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Information inequality in the UK coronavirus communications crisis

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is a communications crisis in addition to being a public health emergency. Few, if any, citizens are, on their own, equipped to understand the disease itself, the preventive steps they might take, or the actions taken by governments and other authorities, and so have to rely on news media, information from health authorities, and other forms of communication. At the same time, most of us have discussed the pandemic, its impact, and the many issues it raises with friends and family both offline and online, and via social media and other platforms. These sources and these conversations – some of them less-than-authoritative, some misleading – will also influence how we navigate the crisis.

This is a communications crisis in the sense that communication is a vitally important and decisive part of how each of us, as citizens, are able to handle the emergency that the pandemic presents, and in the sense that communication, both by government and via institutions intertwined with our political processes and public life – like news media and various digital platforms – is integral to how we are able to respond as a society. The 2020 Coronavirus Act by parliament granting the United Kingdom's (UK) government emergency powers to handle the COVID-19 pandemic was only published on 25 March, several days after Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the first lockdown measures at a televised press conference, and much of the official response has taken the form of 'government by messaging' which relies in part on how official announcements are covered in the news, accessed and shared online, and deciphered by different parts of the public.

In this Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) at the University of Oxford report, we examine information inequality and other social differences in how people have navigated the coronavirus communications crisis in the UK based on data from a series of surveys fielded fortnightly since mid-April. Our research was conducted as COVID-19 rippled through the UK with hundreds of thousands infected and tens of thousands of fatalities, creating severe and often very unequal social and economic impacts from both the disease and responses to it, and increasingly intense public discussion around the UK government's handling of the crisis.

Overall, we find a 'rally around the news' effect,¹ especially early on in the crisis, as people came together around widely used and broadly trusted news media, just as people initially rallied around the UK government, turned to it for information about the coronavirus, trusted it, and generally said they felt the government was doing a good job of responding to the pandemic (Fletcher et al. 2020a).

But as we have documented elsewhere, the initial rally around the UK government quickly evaporated, as fewer and fewer turned to the government for information, trust declined rapidly, many across the political spectrum began to question its handling of the crisis, and a significant minority began to express concern over what they saw as potentially false or misleading information about coronavirus coming from the government itself (Cushion et al. 2020; Fletcher et al. 2020c; Nielsen et al. 2020).

The rally around the news has in some ways held up slightly better. News use is still higher than during pre-crisis levels, and the BBC in particular is widely used as a source of news about COVID-19, both offline and online. But trust in news has eroded too, leaving it on a par with the government. Also, inequalities in COVID-19 news use and differences in news use by age, gender, education, and income have in many cases increased over time (though inequality in news use around coronavirus is still in many cases lower than inequality in news use overall was before the crisis).

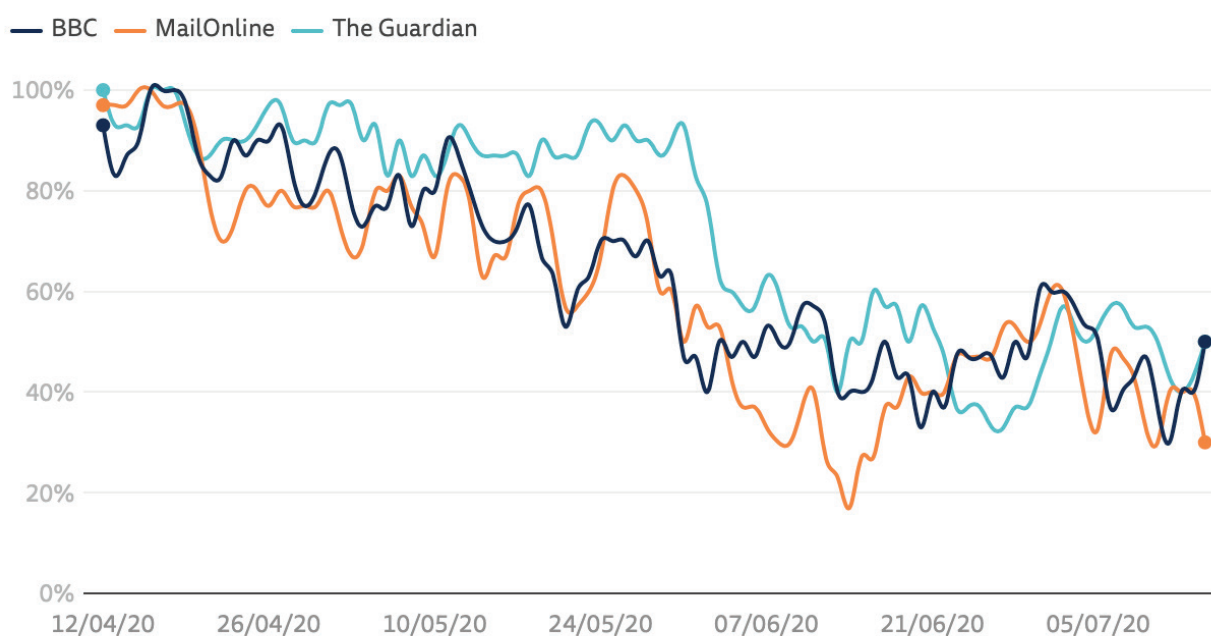
¹ We adapt this term from the 'rally around the flag' effect, which refers to surges in support for political leaders during times of crisis. It was applied to the COVID-19 crisis by Will Jennings: <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-why-boris-johnson-and-other-world-leaders-have-become-more-popular-during-outbreak-11965748>

The continued high levels of news use are important because news media demonstrably play a key role both in holding power to account through the crisis – with many different news media providing detailed coverage of sometimes chaotic government decision-making, as well as serious problems in care homes, specific industries, and problems affecting some minority communities and some parts of the UK disproportionately – as well as in helping the public understand and navigate the crisis. As we have shown in previous work, most people are relatively informed about the coronavirus as a disease (Nielsen et al. 2020), and large majorities say they are willing to take preventive measures (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2020a). News media play an important role in both areas, perhaps especially in terms of engaging people who distrust the government, and news media's role in large part relies on their ability to reach the public and maintain public trust. This is in line with much previous research demonstrating how news media help inform people (see e.g. Aalberg and Curran 2012).

The data we use here to analyse information inequalities in the UK coronavirus communications crisis comes from the first six of a total of ten waves from an ongoing online panel survey of a representative sample of the UK population. We also draw on content analysis collected on a rolling basis throughout the crisis. The surveys were designed by RISJ to collect data on how people navigate news and information during the coronavirus pandemic and were fielded by YouGov.

The coronavirus is still the single most important issue facing the country according to a majority of our survey respondents, and while less all-consuming than in April and May, COVID-19 related stories still account for on average about half of the top ten most-read stories on the BBC News website, MailOnline, and the *Guardian* website – the three most widely used online sources of news in the UK (Newman et al. 2020).

Figure 1. Proportion of top ten most-read stories from ____ that were about COVID-19 (3-day rolling average)



Top-line findings from each of the first six waves have been published in a series of RISJ factsheets, and we summarise key elements of these findings in Section 1, before turning to more in-depth analysis. Those who have read the factsheets published so far may wish to skip the summary section and jump to the in-depth analysis. Further in-depth analysis will be published after the project data collection is completed.

Key findings

Based on six online surveys with the same respondents at regular two-week intervals starting in mid-April, we find that:

- Overall news use levels remain higher than before the crisis, though COVID-19 news use has declined significantly from mid-April to late June. The big initial surge in news use has been followed by a slow and consistent decline over the ten-week period.
- As news use has fallen, inequalities in COVID-19 news use have grown (in the sense that news use has become unevenly distributed). If we apply the Gini coefficient to our data on how much COVID-19 news each person used, we see that inequality was .38 for the first wave of the survey in mid-April, and gradually increased to .46 by the sixth wave in late June.
- Gaps in news use by age have grown. Levels of news use are high, but a 12 percentage points (pp) gap between the proportion of 18–54s and over-55s who used COVID-19 news at least once a day or more on average had doubled to 24pp by the end of June (75% vs. 51%), as news use fell more sharply within the younger age group.
- Differences by gender have also grown. At the start of the epidemic, large and roughly equal proportions of both men (78%) and women (79%) were accessing COVID-19 news at least once a day on average. However, an 8pp gap had emerged slowly by late June, with women less likely to regularly access COVID-19 news than men.
- There are differences in levels of COVID-19 news use by household income and levels of formal education. However, the gaps have remained at the same size since mid-April as news use has declined in parallel across different levels of income and formal education.
- News avoidance has risen slightly since April, and women are consistently more likely to say they avoid news than men. Across the six waves of the study, we found that the proportion of women who actively avoid the news was around 6–10pp higher. By late June 25% of women said that they always or often actively avoid the news, compared to 18% of men.
- Offline COVID-19 news use is more widespread than online use. However, online news inequalities (as measured using the Gini coefficient) are larger than offline news inequalities. Inequalities have grown both online and offline since mid-April, but at the same pace.
- There is almost no difference between the proportion who accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average by education when we consider offline use, but online, the gap between degree-holders and those without a degree was 20pp at certain points in the last ten weeks. In general, gaps in news use between demographic groups are larger online than offline. The exception is for age, where there is a large gap between older and younger people in levels of offline COVID-19 news use.
- We see different patterns of social media COVID-19 news use. By the end of June roughly equal numbers of men and women said that they accessed COVID-19 news at least once a day on social media. Over the course of our study, the gap between men and women has never exceeded 3pp. We see a similar picture for variables like household income, where for all brackets, around one in ten say that they accessed COVID-19 news at least once a day on social media.
- We find no evidence that social media is raising news inequalities. In fact, comparing Gini coefficients for online news use with and without including social media even suggests that social media could be reducing news inequalities. However, we should be cautious, because the differences between the two groups are very small.

Methodology

The data we use for this report comes from the UK COVID-19 news and information project. The project analyses how the British public navigates information and misinformation about coronavirus and about how the government and other institutions are responding to the pandemic. It is based on an ongoing online panel survey of a representative sample of the UK population, and data on news supply from the most popular UK news outlets.

The survey was designed by RISJ to collect data on how people navigate news and information during the coronavirus pandemic. The survey was fielded online by YouGov. Starting in April 2020, the first six waves of the survey were fielded at two-week intervals. The survey is a mix of tracking questions and specific questions fielded only in some waves.

Table 1. Fieldwork dates and sample size

Wave	Fieldwork dates	Sample size
1	10–14 April 2020	2,823
2	24–28 April 2020	2,291
3	7–13 May 2020	1,973
4	21–27 May 2020	1,774
5	4–10 June 2020	1,645
6	18–24 June 2020	1,467

We attempt to survey the same people in every wave. However, for a variety of reasons, some people do not complete every survey. Those that do not complete the most recent survey are not invited to respond in the next wave, meaning that the sample for each wave only consists of people that completed every previous survey. Because panel attrition is non-random (our panel contained more older people and more women by Wave 6), we separately weight each wave by age, gender, region, education, and social grade so that we have a nationally representative sample in each.

We should note that online samples will tend to under-represent the consumption habits of people who are not online (typically older, less affluent, and with limited formal education). It is also important to note that surveys rely on recall, which is often imperfect or subject to biases. We have tried to mitigate these risks through careful questionnaire design and testing. On the other hand, surveys can be a good way of capturing fragmented media consumption across platforms (e.g. social media, messaging, apps, and websites), and tracking activities and changes over time.

Where we refer differences between groups, these are statistically significant using a z-test for population proportions ($p < .05$).

More information about the project can be found at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/UK-COVID-19-news-and-information-project>.

