

Most in the UK Say News Media Have Helped Them Respond to COVID-19, but a Third Say News Coverage Has Made the Crisis Worse

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Key findings

In this RISJ Factsheet we examine how people think about the coronavirus crisis and how different institutions in the UK have responded to it, based on a survey fielded from 13 August to 19 August.

We find that:

- Despite important investigative reporting and previous research demonstrating that people who follow the news know significantly more about the coronavirus disease, a third (35%) say that they think that the coronavirus situation in the UK has been made worse by how the news media has covered it. Just 7% say better, and 46% say news media coverage has neither made the situation better nor worse.
- The percentage of people who say they have used online news as a source of information about COVID-19 in the last week has dropped by 17 percentage points since April, use of TV news for information about the pandemic by 22 percentage points, and use of social media specifically for information about coronavirus by 25 percentage points.
- Less than half (45%) of respondents rate news organisations as relatively trustworthy sources of information about COVID-19, down from 57% in April. The drop in trust in the UK government has been even more pronounced, declining from 67% in April to 44% in August, and trust in individual politicians is down from 38% in April to 22% in August. These declines are far greater than the slight erosion of trust in information about COVID-19 from other sources.
- A majority (56%) say that the news media have helped them understand the pandemic, and 61% that the news media has helped explain what they can do in response to it. Both figures are down by about ten percentage points since April. 27% say they feel the news media have exaggerated the crisis, a figure basically unchanged since the first wave of our study.
- The UK government (38%) and individual politicians (37%) are most widely identified as 'very' or 'extremely' concerning sources of potentially false or misleading information about coronavirus. 30% of respondents say they are 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about possible misinformation from news organisations. While the concern over the UK government and individual politicians has grown since April, concern over news and other sources has remained stable.
- 20% think that the coronavirus situation in the

UK is heading in the right direction, and 29% think the UK is on the wrong track. Just under half (45%) think the picture is mixed.

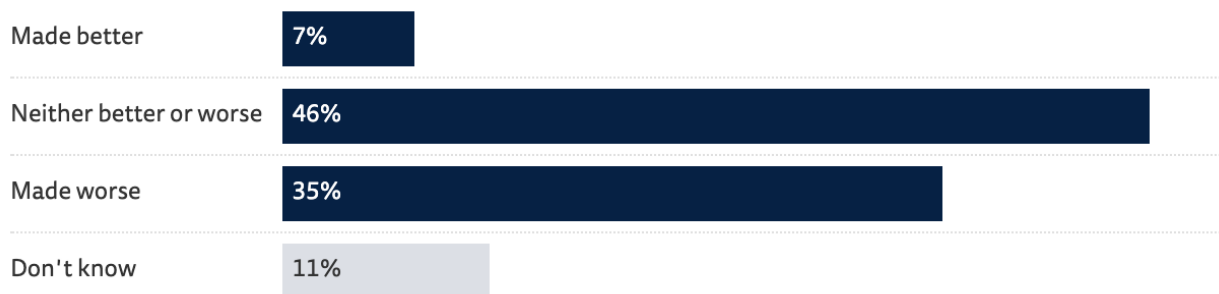
Overview

This is the tenth and final in a series of ten factsheets based on an ongoing online panel survey of a representative sample of the UK population. The survey was designed by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford to collect data on how people navigate news and information during the coronavirus pandemic and was fielded by YouGov. Ten waves have been fielded at two-week intervals, top-line findings from each were published soon after in a factsheet, with more in-depth analysis to follow. More details about the project and the methodology can be found on the [project website](#). The survey is a mix of tracking questions and specific questions fielded only in some waves.

Findings

The majority of the public continues to rely on news media for information about the coronavirus as the UK heads into a complicated and uncertain autumn. BBC News (both offline and online), ITV (primarily offline), and the *Guardian* (primarily online) are the three most widely used brands. But both news use, trust in news, and the overall perception of whether the news media help people understand and respond to the crisis have declined significantly since the early stages of the crisis. And a third (35%) say that they think that the coronavirus situation in the UK has been made worse by how the news media has covered it, despite numerous examples of important investigative reporting by individual news organisations and despite previous research demonstrating that people who follow the news know significantly more about the disease (Nielsen et al. 2020). Just 7% say they think the coronavirus situation in the UK has been made better by how the news media has covered it, 46% say neither better nor worse. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Proportion that think that the coronavirus situation has been made better or worse by how the news media covered it



Q20W10. All in all, do you think the coronavirus situation in the UK has been made better or worse by how the news media covered it? Base: Total sample = 1,003.

