability to separate credible sources from fake news.

- Some participants were actively seeking a broader perspective of the pandemic from a wider range of information sources.

- Daily life had changed to varying degrees for different individuals; this had, in turn, impacted on people's media behaviour in different ways.

- Those who were already highly connected in terms of using the internet for work, learning, etc. had adapted most easily to the lockdown.

- There had been a growth in the claimed use of social media, particularly for activities such as streaming live content and participating in challenges.

- Almost all participants reported a much-increased use of video chat apps such as FaceTime and Zoom for keeping in touch with family and friends, and for participating in social events.

3. Sources of information

3.1 Most, but not all, participants were consuming more news, from a variety of sources and platforms.

All participants recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic is a major crisis, and that staying informed and up to date is important. Most claimed they were consuming more news, from a variety of sources and across a variety of platforms.

"We're living in serious times, and I certainly want serious news."
M, 75, Retired, Warwick

However, behaviour did vary across the sample and news consumption seemed to be more polarised than usual. Those with a strong appetite for news were consuming more, whereas those participants who we have identified in previous waves of the study as News Avoiders were still largely avoiding the mainstream news media.

"I've been trying to not watch the TV, because it's a bit worrying. The news is always on. I feel like they're scaring people more than they need to."
F, 20, Student, Loughborough

Moreover, even though the interviews took place early in the lockdown period, there was already some evidence of 'bad news fatigue' starting to affect other participants, who claimed to be watching less news.

"As soon as you put the TV on in the morning [it's all they talk about]… I normally watch Jeremy Vine and all that's on is the Coronavirus. You turn over, it's the Coronavirus."
F, 58, Unemployed, London

3.2 BBC News in particular was being used more often than usual by most participants.

Most participants (including some who have been sceptical about BBC News in the past) mentioned BBC News as an important part of their current news diet. TV news bulletins/specials, the BBC News Channel, website and app were all mentioned as sources.

The BBC appeared to have become the de facto channel for accessing official Government information, particularly the 5.00pm briefing, although a few participants expressed mixed views about the BBC's role in sharing Government information in this way.

One (who had previously been critical of a perceived overly liberal BBC editorial agenda) was pleased that the BBC was now just 'passing information on'. Another, however, was critical of the BBC not being challenging enough.

"They're still just BBC News; that's why I say I watch it, but I also watch another one. But they are getting better… They've been doing what they're meant to be doing… They are just literally passing on the information."
F, 46, Stay-at-home mum, Rural Essex

"At the start it was BBC, but now I've changed to preferring Sky News because they're a lot more probing. I feel like the BBC is quite laid-back… it's just giving everyone an easy ride."
F, 27, Trainee solicitor, Edinburgh

3.3. The UK Government's key messages were reaching people and participants felt confident that they could distinguish between official Government messages and information from unofficial sources.

All participants during this early-lockdown period claimed that they were aware of the Government's and the NHS's key messages about Coronavirus, including rules on social distancing and other advice on how to limit the risk of spreading the virus (e.g. hand washing, not touching your face).

The 5.00pm briefing from 10 Downing Street on TV had become regular daily viewing for around half the participants we spoke to, but even those not watching much TV claimed to have seen the relevant information via prominent Government and NHS messages on social media platforms (especially Instagram).

Participants claimed to be confident distinguishing between official Government communications of this kind and other content such as editorial or user-generated content which might appear in their social media feeds.

"I've been watching the updates, so you've got the people on the podiums answering the questions from Sky or wherever and they're answering them as honestly as they can – because they're politicians – but it is very interesting… they're using the time they've got to ask questions we want to ask."
F, 46, Stay-at-home mum, Rural Essex

"I watched the big lockdown announcement on the news. My Mum made me watch it, so I know the rules about social distancing – don't meet people, keep two metres apart. I feel like a lot of adverts are coming up… NHS adverts on Instagram and Facebook."
F, 20, Student, Loughborough

"I've also had quite a lot of adverts on Instagram… sponsored things from the Government… and when I'm watching people's stories that will come up… like a sponsored post telling you what to do."

F, 27, Trainee solicitor, Edinburgh

"Whether it's on the BBC or the Guardian or Apple News there's a link so that you can find out what you should be doing to avoid infection… that's omnipresent, I think."

M, 75, Retired, Warwick

3.4 Most participants felt well-informed about what was happening, and claimed to be confident in their ability to separate credible sources from fake news.