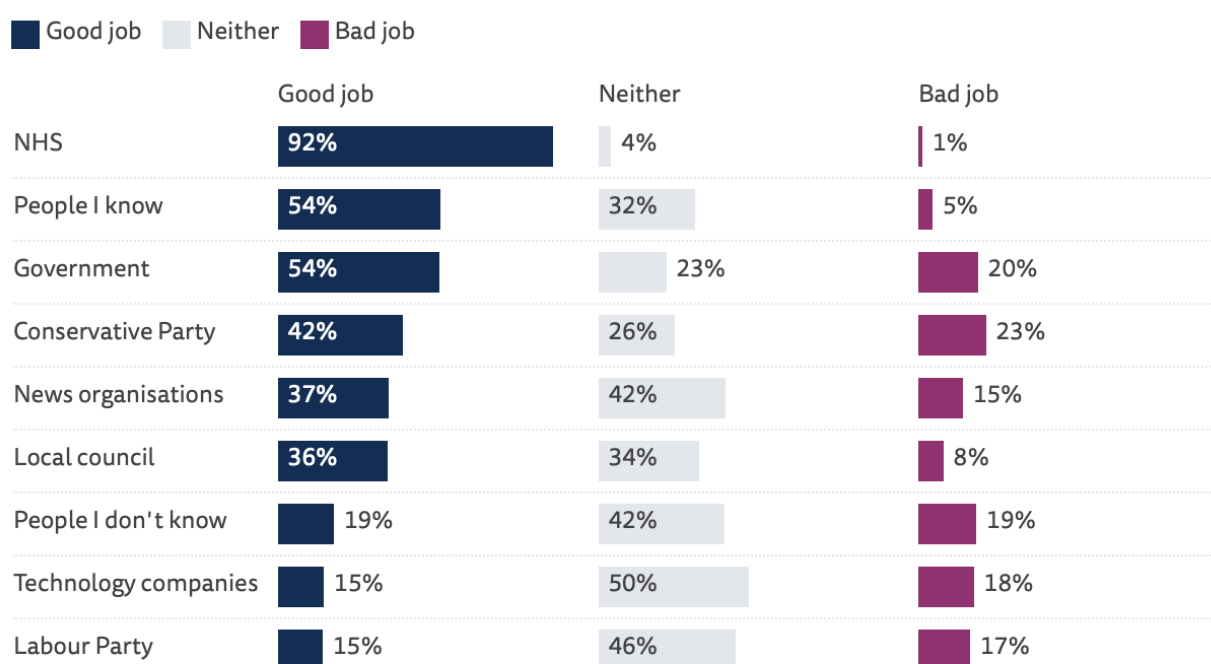
1. How have people in the UK navigated the COVID-19 communications crisis so far?

In this section we recap the research we have already published as part of the UK COVID-19 news and information project. As already stated, those who have read the factsheets published so far may wish to skip this summary section and jump to the in-depth analysis.

10–14 April: Rallying around the news, rallying around the government

Our first survey was fielded from 10 to 14 April, and showed that while news media were broadly trusted, views of the UK government's response to COVID-19 were highly polarised from an early point (Fletcher et al. 2020a). While a majority in this first wave (54%) said they thought the UK government was doing a good job responding to the coronavirus (Figure 2) – higher than the news media (37%) but lower than the NHS (92%) – approval of the government response was very polarised, with 82% of those on the political right saying they thought the government had done a good job, compared to just 14% of those on the left.

Figure 2. Proportion that think ____ has done a good job of responding to coronavirus (10–14 April)



UK_Political. Do you think each of the following is doing a good job or a bad job in responding to the coronavirus pandemic? *Base: Total sample: 2,823. Note: Don't knows not shown.*

When asked about individual major news media, most people (60%) at this stage thought the BBC was doing a good job, and TV outlets like ITV (36%) Channel 4 (32%), and Sky (28%) got a higher proportion of positive evaluations than many newspapers. Most, but not all, major UK news outlets had net positive ratings.

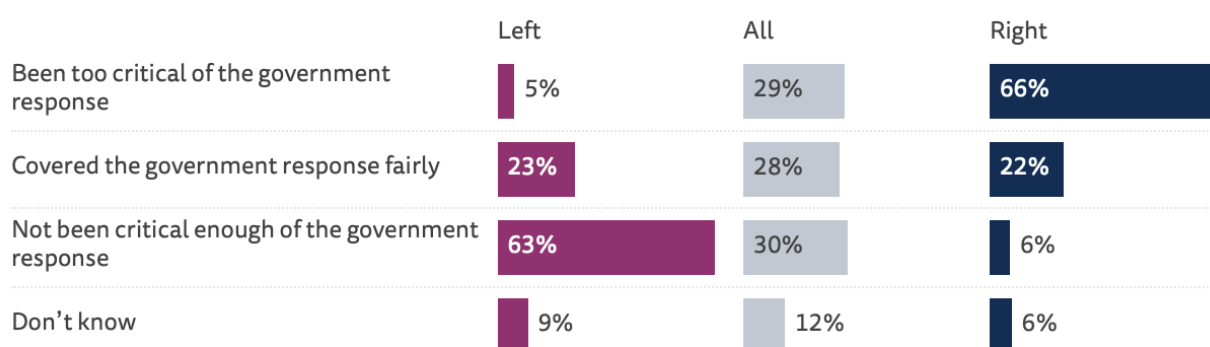
In April, a large majority (65%) said that news media have helped them understand the coronavirus pandemic and explain what they can do in response to it (73%), but a quarter felt news media had exaggerated the crisis (25%). While only a minority (38%) said they felt they can trust

most news most of the time, a majority (57%) rated news organisations as trustworthy sources of information specifically on coronavirus, significantly more than those who said the same about politicians (38%), or about information found via platforms like search engines (31%), social media (13%), video sites (12%), and especially messaging applications (9%).

24–28 April: Polarising attitudes

Our second survey, fielded from 24 to 28 April, showed high levels of political polarisation over news coverage of the government's coronavirus response and concerns over COVID-19 misinformation (Nielsen et al. 2020a). A month into the lockdown, UK public opinion was split three ways between those who thought the news media had not been critical enough of the government response (30%), those who thought it had been covered fairly (28%), and those who thought the coverage had been too critical (29%). But judgement of news coverage was highly polarised along political lines, with 63% of those who self-identify as being on the left feeling the news media had not been critical enough, and 66% of those on the right saying news media had been too critical of the government. This is in line with other work underlining how central politics often is to how many people navigate news and perceive news media (see e.g. Stroud 2011).

Figure 3. Proportion that think the news media has ___ by political leaning (24–28 April)



CRITICAL. Which of the following comes closest to your view about the news media's coverage of the UK government's response to the coronavirus pandemic? The news media has ___ **Q1F.** Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale? *Base: Left = 555, All = 2,291, Right = 366.*

A significant minority said they were very or extremely concerned about false or misleading information about coronavirus from the UK government (32%), from individual politicians (36%), from news organisations (31%), and from ordinary people whom they do not know personally (33%). We found small differences in concern over potential misinformation from news organisations, whereas concerns over the UK government as a potential source of misinformation was highly polarised along partisan lines, with 51% of respondents on the political left saying they are very or extremely concerned about false or misleading information from the UK government, versus 22% among those on the right.

As both the number of cases and the number of confirmed COVID-19 deaths per capita continued to be among the highest in the world (Roser et al. 2020), when asked to compare the UK government's response to most other similar countries, in late April almost half (46%) said it had been worse, around a third (36%) about the same, and 12% better.

7–13 May: Turning away from news?

While the first weeks of the lockdown saw an initial surge in news use around coronavirus in the UK, the later stages of the crisis saw a significant increase in news avoidance (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2020a). Our third survey wave, fielded from 7 to 13 May, found that 22% of our respondents said they often or always actively try to avoid the news (up from 15% in the first wave a month earlier). The number of active news avoiders reached 59% of those who say they sometimes actively avoid the news are included (up from 49% in mid-April).

Figure 4. Proportion that always/often actively avoid the news these days



Q1di_2017. Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days? *Base: 10-14 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*

The vast majority of those who said they always or often actively avoid news (86%) say they are trying to avoid COVID-19 news at least some of the time, and most said they were primarily worried about the effect on their mood (66%). A third (33%) said they felt there was too much news, and 28% said they avoid news because they feel there isn't anything they can do with the information, in line with previous research underlining how functional questions can be central to both news seeking and news avoidance (see Edgerly 2017).

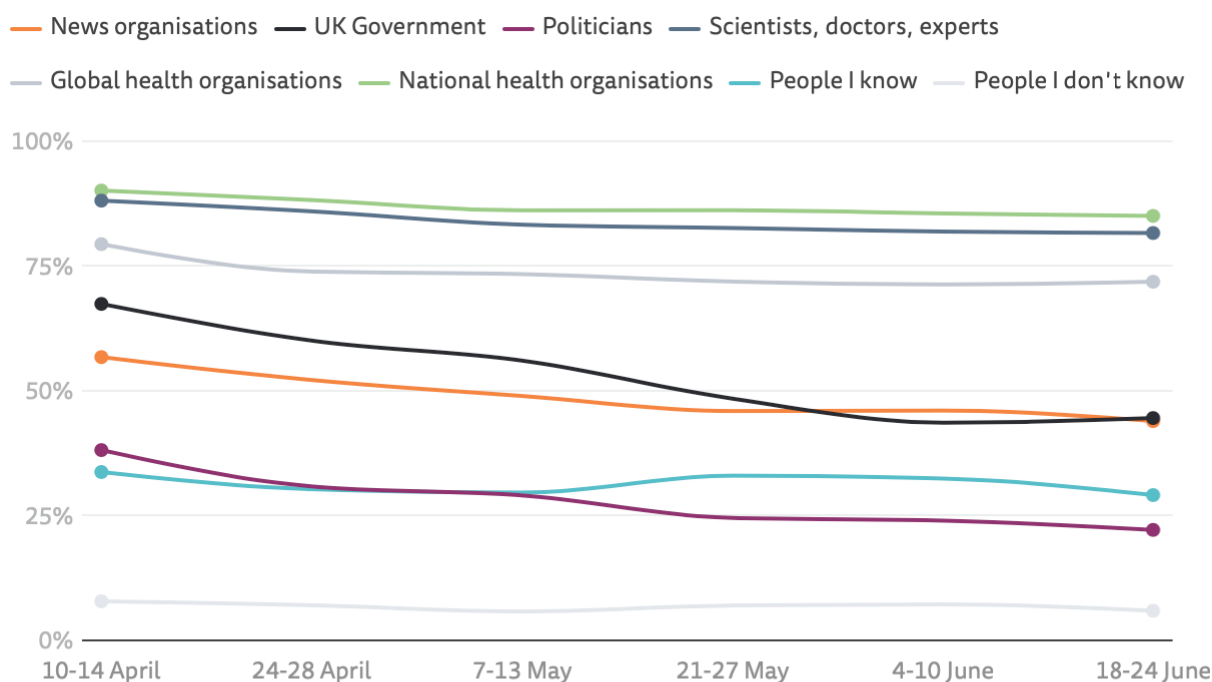
More people said they were actively avoiding news that relies on intentional choice (e.g. television and news websites/apps) than said they were actively avoiding news they may come across incidentally while doing other things (e.g. on social media, or sent to them via email and messaging apps).

21–27 May: The rallying wanes

News use was not the only thing that eroded over time as the crisis continued. By the time of our fourth survey, fielded from 21 to 27 May, we found that trust in COVID-19 information from the news media and especially from the UK government had declined dramatically, and concerns over misinformation from government and politicians had grown significantly (Fletcher et al. 2020b); similar declines have been found in some other countries (see e.g. Lazer et al. 2020). Trust in

COVID-19 information from news organisations dropped by 11pp from 57% in mid-April to 46% six weeks later. Trust in the UK government as a source of information about coronavirus dropped by 19pp from 67% to 48%.