As the UK reports a lower number of new coronavirus cases relative to population than many other large European countries, the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine developed in Oxford enters Phase III trials, and schools, nurseries and colleges plan to open on a full-time basis, there are also continuing concerns around track and trace, testing, and other measures,

local lockdowns in several areas, and some travel restrictions have been reintroduced as the spectre of a second wave is haunting Europe. In addition to the crisis' public health impact, the Office for Budget Responsibility says the country is on track to record the largest annual fall in GDP in 300 years.¹

¹ https://cdn.ubr.uk/OBR_FSR_July_2020.pdf

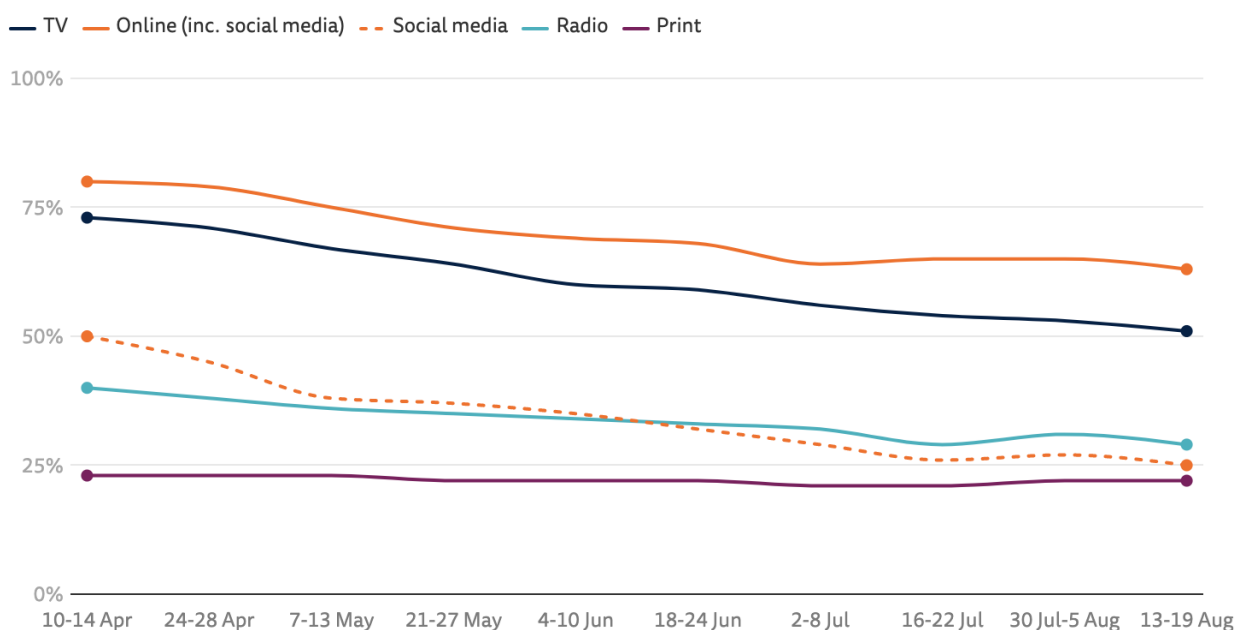
In this final factsheet from the UK COVID News and Information project, we look at how people in the UK navigate this changing and challenging situation, what sources of information they trust, how they rate the news media's ability to help them navigate the coronavirus crisis, and what sources of possible misinformation they are concerned about.

The early stages of the coronavirus crisis in the UK saw a 'rally around the news' as people came together around widely used and broadly trusted news media, overall news use increased, and news media were broadly trusted as a source of COVID-19 information

(Fletcher et al. 2020a, Fletcher et al. 2020c).

Since then, both use and trust has declined, and information inequality has increased (Fletcher et al. 2020c). Looking at use first, the number of people who say they have used various media as sources of news or information about COVID-19 in the last week has dropped across the board. Looking at the most widely used sources, online news use has dropped by 17 percentage points since April, TV by 22 percentage points, and social media use (for information about coronavirus specifically) by 25 percentage points. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Proportion that used ____ as a source of news or information about COVID-19 in the last 7 days



Q4a. On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news or information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? Base: 10-14 Apr. = 2,823, 24-28 Apr. = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467, 2-8 July = 1,338, 16-22 July = 1,218, 30 July-5 Aug. = 1,117, 13-19 Aug. = 1,003.