Participants felt well-informed about the spread of Covid-19, what symptoms to be on the lookout for, and how to stay safe. This information was being consumed via a diverse range of sources including mainstream media, social media and word of mouth.

"I've been using Twitter a lot more, because you're getting a mix of information from different news outlets and just normal people sharing stories."

F, 27, Trainee solicitor, Edinburgh

"A couple of local people have set up the Coronavirus thing on Facebook so that you can talk to each other, find out what's going on."

F, 46, Stay-at-home mum, Rural Essex

Most participants claimed to know someone working on the front line as a healthcare professional (two have spouses who work for the NHS and both parents of one participant are nurses), and their advice was trusted above all other sources.

"My best friend John… his girlfriend works for the NHS, she's on the phones for 111. She always tells me what's going on."

M, 30, Bar Manager, Swansea

The majority of participants reported having seen conspiracy theories online about the origins of Covid-19 and/or questionable information about how to treat or protect themselves from the virus. They claimed, however, that they were confident distinguishing credible sources from fake news. When it comes to judging whether or not a source can be trusted, knowledge or previous experience of the source was considered key.

"I've not read anything or believed anything because I'm up to speed with what's true and what's not because I've got a medical family… There's quite a lot of stuff coming up [on social media] from the Government and the NHS – it says so on the top. If it's from them I will read it and trust it."
F, 20, Student, Loughborough

"I actually follow a guy on the internet… because he's been very helpful to me with my auto-immune problem and everything I've always thought he has said it."
F, 58, Unemployed, London

One apparent area of confusion was whether or not the over 70s have to stay indoors. This was a recurring theme both among those participants who were over 70 themselves and those who have parents in that age group. One participant in particular complained both about mixed messages, and a perceived lack of easily accessible information.

"It's not very clear what I'm allowed to do. I went on the website for the Government and it just talked about the things you were meant to do if you're up to 70. If I'm fit and healthy and over 70 can I go out for a walk? I don't know."
F, 75, Retired, Edinburgh

3.5 Some participants were actively seeking a broader perspective of the pandemic from a wider range of information sources.

Beyond staying up to date with official updates, some participants demonstrated a strong interest in accessing a broader range of information sources to gain a more rounded perspective of the crisis. This included both an interest in what is going on in other countries, and in international news sources' perspective on the UK.

"I try to split [my time] evenly between the BBC and Al Jazeera, just to get a bit more of a globalist view of the issue."
M, 23, Tutor, London

In this sample, many participants' use of social platforms transcends borders, and some were making a particular effort either to keep in touch with friends and family overseas and to read about the experiences of real people in other countries.

"One of the things that I've been doing is making contact with people I haven't spoken to recently. They give me a perspective of what's happening. Close to home, I was talking to somebody in Scotland… but going further than that, in South Germany, South Africa and even Namibia."
M, 75, Retired, Warwick

A few participants – particularly those in Scotland and Wales – were also interested in more specific local news context. This appeared to be readily accessible to those in the nations, but perhaps less so to those in the English regions.

"As far as local stuff is concerned, that I think is a gap. Birmingham and the Midlands are said to be a hotspot for Covid-19, but it's hard to get the information."
M, 75, Retired, Warwick

4. Changes in behaviour

4.1 Daily life had changed to varying degrees for different individuals; this had, in turn, impacted on people's media behaviour in different ways.

As we have seen above, this period in early-lockdown had affected participants' daily lives in different ways. Consequently, it is not surprising that people's media behaviour had also been impacted to different degrees.

Some were spending more time in front of their TV screen, and there were examples of participants signing up to additional TV services to stay entertained during the lockdown. This included the Disney+ streaming service which had recently launched at the time of the interviews.

"We've got Sky TV and Virgin now, so we've got two kinds of TV, with two different packages."
F, 46, Stay-at-home mum, Rural Essex

However, some other participants claimed that they were watching less TV, because they were too busy with work or other activities. And a few (older) participants were consciously avoiding devoting too much of their day to TV viewing, rationing their TV time to particular points in the day.

"There is a television, but I think over the two weeks I've been here I've put it on about four times."
M, 75, Retired, Warwick

"I'd say we're watching less TV because we're playing board games and going on the Wii and stuff like that."
F, 42, Fundraising manager, Cardiff

Several participants mentioned that they had started to devote more time to playing on games consoles, and two had, in fact, bought new PlayStations since the start of the lockdown.