Figure 5. Proportion that trust ____ as a source of news and information about COVID-19



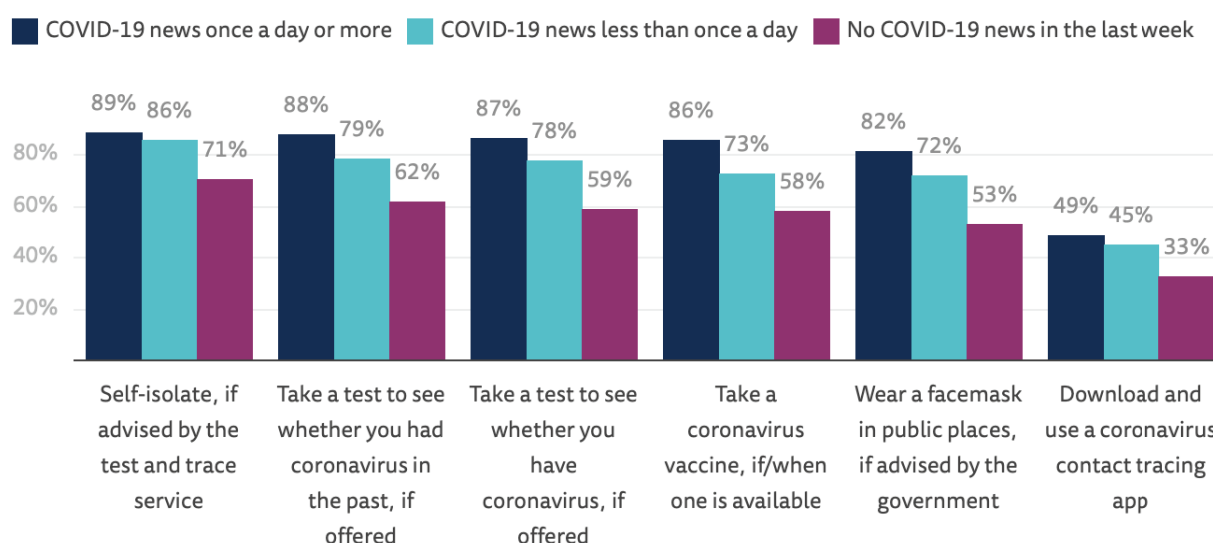
Q10. How trustworthy would you say news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19) from the following is? Please use the scale below, where 0 is 'not at all trustworthy' and 10 is 'completely trustworthy'. *Base: 10-14 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*
Note. 6-10 = Trust. 5 = Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy.

The decline in trust could be seen across the political spectrum, including among those on the right (down 10pp), but was more pronounced among people in the centre (down 19pp) and on the left (down 24pp). We also found a significant increase in the percentage of people who said they were concerned about false or misleading information about coronavirus from the UK government (up 11pp to 38%) and from politicians (up 9pp to 39%). Trust in government has since stabilised, but is still far below the early stages, and any rally around the flag effect has dissipated.

4-10 June: People willing to take preventive measures

Despite declining trust in both government and news media, as well as the initial surge in news use abating and news avoidance increasing, our fifth survey, fielded from 4 to 10 June, documented that even low news users and those with little trust in the government said they would be willing to take preventive measures against COVID-19 (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2020b).

Across demographic differences, political differences, and differences in news use and trust in government, a large share of the UK population said they would be willing to take preventive measures, including to self-isolate following test and trace (86%), take an antibody test (82%), a coronavirus test (80%), and a coronavirus vaccine if/when available (78%). People also said they would wear masks in public spaces if advised by the government (76%), but less than half (46%) said they would be willing to download and use a coronavirus contact tracing app.

Figure 6. Proportion that definitely or probably would ____ by frequency of COVID-19 news use in last 7 days (4–10 June)

PREVENT. Would you do each of the following or not? Showing results for ‘Probably would’ and ‘Definitely would’. **Q4a.** On how many of the last 7 days have you used the following as a source of news and information about Coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: COVID-19 news once a day or more/COVID-19 news less than once a day/No COVID-19 news in the last week = 1061/319/213.*

Thus, even though by early June a sizable minority of people in the UK sought out little, or even no, news from news organisations, and a large number of people had low trust in government information, most people said they would be willing to take most of the preventive measures we asked about. Clearly, people can be sceptical, even highly critical, citizens and be prepared to take steps recommended by health authorities to protect themselves, their families, and their communities at the same time.

18–24 June: Using social media

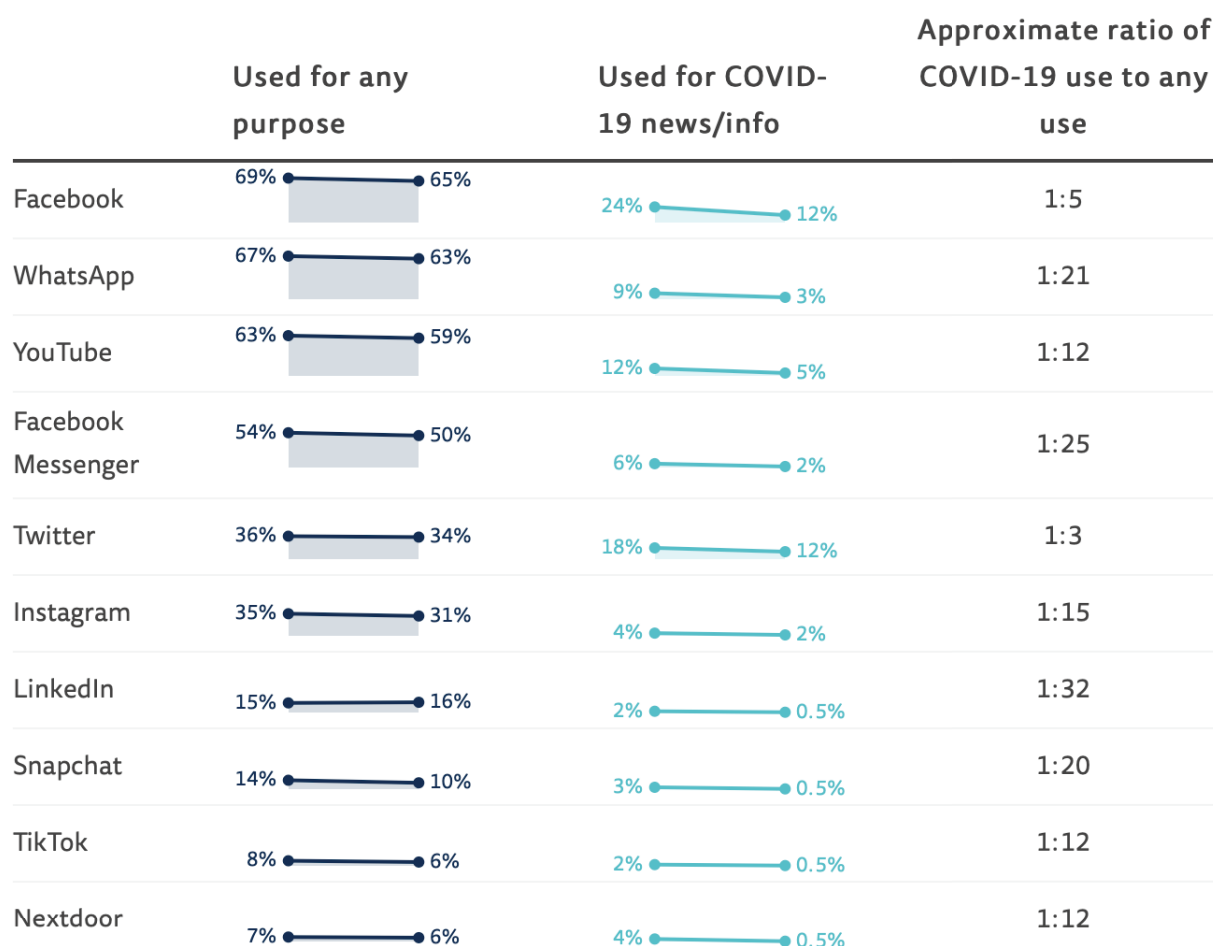
Social media use remained high and widespread throughout these months, even as they were less and less used for news and information about COVID-19 (and trusted by very few for such information) (Nielsen et al. 2020b). In our sixth survey, fielded from 18 to 24 June, we found that the overall use of different social networks had remained consistent over the course of the COVID-19 crisis, and we found little change in the relative popularity of different networks.

Facebook remained the most widely used social network in the UK (65%), along with WhatsApp (63%) and YouTube (59%). Twitter (34%) and Instagram (31%) are also popular, but less widely used. TikTok and Nextdoor are much smaller – both are used by less than 10% of the adult population respectively. This is a powerful reminder of how we continue to live with what some have called a ‘culture of connectivity’ highly reliant on various digital platforms (van Dijck 2013).

However, while overall use remained high and stable, the use of several of these specifically for news and information about COVID-19 roughly halved between April and June. News organisations in the UK, as elsewhere (Quandt et al. 2020), continued to post content on platforms, and several platforms continued to privilege COVID-19 communications from authorities; but while platforms remain widely used, over time they have become less important as a source of COVID-19

information. In April, 24% said they used Facebook for COVID-19 information, but by June the figure was down to 12%, the same figure as the far less widely used Twitter. Fewer people say they used YouTube (5%), WhatsApp (3%), and Instagram (2%) for news and information about COVID-19. Although much talked about, less than 1% said they used TikTok and Nextdoor for the same purpose.

Figure 7. Proportion that used ____ between 10–14 April and 18–24 June



Q8M. Which of the following have you used in the last 7 days for any purpose? **Q8Ma.** Which of the following have you used in the last 7 days for news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: 10–14 April = 2,823, 18–24 June = 1,467. Note. 0.5% indicates values between 0% and 1%.*

By June, around 10% of our respondents said they trust news and information about COVID-19 on social media, video sites, and messaging apps, and one in five (21%) said they trust news and information about COVID-19 on search engines. This leaves a significant trust gap between news organisations (44pp in our first wave) and different digital platforms, though the gap has actually narrowed since the beginning of the crisis, because trust in news has declined while trust in various platforms has remained more or less at its already low level.

2. Differences in news use

We all face the same pandemic, but we do not navigate it, experience it, or understand it in the same ways – or face the same consequences of the crisis. Research in other countries has documented various pronounced social differences in how people navigate and experience the COVID-19 crisis (Hargittai et al. 2020; Safi et al. 2020), and we find the same in the UK.

To better understand information inequality and other social differences during the coronavirus communications crisis, we examine more closely, below, differences and similarities in news use, news avoidance, and the use of different online and offline platforms across age groups, gender, education, and household income.

There are important and troubling differences in how the crisis has impacted different ethnic groups too, often compounding intersecting inequalities; but our number of respondents from individual black and minority ethnic groups – particularly in later survey waves – are too small to allow for robust statistical analysis, and we therefore have to leave this important dimension of the crisis aside in this report.

For the purposes of this report we use the term inequalities to refer to inequalities in the use of COVID-19 news. Therefore, inequality describes the uneven distribution of COVID-19 news use across the population, which can be partially understood through the examination of differences in COVID-19 news use by different groups in society. As we will see, some groups use more COVID-19 news than others. The reasons for this are complex and difficult to untangle, but it is still useful to identify and describe such differences, and explore how they shift over time. The term inequality can be read by some to imply unfairness, and in some contexts this may be appropriate. However, we use the term simply as a way of characterising the distribution of COVID-19 news use across the population.