In terms of trust, there has been a significant decline since the early stages of the crisis. The percentage of people who rate news organisations relatively trustworthy sources of information about COVID-19 has declined from a clear majority (57%) in April to less than half (45%) in August. Most of this decline happened in April and May, and trust in news has been

stable at the lower level since (Fletcher et al. 2020b).

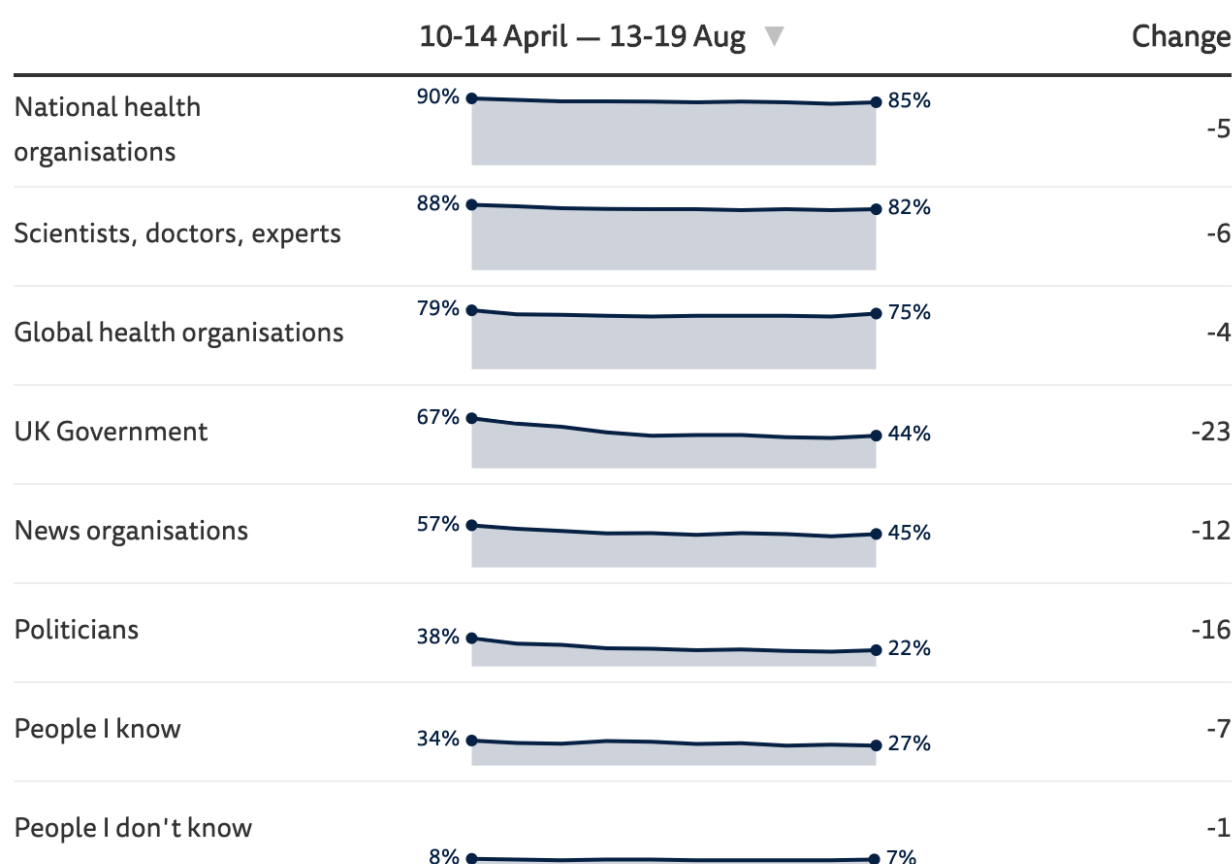
The drop in trust in the UK government has been even more pronounced, declining from 67% in April to 44% in August. As with the news media, much of the decline happened early on, but the erosion of trust in government has continued over

time. Trust in individual politicians as a source of information about COVID-19 is even lower, down from 38% in April to 22% in August.

It is important to note that the double-digit declines in trust in news and especially in the UK government and in politicians is far greater than the slight erosion of trust in information about COVID-19 from other sources, whether highly and widely trusted sources like the NHS and scientists, doctors, and experts, or much

less trusted sources like ordinary people. It continues to be the case that more people say they trust people they know for information about COVID-19 than say they trust politicians. (See Figure 3.) Whereas the decline in trust in the UK government has been pronounced across the political spectrum, both on the right, in the centre, and on the left, the decline in trust in news organisations is most pronounced on the right and on the left, and less so among those in the centre.