"With Virgin you can record six things at one time, so I normally go through the telly at the beginning of the day, record everything, play on the PlayStation and when I've finished, about 8 o'clock, I'll watch everything that I've recorded."
M, 30, Bar Manager, Swansea

Engaging and entertaining children was cited as a particular challenge, especially for parents who were still working full-time. This also had an effect on some participants' own viewing behaviour, and there was some evidence of more family viewing taking place as a result.

"When [daughter] is around we don't watch things like the Netflix series or Amazon Prime, because we have to gear our viewing to her."
F, 42, Fundraising manager, Cardiff

4.2 Those who were already highly connected had adapted most easily to the lockdown.

For several years, we have been reporting how the internet plays an increasingly important part in participants' daily lives. Going online is less an activity in its own right as an integral part of almost everything they do – a facilitator of everyday activities. Examples include interaction with educational institutions, healthcare, job hunting, shopping, gambling, banking and, of course, keeping in touch with family and friends.

During this early-lockdown period, participants felt that the internet was more important than ever, and the more 'connected' a participant's lifestyle already was, the more easily they were able to adapt to the lockdown.

For example, those who already worked mostly from home were well-equipped for the lockdown and faced minimal disruption. Existing online university and school resources also allowed study to continue relatively seamlessly.

"For me I'm home-based anyway so it hasn't been a massive change. The main difference has been not being out and about so much."
F, 42, Fundraising manager, Cardiff

"When I first found out that our lectures were cancelled, I just did nothing, but then I realised it was all online. So now I'm catching up on a lot of Uni work."
F, 20, Student, Loughborough

"[Daughter] was sent home from school with a pack of work for a fortnight. To be honest she did that within the first three days, so we've subscribed to Twinkl, which is the learning resource that the school uses to print out worksheets and things like that. There's loads and loads on there."
F, 42, Fundraising manager, Cardiff

On the whole, participants' broadband and mobile connections appeared to have been holding up well. There were only a few isolated complaints, most commonly about broadband speed. Most were pleased with the quality of their service overall.

"In terms of our internet, to be honest it has been remarkably good. I think we had one issue once when all three of us were on a video call simultaneously, which strained things a little bit but otherwise…"
M, 23, Tutor, London

At this stage of early-lockdown, participants' online shopping habits had not changed very much. Those who were already using the internet for grocery shopping continued to do so, but those who weren't were still mainly accessing their essentials in other ways. Similarly, those who were not already shopping online for non-essential items such as clothes and durables had not started to do so.

"I don't need anything essential and I don't want to make a delivery guy or woman have to come and deliver something like clothes, that I don't really need. I'd only shop online if I really needed something."
F, 27, Trainee solicitor, Edinburgh

4.3 There had been a growth in the claimed use of social media, particularly for activities such as streaming live content and participating in challenges.

Although not all participants believed that they were spending more time than before on social media, the majority claimed to be going onto the social platforms they usually use more often, and spending more time on each visit. In particular, some younger participants' already heavy use of Instagram appeared to have expanded substantially.

"I put on the odd Netflix thing, but mostly I'm just on social media… Instagram and stuff… a lot."
F, 20, Student, Loughborough

"I got my screen time through this morning – I get a notification every Monday – and I thought 'That's disgusting!'. Last week it was 66 hours on my phone. That is outrageous. And I spent 30 hours on Instagram… that's almost a working week."
F, 27, Trainee solicitor, Edinburgh

One growth area was the claimed consumption of live streamed content on Facebook and Instagram, both from social media influencers and mainstream media and political personalities.

"Nigel Farage, I've been watching him a lot doing his speeches. So it will give me a notification that Boris is live or Trump is live, or whoever. Nigel Farage is one of them."
F, 46, Stay-at-home mum, Rural Essex

Participants also remarked on how specific threads and challenges have been especially engaging; social media seems to have played an important role in fostering a continued sense of community for some participants.

"What's big on Instagram at the moment is that there's lots of challenges going round, like 'See ten press-ups, do ten press-ups', things to keep you active. There was another one – 'Post your baby picture'… I think that's just to keep people entertained, keep people positive. I think that's been really good actually."
F, 20, Student, Loughborough

Similarly, group messaging continued to play a key role in keeping participants connected to friends and family, and participants reported an increase in the number of WhatsApp (and similar) groups they were participating in.

"We've got a work group, we've got a friends group, we've got a Prosecco group… we've had the family groups anyway. These groups will probably stay afterwards, I'd have thought."
F, 42, Fundraising manager, Cardiff

4.4 Almost all participants reported a much-increased use of video chat apps such as FaceTime and Zoom for keeping in touch with family and friends, and for participating in social events.