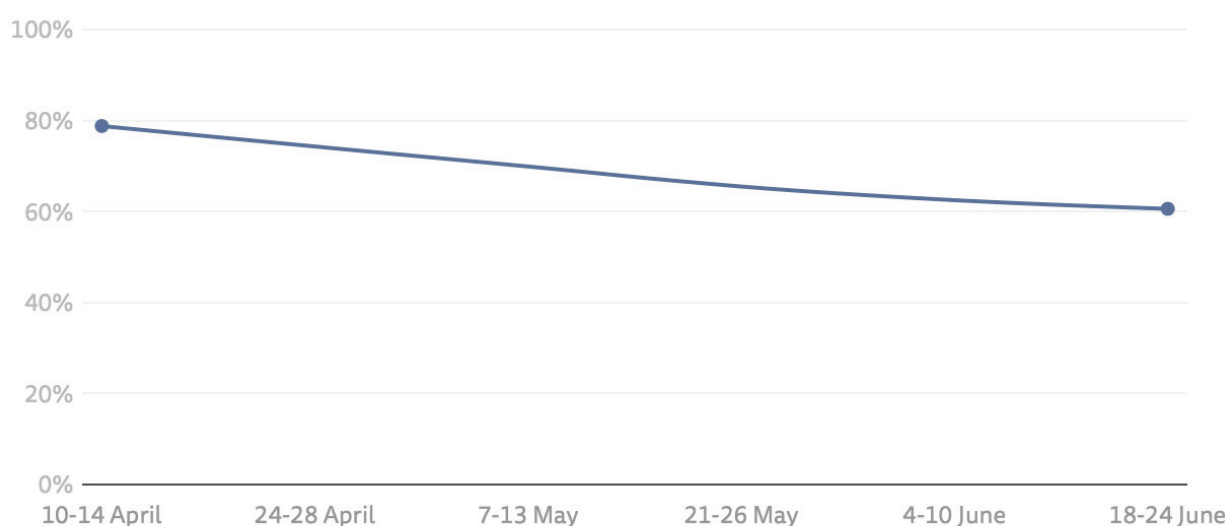
We divided our respondents into two categories: those who reported using little or no COVID-19 news in the previous seven days (less frequently than once a day on average), and those who accessed it once a day or more on average. In the survey, people were asked separately about how often they used television, radio, print, and online media to get news and information about COVID-19, to cover a wide range of different media habits.²

In Figure 8, we can see that the proportion who got news about COVID-19 at least once a day per week on average, dropped by 18pp from 79% in mid-April to 61% in late June. The fall in the use of COVID-19 news happened slowly and consistently over the ten-week period. However, it is important to point out that even though COVID-19 news use has declined since April, overall news use levels still remain high if compared to pre-pandemic levels (Newman et al. 2020). The decline we've seen since April is a 'relative decline' in that it represents a decline from a very high point, when the UK entered lockdown and news and information about COVID-19 had an urgent relevance with direct implications for people's everyday lives – very different from how most people experience and use news most of the time.

² In the survey we asked people 'On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19)?' Respondents could select a number between 0 to 7 days for 'Television news bulletins or programmes such as News at Ten, C4 News, Good Morning Britain, Newsnight and Question Time', '24 hour news television channels such as Sky News or BBC News 24', 'Radio news bulletins or programmes such as BBC Today Programme, BBC 5 Live, LBC, commercial radio bulletins', 'Printed newspapers such as The Guardian, Times, Daily Mail, Mirror', 'Printed magazines such as the Economist or The Week', 'Websites/apps of newspapers such as Guardian online, Times online, Mail Online', 'Websites/apps of news magazines such as The Economist or The Week Online', 'Websites/apps of TV and Radio companies such as BBC News Online or Sky News Online', and 'Websites/apps of other news outlets such as MSN, Yahoo, Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Vice News'. These numbers were summed for each respondent, with those less than 7 placed in the 'less than once a day on average' category, and those with 7 or more placed in the 'once a day or more on average' category.

As news use fell, inequalities in COVID-19 news use grew. To provide an overall estimate of inequalities in COVID-19 news consumption, we use the Gini coefficient – a measure of statistical dispersion which is typically used to measure income inequalities in a population, but can also be applied to media use (Hindman 2009). A higher Gini coefficient denotes higher inequalities. A Gini of 1 denotes maximum inequality (e.g. a single individual having all the resources while the rest have none) whereas a Gini coefficient of 0 denotes equality to the point where all subjects have the same (e.g. the same income for everyone).

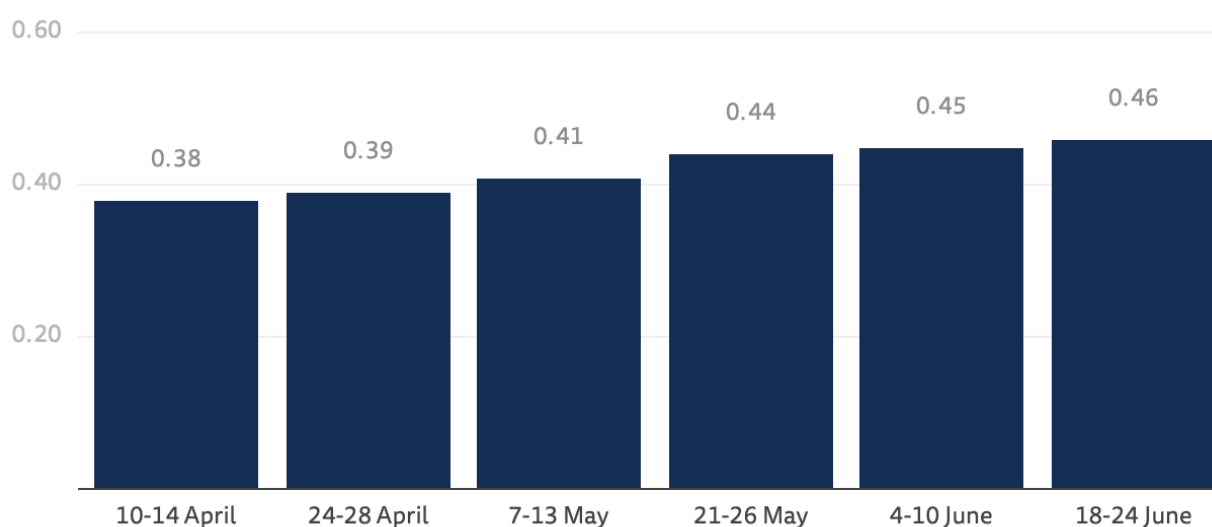
Figure 8. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average



Q4a. On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: 10-14 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*

We use the Gini coefficient to measure inequalities in the total number of COVID-19 news uses in our dataset.³ The Gini coefficient was .38 for the first wave of the survey in mid-April, and gradually increased to .46 by the sixth wave in late June. Although differences between individual waves are very small, the increase over the ten-week period suggests increasing inequalities in COVID-19 news use. However, despite this increase, inequalities are still smaller than those for general news use in the UK in 2018 – albeit arrived at using different measures of media use (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018). The change over time means that, by late June, heavy COVID-19 news users have a larger share of the estimated total news consumed. In other words, COVID-19 news use became less evenly distributed across the population.

³ Our dataset contains information about the number of days in the previous week people got news and information about COVID-19 from nine different sources (e.g. television, radio, online). See footnote 2 for more information. The sum of these for each respondent was used as a proxy measure of total news uses. This 'list-frequency' technique is often considered the most accurate way of measuring news use with surveys (Andersen et al. 2016), but due to problems of recall, surveys cannot always provide completely accurate measures of total news use.

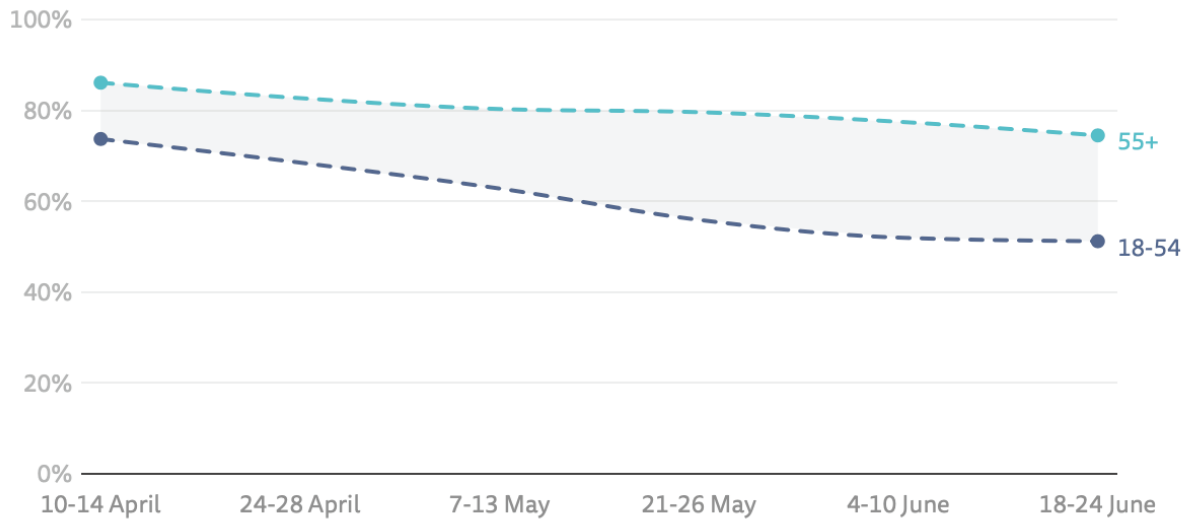
Figure 9. Estimated inequality in COVID-19 news use

Q4a. On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: 10-14 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*

Given the overall decline in news use that we see in Figure 8, the increase in inequality is likely to be because the levels of COVID-19 news use is falling faster in some groups than in others. This raises the question of which groups are seeing the biggest declines in COVID-19 news use. Research has consistently shown that overall levels of news use are dependent on age (see Thurman and Fletcher 2019, for a brief overview), so this seems like a good place to start.

At the start of our study in mid-April we saw a difference in COVID-19 news use between age groups. Older people (categorised as those aged 55 and over at the start of the study) used more news than younger adults (those aged 18–54). More specifically, 86% of those aged 55 or over said that they accessed COVID-19 news at least once a day on average, compared to 74% of those aged 18–54. These are very high levels of news use, but the 12pp gap had doubled to 24pp by the end of June (75% vs. 51%), as news use fell more sharply within the younger age group. News use dropped among all separate 10-year age groups, but the drop was steeper for those under 55.