Figure 3. Proportion that trust news and information about coronavirus from ____



Q10. How trustworthy would you say news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19) from the following is? Please use the scale below, where 0 is 'not at all trustworthy' and 10 is 'completely trustworthy'. Base: 10-14 Apr. = 2,823, 24-28 Apr. = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467, 2-8 July = 1,338, 16-22 July = 1,218, 30 July-5 Aug. = 1,117, 13-19 Aug. = 1,003. Note: Trust = 6-10.

For comparison, only small minorities say they trust news and information about COVID-19 that they find on search engines (19%), social media (6%), video sites (5%), and messaging applications (5%). This is in line with the 'trust gap' between news media and digital platforms that we have documented in previous research

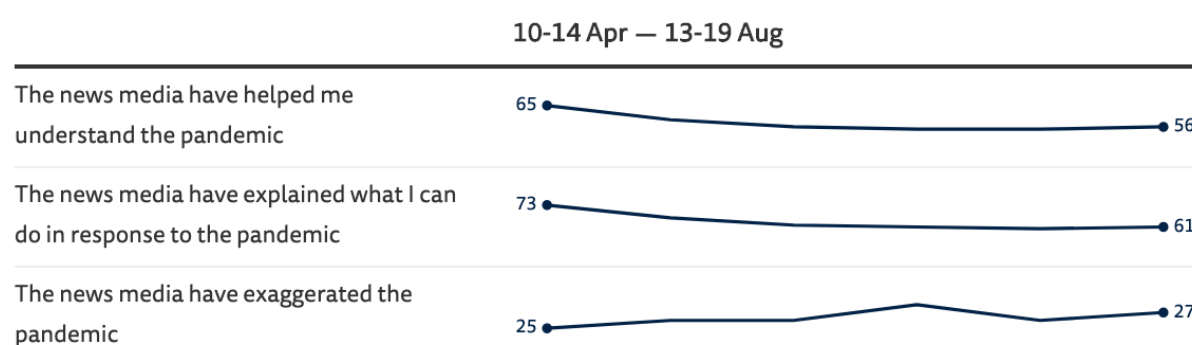
(Nielsen et al. 2020).

The declining trust in news organisations as a source of information about COVID-19 is a challenge for the profession and the industry, but it is worth highlighting that the coronavirus crisis may have persuaded at least some of the public

that news media have value. When we look beyond trust in COVID-19 news and information specifically, and compare the percentage who in August say they feel they can trust most news most of the time with figures from early 2020 collected before the pandemic hit the UK, we have seen an increase from 28% to 34% (pre-crisis data on trust from Newman et al. 2020). The percentage of people who say they at least feel they can trust most of the news they consume most of the time has increased from 39% to 52%.

But public opinion is still mixed when it comes to whether the news media have helped them navigate the coronavirus crisis. When asked whether the news media have helped them understand the pandemic, in August, a majority of 56% agrees, and 61% agree that the news media has helped explain what they can do in response to the pandemic. Both figures have declined since April, but it is still a majority of the UK public who on balance feel the news media help them in the crisis. In August, 27% say they feel the news media have exaggerated the crisis, a figure basically unchanged since April. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4. Proportion that agree with each statement

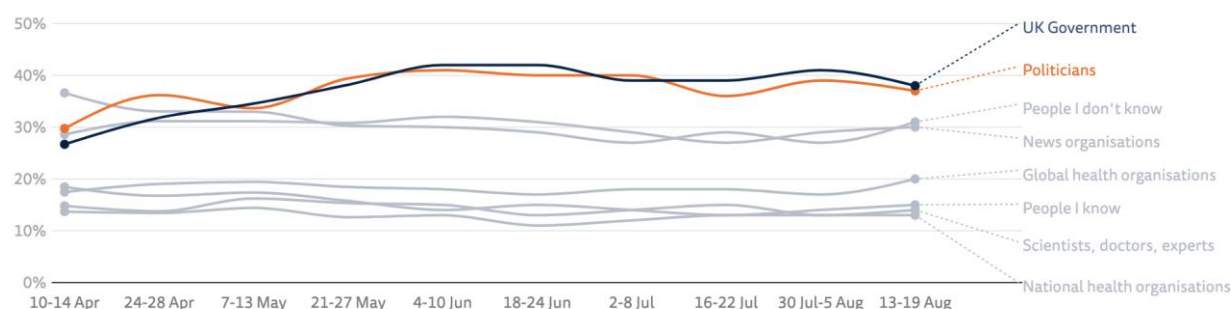


Q14. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the coronavirus. Base: 10-14 Apr. = 2,823, 24-28 Apr. = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 2-8 July = 1,338, 13-19 Aug. = 1,003. Note: The question was asked on waves 1-4, 7 and 10. Showing 'tend to agree' or 'strongly agree'.

