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Research suggests UK public can spot fake news about COVID-19, but don't realise the UK's death toll is far higher than in many other countries

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How much does the British public know about the pandemic? Stephen Cushion, Nikki Soo, Maria Kyriakidou and Marina Morani (Cardiff University) sampled 200 people and found that while there is widespread rejection of the 5G conspiracy theory, many people do not realise the UK death rate is far higher than in other countries.

In recent weeks, **dramatic headlines** have emerged about fake news sites or online conspiracy theorists warping people's understanding of the coronavirus. However, our **AHRC-funded research** at the Cardiff

School of Journalism, Media and Culture suggests that while people can identify a false story, many have gaps in their knowledge about COVID-19, particularly when it comes to the UK's death rate compared to other countries.



The hub of the BBC's Broadcasting House in London. Photo: [Tim Regan](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

We asked 200 people about their news consumption habits and knowledge of COVID-19 on April 16-17, which we will continue to do over the coming weeks. Respondents were recruited so they made up a representative mix of the UK population. Although the sample size is not statistically representative of public opinion, it can provide insights into how people are responding to information about the pandemic.

We found respondents relied heavily on TV, online or social media platforms for news about coronavirus, with more than eight out of ten people using at least one of these platforms every day or most days of the week. When asked which TV news bulletins they most regularly watched, seven out of ten people chose the BBC.

Figure 1: Since media coverage of Covid-19 began, on average how often have you done the following each week?

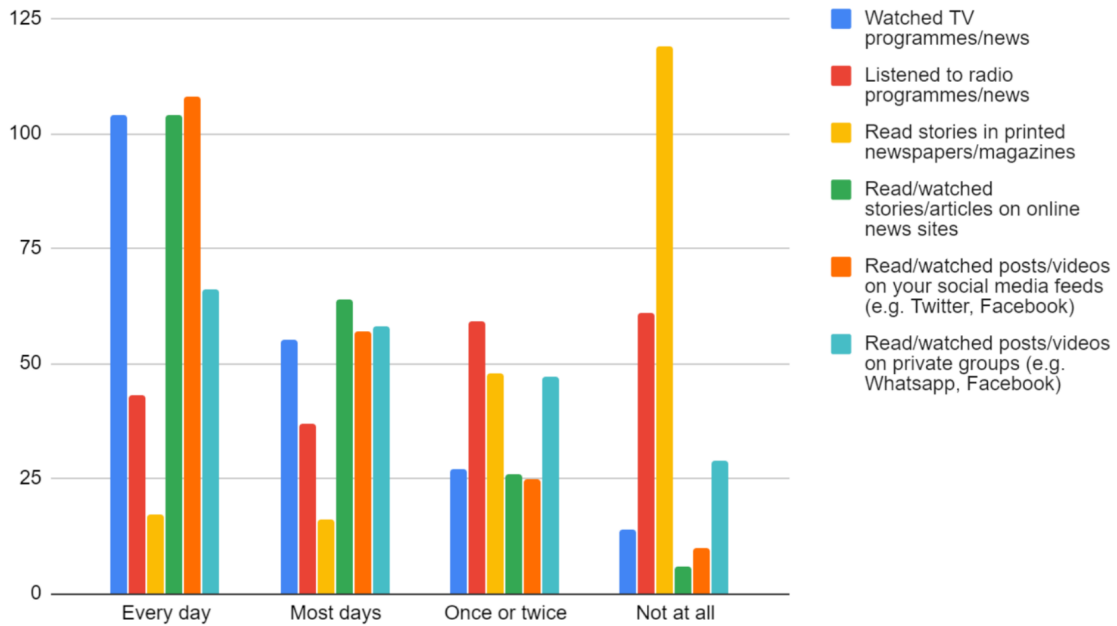
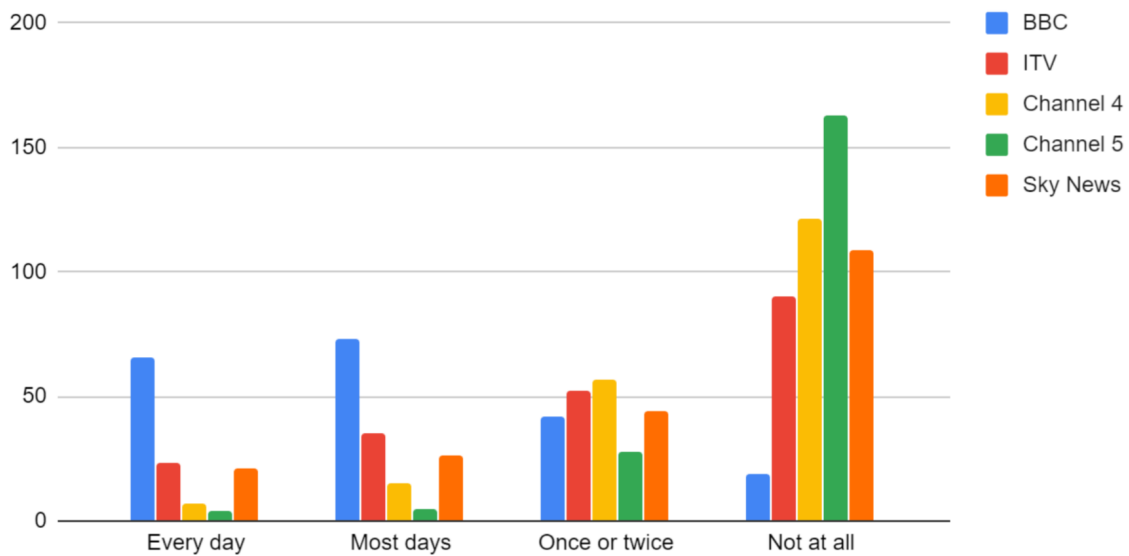