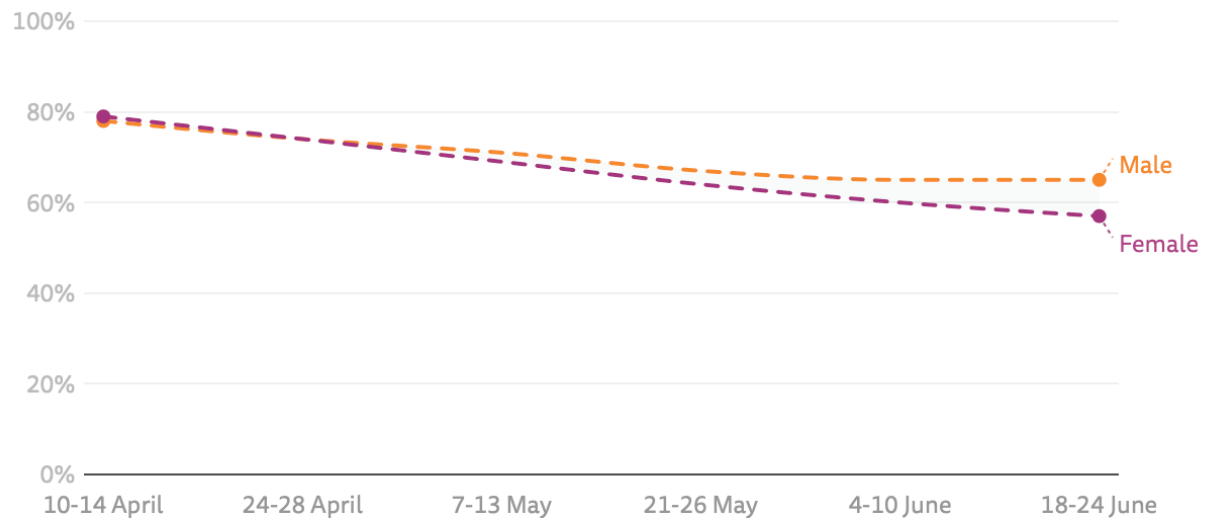
Figure 10. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average by age group



Q4a. On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: 18-54/55+: 10-14 April = 1,680/1,143, 24-28 April = 1,284/1,007, 7-13 May = 1,093/880, 21-27 May = 955/819, 4-10 June = 861/784, 18-24 June = 730/736.*

There are also increasing differences in COVID-19 news use between men and women. At the start of the epidemic, large and roughly equal proportions of both men (78%) and women (79%) were accessing COVID-19 news at least once a day on average. However, a slightly larger 8pp gap had emerged slowly by late June, with women less likely to regularly access COVID-19 news than men. Research tends to show that men normally consume more news than women, so the emergence of a gap could represent a return to pre-pandemic levels after unusual patterns of news use in April. But at the same time, given the heavy burden of household responsibilities that the pandemic brought, the increasing gender differences in news use could be in part attributed to the differences in caregiving (Toff and Palmer 2019).

Figure 11. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average by gender

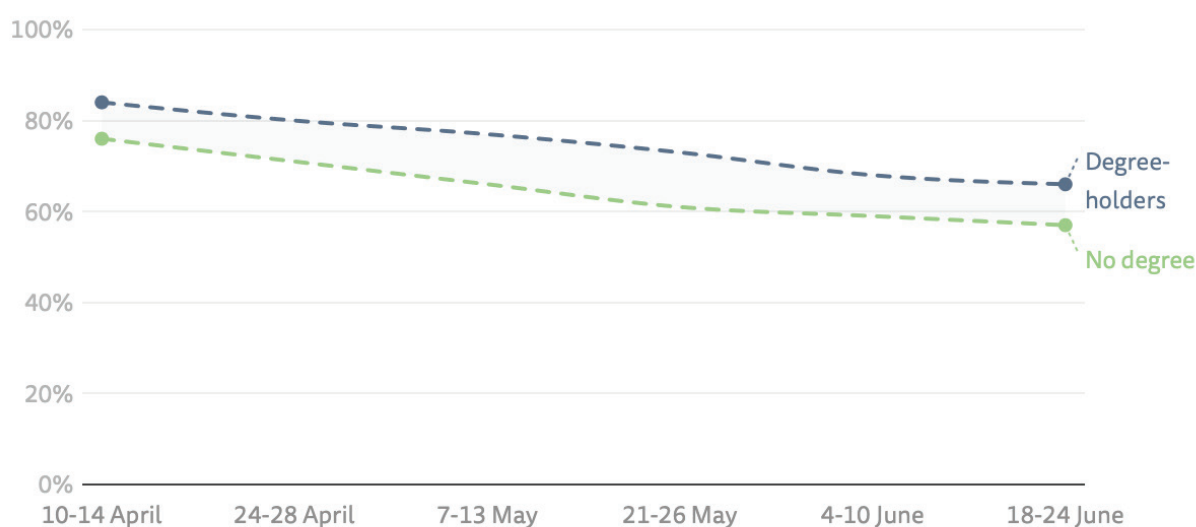


Q4a. On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news or information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: Male/Female: 10-14 April = 1,408/1,415, 24-28 April = 1,119/1,172, 7-13 May = 960/1,013, 21-27 May = 861/913, 4-10 June = 786/859, 18-24 June = 703/763.*

If we look instead at indicators of social class, such as household income⁴ or levels of formal education, we find that those with lower levels of education and household income are consistently less likely to consume news about COVID-19 once a day or more on average, but the size of the gap has remained roughly the same. For both income and education, the differences are significant throughout the ten weeks of the study, but have changed little.

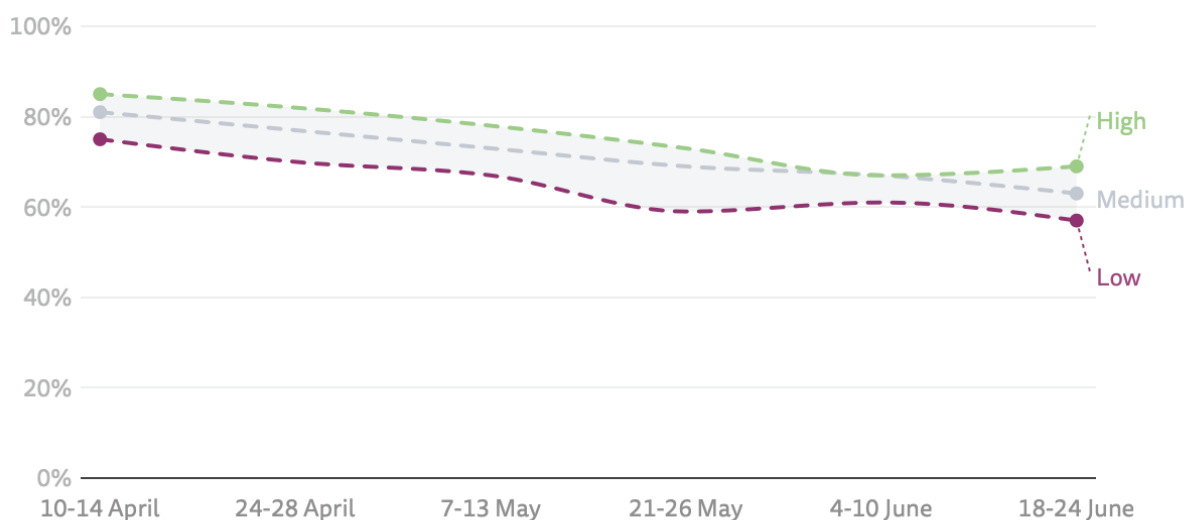
If we look at formal education levels in Figure 12, we see that the difference in using COVID-19 news once a day or more on average between those with a university degree and those without ranged from 8–12pp, with a difference of 9pp by the end of June (66% among degree-holders and 57% among those without a degree).

Figure 12. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average by levels of formal education



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: No degree/Degree-holders: 10-14 April = 1,671/1,152, 24-28 April = 1,356/935, 7-13 May = 1,170/803, 21-27 May = 1,053/716, 4-10 June = 978/667, 18-24 June = 874/592.*

⁴ We group respondents into 'High', 'Medium', and 'Low' household income categories. We classify low household income as between £0–19,999 per year, medium as between £20,000–44,999, and high as £45,000 and higher. Around 18% of respondents 'Prefer not to say' when asked about their household income, and these respondents are excluded from the analysis.

Figure 13. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average by household income

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: Low/Medium/High: 10-14 April = 585/882/709, 24-28 April = 476/732/561, 7-13 May = 409/642/485, 21-27 May = 380/578/425, 4-10 June = 358/539/390, 18-24 June = 333/472/337.

In general we see that COVID-19 news use patterns are similar to those we see for news in general, in that older people, men, and those with more formal education tend to consume news more. When it comes to rising inequalities in news use, these seem to be primarily driven by relative declines in news use from women and from those aged under 55. However, it is important to reiterate once more that we are probably looking at relative decreases in news use and relative increases in inequality given the very high and widespread use of COVID-19 news in mid-April when the study began.

3. Differences in news avoidance

When we think about news use, we often think of it in terms of people's interest and motivation to actively seek news out. But in media environments where people increasingly believe that news-finds-me (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017), we also have to consider people's attempts to intentionally avoid the news – particularly on a topic like COVID-19, where news can leave them feeling powerless and depressed.

In addition to measuring how often people access news and information about COVID-19, we also measure different levels of active news avoidance. Intentional news avoidance (e.g. by stepping back from social media or changing the TV channel when news comes on) is conceptually distinct from unintentional news avoidance (e.g. due to automatic personalisation or reduced supply) (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). Importantly, active news avoidance does not necessarily imply no news use at all, but rather the attempt (which can be unsuccessful) to avoid news to some degree. As such it can tell us about people's attitudes towards news as well as their consumption patterns.

When we asked respondents about how often they actively avoid the news, we found that the proportion of people that say they either always or often avoid the news slowly increased from 15% in mid-April to 25% in late May and early June (see Figure 14).⁵ There are possible signs that news avoidance then started to decrease, falling slightly to 21% in late June. However, given that our earlier research found that the main reason most people avoid COVID-19 news is because they say it has a bad effect on their mood (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2020b), this dip could be explained by the fact that much news from this period was about the relaxing of the UK's lockdown restrictions.

Figure 14. Proportion that always or often actively avoid news these days



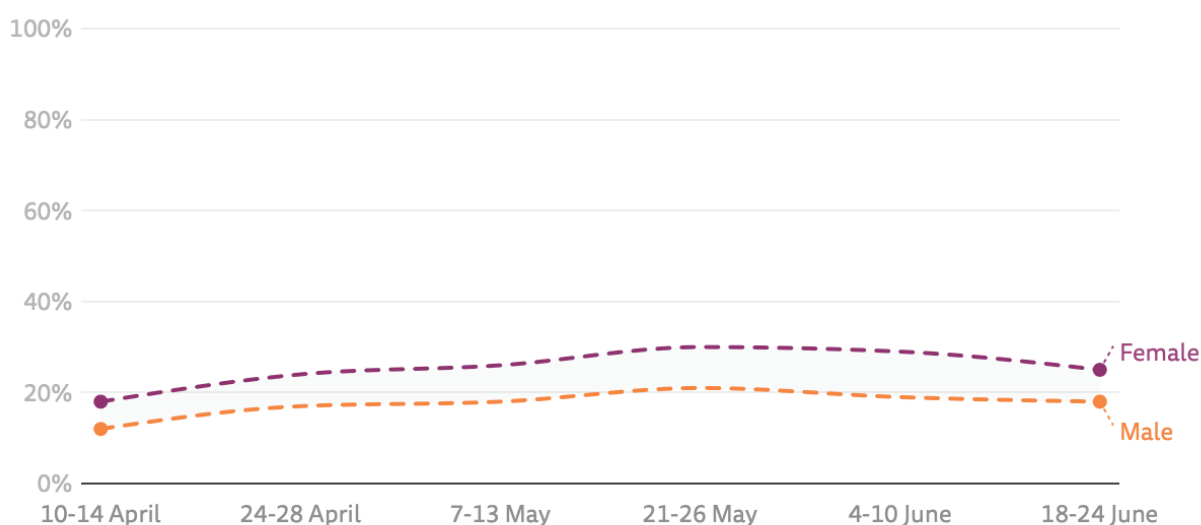
Q1di_2017. Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days? *Base: 10-14 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*

⁵ The survey question used here asked about news avoidance in general, but a follow-up question fielded in Wave 3 revealed that the vast majority of those who always or often avoid news (86%) say they are trying to avoid COVID-19 news at least some of the time.