While the majority of the UK public relies on news media for information about COVID-19 and a majority find news helps them understand and respond to the crisis, a large minority have strong reservations. Three out of ten respondents (30%) say they are 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about false or misleading information about coronavirus from news organisations. Only the UK government (38%) and individual politicians (37%) are seen by more people as concerning sources of potential misinformation about the pandemic.

(The latter finding in line with qualitative research done by others, see e.g. Kyriakidou et al. 2020.) Whereas concern over the UK government as a source of misinformation about coronavirus has increased since April (up 6 percentage points), concern over most other sources has remained largely stable throughout the crisis. (See Figure 5.) Even among people on the political right, one in five say they are 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about false or misleading information about coronavirus from the Conservative UK government.

Figure 5. Proportion very/extremely concerned about false or misleading information about coronavirus from _____

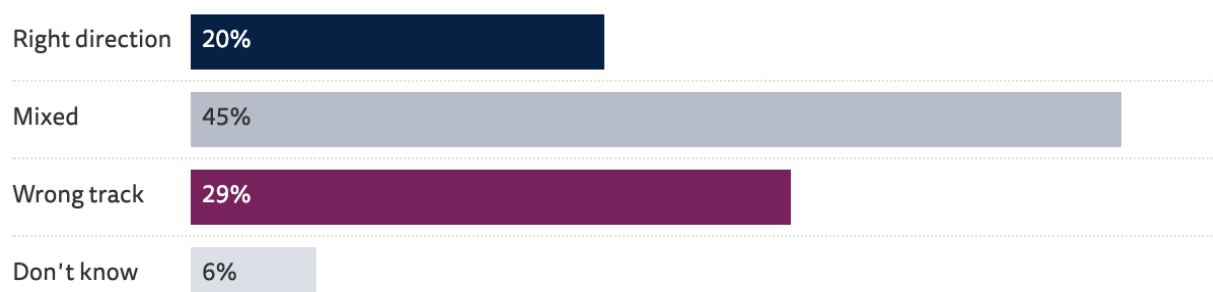


Q11. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about coronavirus (COVID-19) from each of the following? Base: 10-14 Apr. = 2,823, 24-28 Apr. = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467, 2-8 July = 1,338, 16-22 July = 1,218, 30 July-5 Aug. = 1,117, 13-19 Aug. = 1,003.

Finally, our survey was in the field from 13 August to 19 August, a period in which confirmed hospital deaths from COVID-19 in the UK grew from 41,329 to 41,381 (Roser et al., 2020), and where there was considerable news coverage of how the UK government was handling exam results and of the introduction

of quarantine for travellers from France.² During this period, 20% of respondents said they think that the coronavirus situation in the UK is 'heading in the right direction', but 29% feel it is off 'on the wrong track'. 45% think that the picture is mixed (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Proportion that think the coronavirus situation in the UK is generally heading in the right direction



Q19. All in all, do you think the Coronavirus situation in the UK is generally headed in the right direction, or do you feel things are off on the wrong track? Base: Total sample: 1,003.

These figures have been broadly stable since June, though the percentage of people saying the UK is heading in the right direction has declined somewhat. By comparison, in our first survey in April, 39% of respondents said they thought that the coronavirus situation in the UK was heading in the right direction, and 10%

thought that it was on the wrong track (45% thought the picture was mixed) (Fletcher et al. 2020). When asked what the main issue facing the UK today is, 50% answered COVID-19 in August, down from earlier in the crisis, but still by far the most frequently named issue, with the economy a distant second at 20%.

² Please note that a change in how deaths from coronavirus are counted in England has reduced the total confirmed UK death toll by more than 5,000 since our last factsheet. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-53722711>

Five months into the coronavirus crisis the UK public is, overall, more pessimistic than they were in the early stages, they follow the news less and trust it less (and government much

less), and a large minority are extremely sceptical of the news media. But a majority still say that news media help them understand the pandemic and respond to it.

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