Figure 2: Since media coverage of COVID-19 began, how often have you watched UK national TV news bulletins on the following channels each week?



Are people aware of the UK's death rate compared to other countries?

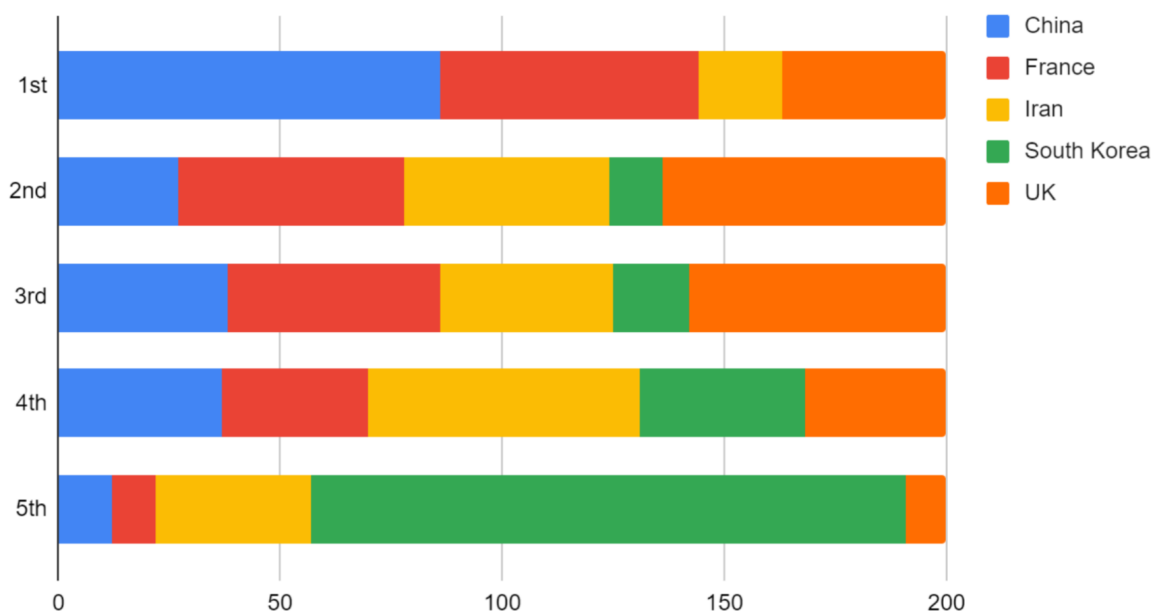
To understand public knowledge about the pandemic, respondents were asked to rank the UK's death rate compared to other countries, as well

as which government had implemented the strictest lockdowns. After all, if people think the UK has a comparatively low death rate and has implemented the strictest public lockdown it might follow that they think the government's handling of COVID-19 was proportionate, given it is a global pandemic.

Respondents were asked to rank which country – Iran, South Korea, the UK, France and China – had recorded the highest to lowest number of deaths related to the coronavirus. These nations have received varying levels of media attention, with China the focus of coverage when the pandemic began.

We found that more than four in ten people – 43% – incorrectly ranked China as having the highest death rate. At the time of the survey, 4,632 people had died due to the coronavirus in China, compared to three and four times as many in France and the UK respectively. Almost one-third of people also incorrectly ranked Iran as having either the highest or second highest death rate, despite having recorded just over 300 more fatalities than China. In fact, of the five countries we selected, only South Korea recorded fewer deaths than China.

Figure 3: From the highest to the lowest, rank in order which countries have had the most deaths due to coronavirus so far