We did not find large differences in news avoidance by most demographic variables such as education or household income. However, women are consistently more likely to say they avoid news than men. Across the six waves of the study we found that the proportion of women who actively avoid the news was around 6–10pp higher than for men. By late June 25% of women said that they always or often actively avoid the news, compared to 18% of men.

This is similar to the pattern we see for COVID-19 news use in the previous section, and again could be linked to structural gender inequalities that have little to do with news. Previous research suggests that women are more likely to avoid news, partly because of differences in household and emotional caregiving responsibilities (Toff and Palmer 2019). The increase in such responsibilities throughout the pandemic could partly explain the differences in levels of news avoidance.

Figure 15. Proportion that always or often actively avoid news these days by gender



Q1di_2017. Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days? Base: Male/Female: 10-14 April = 1,408/1,415, 24-28 April = 1,119/1,172, 7-13 May = 960/1,013, 21-27 May = 861/913, 4-10 June = 786/859, 18-24 June = 703/763.

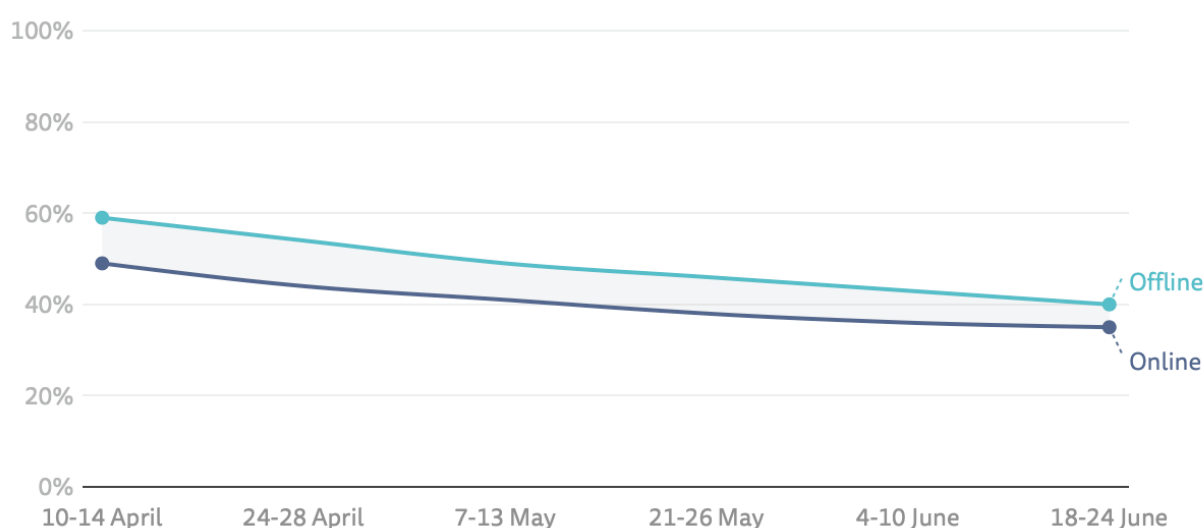
4. Differences in online and offline news use

Up to now we have considered COVID-19 news use in general, but research consistently shows that there can be quite large differences in how people use news online (e.g. via websites and apps) and how they use it offline (e.g. via TV, print and radio). In this section, we separate out online and offline use, and explore differences and inequalities in the use of each.

Our data show that accessing COVID-19 news offline once a day or more on average is more widespread than doing so online (Figure 16).⁶ In the UK this is true for news in general (if social media is not counted), but especially so during the coronavirus pandemic where TV in particular has played an important role – especially at the beginning of lockdown (Nielsen et al. 2020).

Overall, 59% of respondents used offline media to get news and information about COVID-19 in mid-April, decreasing to 40% in late June. Around half of respondents (49%) used online news media to get updates about the pandemic, down to 35% in the sixth wave. This means that the gap between online and offline news use has shrunk during the ten-week period.

Figure 16. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average offline and online



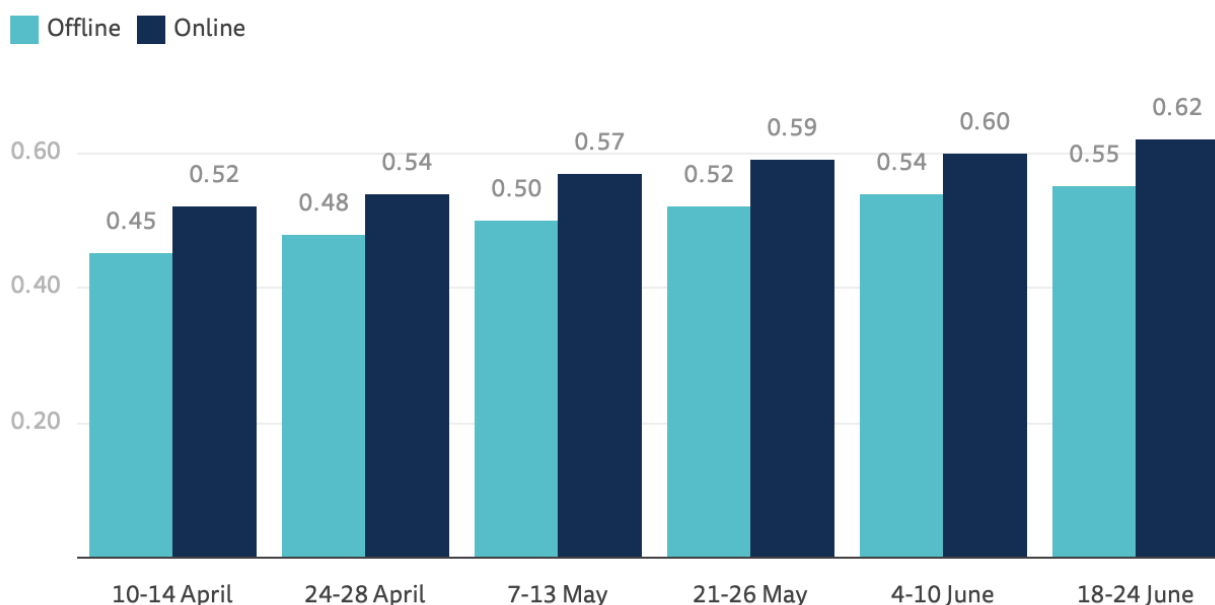
Q4a. On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news or information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: 10-14 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*

We can also use the Gini coefficient to estimate the differences between news inequalities online and offline. When we do this, we see that online news inequalities are larger than offline news inequalities. During the course of the pandemic so far, we find that inequalities have grown both online and offline, but at the same pace (see Figure 17).

⁶ We measure online and offline COVID-19 news use using the same set of questions as for overall COVID-19 news use. The measure of offline news use is based on the use of 'Television news bulletins or programmes such as News at Ten, C4 News, Good Morning Britain, Newsnight and Question Time', '24 hour news television channels such as Sky News or BBC News 24', 'Radio news bulletins or programmes such as BBC Today Programme, BBC 5 Live, LBC, commercial radio bulletins', 'Printed newspapers such as The Guardian, Times, Daily Mail, Mirror', and 'Printed magazines such as the Economist or The Week'. Online news use is based on the use of 'Websites/apps of newspapers such as Guardian online, Times online, Mail Online', 'Websites/apps of news magazines such as The Economist or The Week Online', 'Websites/apps of TV and Radio companies such as BBC News Online or Sky News Online', and 'Websites/apps of other news outlets such as MSN, Yahoo, Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Vice News'.

The finding is consistent with our previous research (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018). We believe that this is mainly due to the fact that media choice and user control is much greater online than offline, and it is far easier for people who are very interested in news to consume more and more of it, and for people who have low interest to consume something else – or perhaps opt out of news altogether (Prior 2005). Even though our data was collected using an online survey, meaning that everyone in the sample is able to access online news, 31% in late June said they had not accessed any news at all online in the previous seven days. Online news inequalities then are in part due to a larger minority opting out of news online compared to offline.

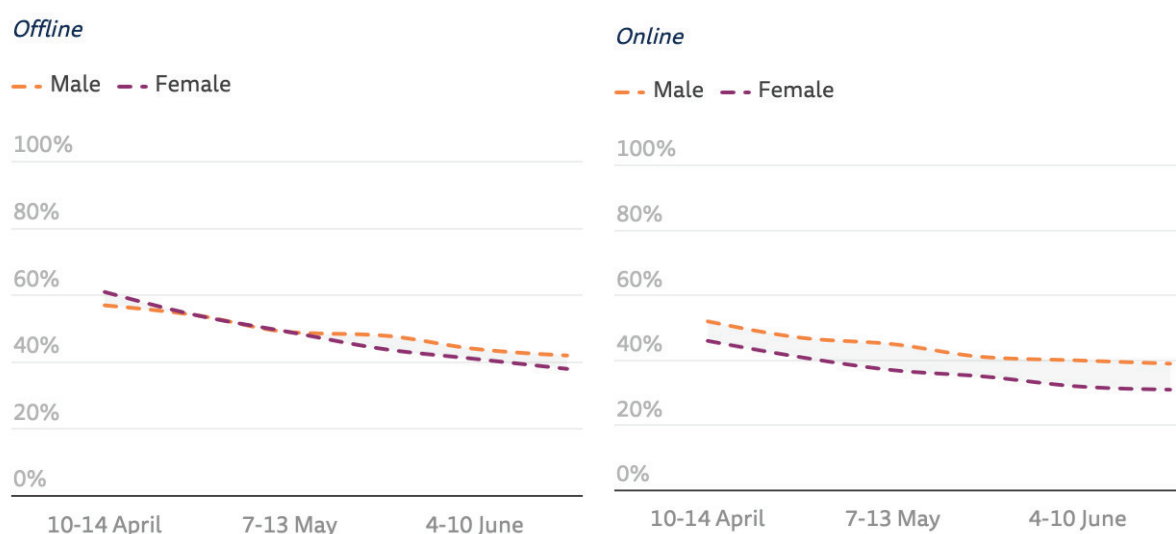
Figure 17. Estimated inequality in offline and online COVID-19 news use



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 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*

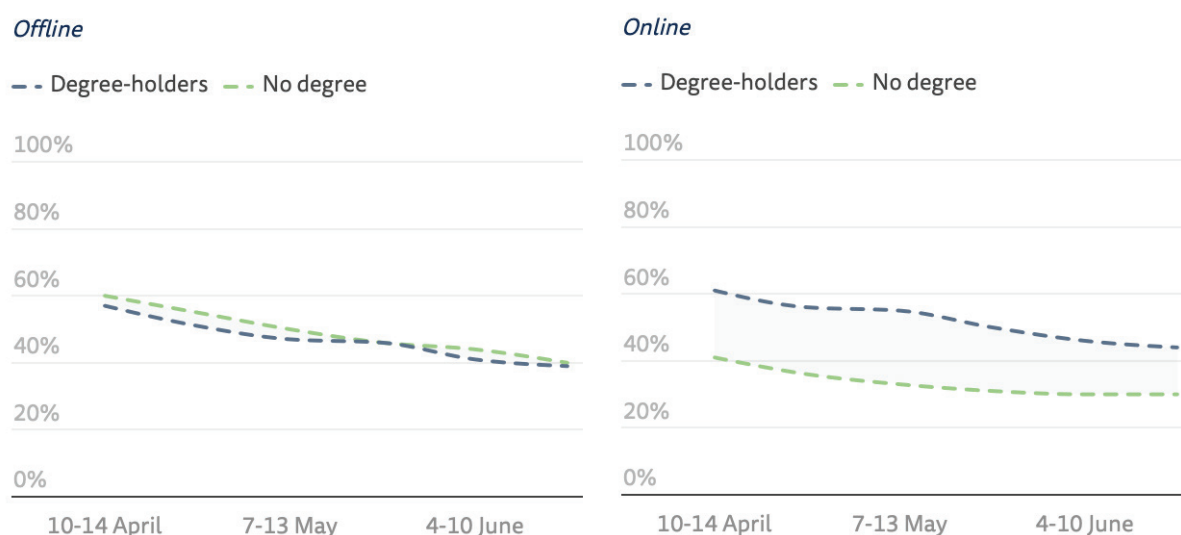
It is worth noting that the separate online and offline coefficients are larger than for overall news use. This suggests that people tend to have a preference for either online or offline news use, because their use on one platform is compensating for their lack of use on another, thus reducing overall inequality.