Perhaps the most notable change in behaviour during this period of early-lockdown was the explosion in the use of video chat apps such as FaceTime, Skype and Zoom (and the video chat function of other apps such as WhatsApp). Almost all participants were using one or more apps regularly, and they had become an important way of keeping in touch with friends and family.

"We have a FaceTime meeting with the three families. That's happening now on a Saturday night on a regular basis."
M, 45, Engineer, Rural Derbyshire

Three participants mentioned having downloaded and used the *Houseparty* app (which had been the subject of high profile security concerns). All deleted the app as soon as these concerns were made public.

"It just came out of nowhere, this app, and we all downloaded it… It was such a good app, it's just a shame that no-one trusts it anymore. It just goes to show the power of one [negative] post… Everyone was loving the app, but it's history now. That's so last week!"
F, 27, Trainee solicitor, Edinburgh

Participants described various inventive uses of these platforms, particularly in a group social setting. These included game and film nights, pub quizzes, and social drinking.

"The main issue for me in terms of social life has been that my girlfriend lives in Richmond, so I haven't seen her since the lockdown began, which has been a bit weird since we live in relatively close proximity. On Saturday evenings we'll FaceTime each other, watch the same movie on Amazon Prime, and have a kind of movie night."
M, 23, Tutor, London

"I find it hilarious how Zoom has become my new social life. Me and the girls have done a pub quiz where we get drinks, there's a quizmaster who does all the questions, and then we just have a catch-up for a couple of hours afterwards."
F, 27, Trainee solicitor, Edinburgh

ANNEX 1

Summary of participant profiles

Sex	Age	Job	Location	Current status
Female	19	Student	Loughborough	Studying at home and working part time in supermarket
Male	24	Tutor	London	Working from home
Female	27	Trainee solicitor	Edinburgh	Working from home
Male	30	Bar manager	Swansea	Furloughed
Female	42	Fundraising manager	Cardiff	Working from home
Male	45	Engineer	Rural Derbyshire	Key worker
Female	46	Stay-at-home mum	Rural Essex	Self-isolating
Female	58	Unemployed	London	Self-isolating
Female	75	Retired	Edinburgh	Self-isolating
Male	75	Retired	Warwick	Self-isolating

ANNEX 2

Discussion Guide

1. Sources of information

Which media have you been using to keep yourself informed about the Coronavirus crisis? [PROBE ON TV, RADIO, ONLINE SOURCES, SOCIAL MEDIA, NEWSPAPERS]

(Where participants are using social media) **How conscious are you of the source of the information you're seeing** (e.g. directly from NHS or the Government, mainstream news sources like the BBC, Mail, Guardian, other news sources, opinions from people you do or don't know)? Do you trust some more than others?

Have you come across any advice or information online that you think was questionable or wrong? What made you think that?

Are you watching/reading/listening the news more (or less) often than you usually do? Why (not)? What about local news?

Have you been actively searching out information about symptoms, how to self-isolate, self-care etc.? If so, where from?

How well informed do you feel about…

> a) **Coronavirus itself, and the spread of the disease?**

> b) **What actions you need to take to stay safe and minimise the risk to others?**

(Where participants are using the BBC to keep informed having previously been critical or mistrustful of it…) **Why are you using the BBC now when you previously said [x] about them?** Has this experience of using the BBC changed your views about them at all?

2. Behavioural changes

How have you been keeping yourself entertained whilst at home? Have you been watching more TV/box sets/etc. than normal?

Have you subscribed to any new services (e.g. Netflix, Now TV) or are you thinking of doing so?

On the contrary, have you considered cancelling any of your services to save money in these uncertain times?

Are you doing more online shopping, either for groceries or other goods?

Are you working from home? If so, have you bought any new (e.g. IT) equipment to enable yourself to do so? How did you choose what to buy?

How have you been using technology to keep in touch with friends and family? [PROBE ON ROLE OF SKYPE/FACETIME/ZOOM ETC. AND OF WHATSAPP/MESSENGER GROUPS] How is this any different to what you normally do?

(Parents only) **How have you been using technology to keep your children entertained and/or up to date with their studies whilst they have been at home?**

Have you experienced any technical difficulties (e.g. slow internet, poor mobile signal, video streaming services not working properly)? What, if anything have you done about it?

Have you seen any advice from Ofcom about how to get the best out of your devices while working from home, and have you taken any action to improve things *(e.g. turning off the WiFi on devices that aren't being used e.g. tablets, mobile phones, in order to improve WiFi signal or using a landline instead of mobiles)*?