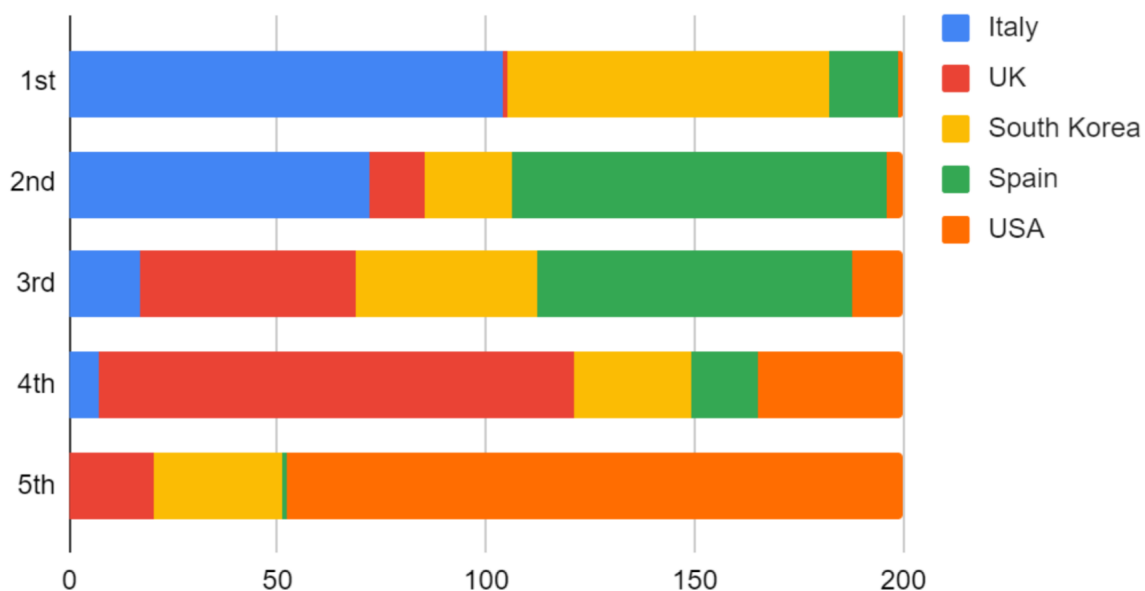
Of course, the accuracy of official figures has been disputed and China has often been singled for under-reporting its death rate. But there are questions about the UK government's figures, since they only include deaths that occur in hospitals rather than care or nursing homes. If they were included, the UK would have a higher death rate than France, **according to the Health Service Journal** (HJS). And yet our study showed that virtually half – 49.5% – did not rank the UK as having either the first or second highest death rate.

Lockdowns and fake news

Since the impact of social distancing rules is now being debated, we asked respondents to rank which country had implemented the strictest lockdown measures from highest to lowest.

According to Oxford University research, Italy, followed by Spain, South Korea, the UK and US have implemented the most stringent lockdowns. Broadly speaking, these were accurately ranked by respondents, perhaps indicating media coverage of national lockdowns has been informative.

Figure 4: From highest to lowest, rank in order which countries have implemented the strictest lockdown measures so far



However, almost half of respondents (49%) ranked South Korea as having either the most or second strictest lockdown. Our survey did not tell us why, but the country's stringent measures were largely a result of early interventions, wide-scale testing, GPS tracking and quarantine rather than implementing tough curfews or limiting the workforce to essential services. How far people are aware of the practical differences between national lockdown policies remains unclear.

But as pressure builds on the UK government to relax the lockdown, it is vital journalists compare international strategies in order for the public to be informed about how well other countries are dealing with the coronavirus.

(Mis)informing public debate?

Finally, in an open-ended question, respondents were asked what role, if any, they thought 5G had played in spreading the coronavirus, underneath a BBC News headline that was criticised for appearing to give this claim legitimacy.

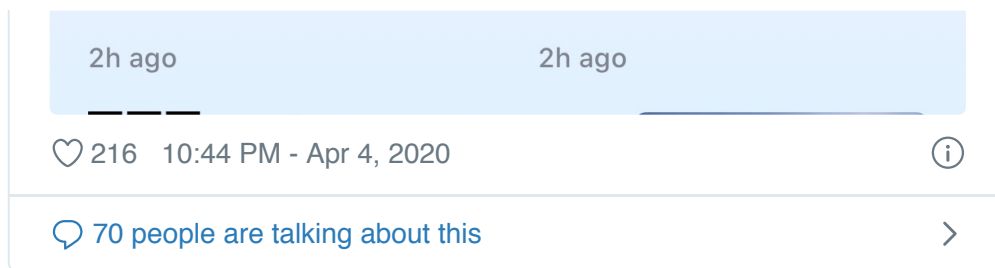


KateMaltby 
@KateMaltby



This is a classic example of how not to headline a story about misinformation. Disappointing from the BBC.

The story refers to an absolutely batshit-crazy hoax. But what this headline tells readers is: "Claims? There are CLAIMS of a link between 5G & COVID-19? Intriguing!"



But even so, respondents overwhelmingly, and correctly, rejected this notion. When explaining why, many people referred to news stories that have reported 5G networks are not responsible for COVID-19, including from BBC coverage, suggesting that the media have been effective in countering disinformation.

Overall, our study suggests that the vast majority of people have become voracious consumers of news media. As a result, they've developed a good understanding of the UK's comparative approach to the lockdown and are able to spot a fake news story. But many people did not realise the number of coronavirus-related deaths in the UK was far higher than in many other countries. This is significant because, as the HJS put it:



“There is huge public debate over how the UK is faring in terms of deaths compared to other European nations and the government and its advisers have constantly referred to the 'global death comparison' data to defend their position”.



Since the UK may soon have the highest death rate of any European country, the news media will play a critical role in this debate by ensuring the public receive **accurate information** about the impact of COVID-19 and the measures taken to keep people safe. In doing so, it is essential journalists independently assess the government's facts and figures, and regularly compare the UK's approach to handling the pandemic with other countries.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.

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