On the basis of the data in Figure 17, we might expect larger gaps between demographic groups for online COVID-19 news use when compared to offline. And, for the most part, this is indeed what we find. If we look at the difference between online and offline COVID-19 news use by gender, we can see statistically significant gaps online, but not offline – though the difference between online and offline use is quite small.

Figure 18. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average offline and online by gender

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: Male/Female: 10-14 April = 1,408/1,415, 24-28 April = 1,119/1,172, 7-13 May = 960/1,013, 21-27 May = 861/913, 4-10 June = 786/859, 18-24 June = 703/763.

However, if we look instead at differences by class indicators such as levels of formal education, larger gaps between online and offline COVID-19 news use start to become visible. There is almost no difference between the proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average by education when we consider offline, but online, the gap between degree-holders and those without a degree was 20pp at certain points in the last ten weeks. Gaps between those with high and low levels of household income were roughly the same size.

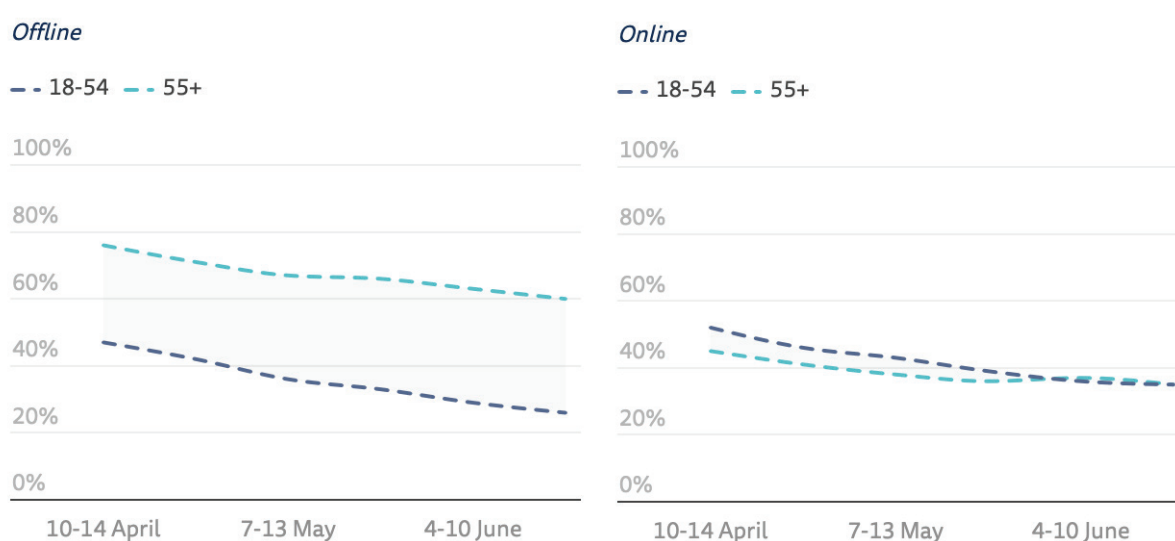
Figure 19. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average offline and online by level of formal education

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: No degree/Degree-holders: 10-14 April = 1,671/1,152, 24-28 April = 1,356/935, 7-13 May = 1,170/803, 21-27 May = 1,053/716, 4-10 June = 978/667, 18-24 June = 874/592.

The larger differences we see when it comes to online news use may in part be due to those with higher levels of education being more confident and adept internet users (Hargittai and Micheli 2019), or because they are more likely to have a job that requires computer use. However, age is also likely to be important. Due to changes in the UK education system over time, younger people are both more likely to have been to university and – for a variety of other reasons – more likely to use online media.

Differences in COVID-19 news use online and offline by age are shown in Figure 20. Somewhat unusually, the gaps are much larger for offline use than online use. Offline, the gap between the 18–54s and the over 55s is around 30pp, compared to less than 5pp online – where the younger group were slightly more likely to use online news in April.

Figure 20. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news once a day or more on average offline and online by age



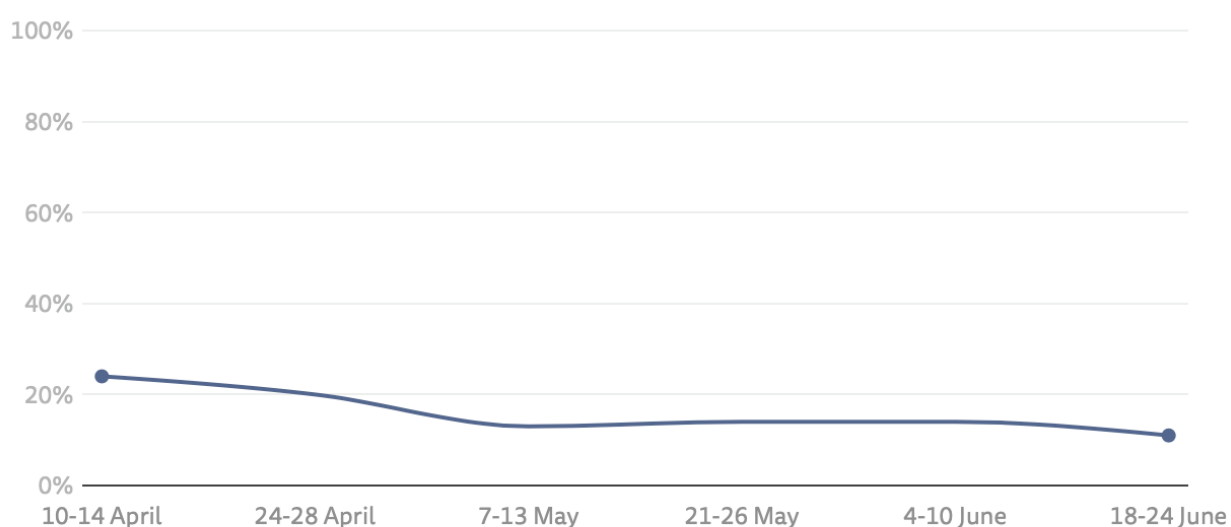
Q4a. On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: 18-54/55+: 10-14 April = 1,680/1,143, 24-28 April = 1,284/1,007, 7-13 May = 1,093/880, 21-27 May = 955/819, 4-10 June = 861/784, 18-24 June = 730/736.*

The offline gap is less likely to be rooted in different levels of interest in news, but rather different media habits and technology use. This highlights the limits of studying news use inequalities – and media use more generally – on single platforms. Younger people’s online news use partly compensates for their lack of offline use, so focusing on just one platform can in some cases create a misleading impression (Dubois and Blank 2018).

5. Differences in social media news use

Within the online category we also have social media. Social media is now a key part of the UK media system, but as we have already documented in our sixth factsheet (Nielsen et al. 2020), the use of social media for COVID-19 news has also declined since April. The proportion that say they used social media for COVID-19 news once or more per day on average fell from 24% in mid-April to 11% by the end of June. Of course, the figures for those who see COVID-19 news less frequently than this on social media, and for those who use social media for any purpose, are considerably higher.

Figure 21. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news on social media once a day or more on average

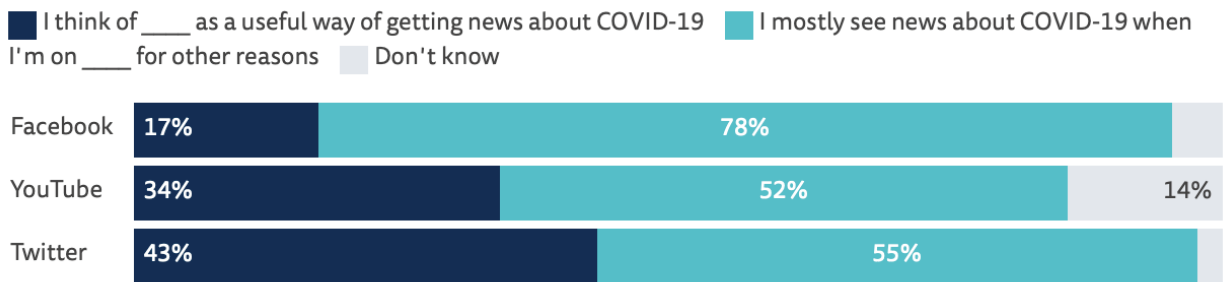


Q4a. On how many of the last 7 days have you used each of the following as a source of news or information about coronavirus (COVID-19)? *Base: 10-14 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*

One reason why social media is particularly interesting to look at here is that many social networks deliver news to people through a combination of self-selection and algorithmic selection. This is quite different from other ways of getting news online, particularly when going direct to news websites and apps, where people have much more control over whether or not they want to access news, and where that news comes from. Social media users generally have less control over what they see because they are shown news based on a combination of decisions they have made themselves (e.g. by 'friending' or 'following' other users) and decisions made by algorithms (e.g. what to put at the top of a news feed).

Of course, it is precisely this partial lack of control that has generated so many anxieties about social media as a source of false and misleading information – particularly during a global health crisis. But the other side of this issue is that social media has the power to 'incidentally expose' people to useful and reliable news and information about COVID-19 as well, even as they are not intentionally seeking it out. In fact, most people who see news and information about COVID-19 on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube say they mostly see it when they are using these networks for other reasons. This ultimately means that news access via social media is less dependent on interest and motivation for those groups that typically do not use much news (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018).

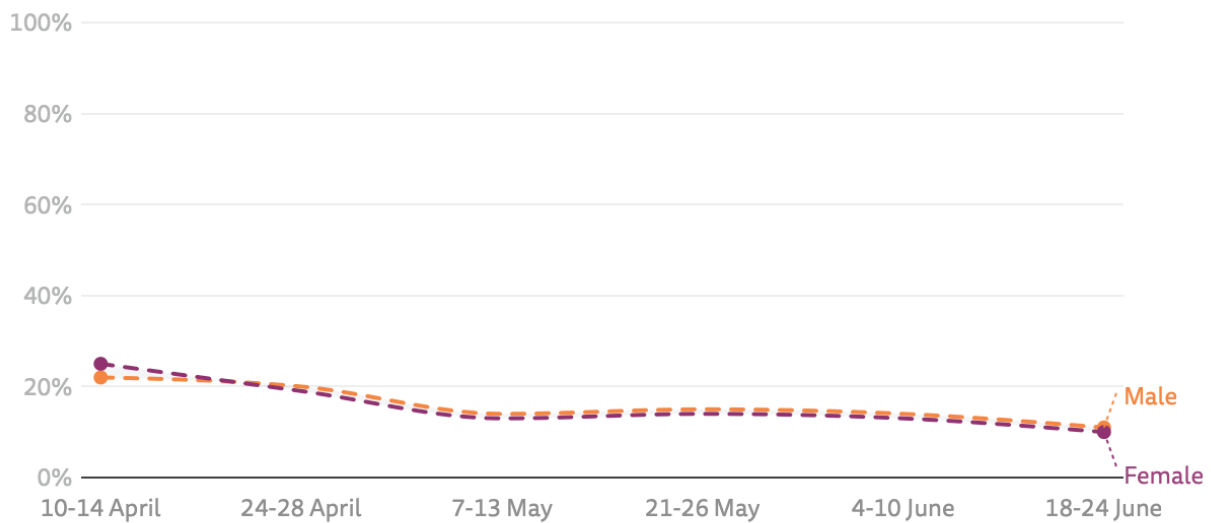
Figure 22. Proportion of COVID-19 news users on ____ that think of it as a useful way of getting news about COVID-19 (10–14 April)



Q12Dii/OptQ12Fi/Q12Cii. You said that you use Facebook/YouTube/Twitter for news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19). Which of the following statements applies best to you? *Base: Facebook = 678, YouTube = 321, Twitter = 498.*

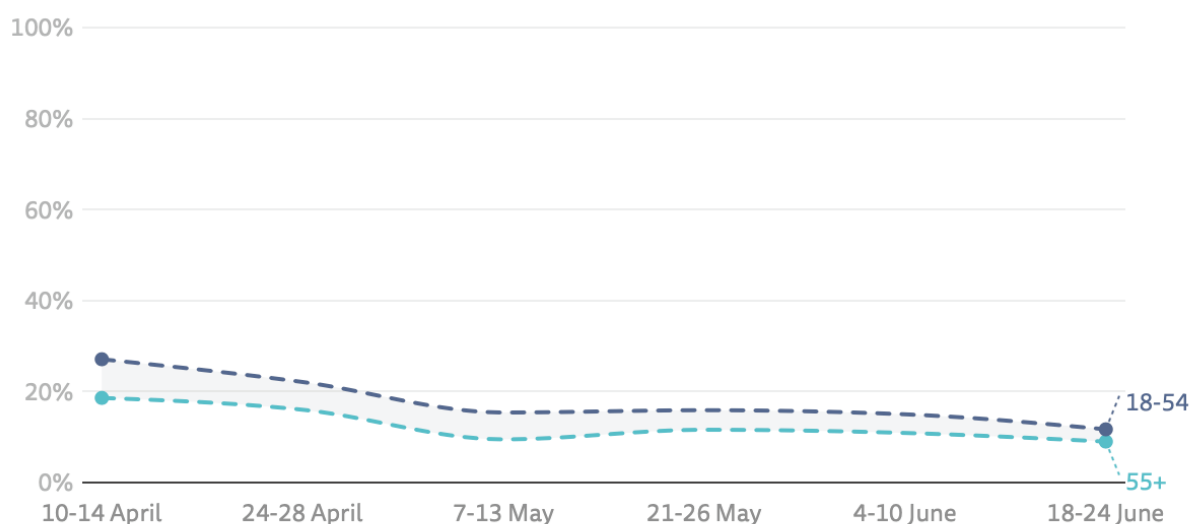
This may be one reason why – in contrast to online news use – by the end of June roughly equal numbers of men and women said that they accessed COVID-19 news at least once a day on social media. Over the course of our study, the gap between men and women has never increased past 3pp. We see a similar picture for variables like household income, where for all brackets, around one in ten say that they accessed COVID-19 news at least once a day on social media.

Figure 23. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news on social media once a day or more on average by gender



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: Male/Female: 10-14 April = 1,408/1,415, 24-28 April = 1,119/1,172, 7-13 May = 960/1,013, 21-27 May = 861/913, 4-10 June = 786/859, 18-24 June = 703/763.*

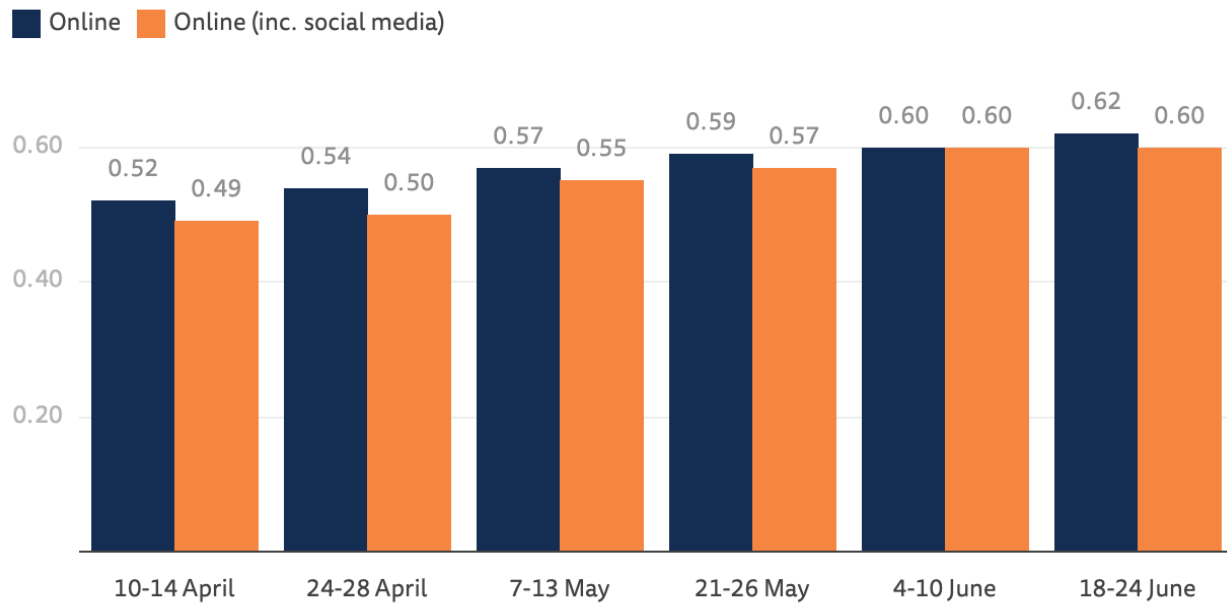
However, age is one of the few variables where there are clear differences between younger and older people when it comes to COVID-19 use on social media. Unsurprisingly, younger people are more likely to say that they accessed COVID-19 news at least once a day; however, the gap is still quite small, and has shrunk slightly since mid-April.

Figure 24. Proportion that accessed COVID-19 news on social media once a day or more on average by age

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: 18-54/55+: 10-14 April = 1,680/1,143, 24-28 April = 1,284/1,007, 7-13 May = 1,093/880, 21-27 May = 955/819, 4-10 June = 861/784, 18-24 June = 730/736.*

Therefore there is some evidence that social media use widens regular access to COVID-19 news. Though this can help reduce news inequalities, it is important to recognise that it is not the only relevant factor. Some have asked whether social media access will disproportionately benefit those who are already heavy news users by giving them new ways of accessing more and more information (Kümpel 2020; Thorson 2020).

We can explore this by identifying the level of inequality in online COVID-19 news use, and comparing this to the level of inequality when we add in COVID-19 news use on social media. If we do this, we see that online COVID-19 news use is normally more unequal than online COVID-19 news use and COVID-19 news use on social media combined. For example, between 10–14 April, online COVID-19 news use inequality measured using the Gini coefficient was .52, but when social media COVID-19 news use was added in, the figure fell to .49. We therefore find no evidence that social media is raising news inequalities, and even suggests that social media could be reducing news inequalities. However, we should be cautious, because the differences between the two groups are very small, and surveys are not best suited to capturing precise information about the amount of news that people access.

Figure 25. Estimated effect of social media use on online COVID-19 news use inequality

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 April = 2,823, 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467.*

Conclusion

The coronavirus crisis has driven a significant increase in news use as people face great uncertainty and urgent questions concerning how they can protect themselves, their loved ones, and their communities. In the early stages of the crisis, our research documents that there was a rallying around the news and a rallying around the government as people sought news and information to navigate the pandemic.

In previous research, we have shown how quickly the rally around the government evaporated, as fewer and fewer turned to the government for information, trust declined, people across the political spectrum began to question its handling of the crisis, and a significant minority began to express concern over what they saw as potential misinformation about coronavirus coming from the government itself.

In this report we have looked more closely at the rally around the news, and at information inequality in the UK coronavirus communications crisis. We have shown that the initial surge in news use has been followed by a slow and consistent decline, but news use is still above pre-crisis levels. The BBC is particularly widely used as a source of news about COVID-19, far more than any other news brand, both offline and online. Trust in news has also eroded, but trust in news organisations as a source of information about coronavirus remains significantly higher than trust in news in general was before the crisis.

We also find, however, significant and in many cases increasing inequalities around COVID-19 news use. The Gini coefficient for COVID-19 news use, which can be used to measure how evenly distributed news use is across the population, was .38 for the first wave of our survey in mid-April, and gradually increased to .46 by the sixth wave in late June. This means that, over time, heavy COVID-19 news users came to have a larger share of the estimated total news consumed. The overall increase in information inequality includes growing gaps in news use between different age groups, between men and women, and stable differences by income and levels of formal education. This is a reminder that there are real challenges ahead as the crisis continues to evolve and people will continuously have to keep track of the situation, evaluate the risk, understand what they can do, and make decisions about how to handle the crisis.

In the high-choice online environment, where countless offers compete for our attention, inequalities are particularly pronounced, while they are significantly smaller in low-choice offline environments. For example, there is little difference between how degree-holders and those without a degree use offline news about COVID-19, but a very significant gap between the same two groups online. The main exception to this is social media, where people often come across news incidentally while doing other things (communicating with family, socialising with friends, sharing diverting updates, and finding ways to pass the time). Here, the inequalities are far less pronounced. In fact, comparing Gini coefficients for online news use with and without including social media suggests that social media could be reducing news inequalities, though the differences between the two groups are very small.

Overall, our ongoing work in the UK COVID-19 News and Information project, and our other research in this area (Nielsen et al. 2020), together paint a picture of much of the UK public as relatively discerning, knowledgeable about the coronavirus, and willing to take preventive measures. Even though many are increasingly sceptical both of news and the government, they continue to navigate the coronavirus crisis in large part by relying on independent news media.

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UK COVID-19 NEWS AND INFORMATION PROJECT PUBLICATIONS

Majority Think UK Government COVID-19 Response Worse Than Other Developed Countries, Almost Half Say Response Too Focused on Protecting the Economy
Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Social Media Very Widely Used, But Use for News and Information about COVID-19 is Declining
Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, and Richard Fletcher

Even Low News Users Say They Are Willing To Take Preventive Measures Against COVID-19
Antonis Kalogeropoulos, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Trust In UK Government and News Media COVID-19 Information Down, Concerns over Misinformation from Government and Politicians Up
Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Initial Surge in News Use around Coronavirus in the UK has been followed by Significant Increase in News Avoidance
Antonis Kalogeropoulos, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

UK Public Opinion Polarised on News Coverage of Government Coronavirus Response, and Concern over Misinformation
Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, and Richard Fletcher

News Media Broadly Trusted As Source of Coronavirus Information, Views of UK Government Response Highly Polarised
Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

SELECTED RISJ REPORTS AND FACTSHEETS

Volume and Patterns of Toxicity in Social Media Conversations during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Sílvia Majó-Vázquez, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Joan Verdú, Nandan Rao, Manlio de Domenico, and Omiros Papaspiliopoulos

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020
Nic Newman, with Richard Fletcher, Anne Schulz, Simge Andı, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Navigating the 'Infodemic': How People in Six Countries Access and Rate News and Information about Coronavirus
Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Richard Fletcher, Nic Newman, J. Scott Brennen, and Philip N. Howard

Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation
J. Scott Brennen, Felix M. Simon, Philip N. Howard, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen



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