Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 10 to 23 August 2020
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Key insights

Continuous decrease in volume of social media conversations
Since the peak on 17 March 2020, the number of social media conversations is continuing to decline, with 13.2% fewer mentions between 10 and 23 August 2020 compared to 27 July and 09 August 2020.

Preventive behaviours, accessing of health services, and a coronavirus vaccine
The preventive behaviour we added in the last report, lockdown, continued to be the behaviour with the highest levels of both interest and polarisation. The online conversation around lockdown focused on the easing of restrictions during August, with social media users dividing over whether or not the easing was premature and whether the government would be forced to reimpose restrictions in the near future, as happened in New Zealand. A viral image of partygoers at a pool party in Wuhan, China, none of whom were social distancing or wearing masks, was widely shared and commented on. Wearing masks was the preventive behaviour with the second highest levels of interest and polarisation. The announcement on 16 August 2020 that fines would be doubled for repeat offences for not wearing a mask was seen as authoritarian by some, while others criticised what they saw as shifting and contradictory advice around the necessity of wearing masks. Organised anti-mask and anti-lockdown groups were also making extensive use of social media to coordinate their protest events.

Frustration at apparent violations of social distancing guidelines persisted in this reporting period, although as the weather had cooled the focus of concern seemed to be shifting from beaches to indoor venues such as pubs and restaurants. There was also some frustration around travel advice, with people complaining about having their holidays curtailed unexpectedly or needing to self-isolate on their return, and reports of people confused about contacts from the Government’s Coronavirus Isolation Assurance Team. Coronavirus vaccine remained the category with the smallest proportion of negative content. The conversation around a potential Covid-19 vaccine was dominated by discussion of ongoing vaccine trials in the UK and news that a vaccine had been approved for use in Russia.

Social analytics
Sentiment statistics were broadly unchanged from the previous reporting period, with 15% of content classed as negative, 7% as positive, and the majority (76%) as neutral. The main emotion being expressed was love (403.7k), followed by anger (22.8k) and sadness (21.3K). Some of the most common hashtags were #NHS, #ExcludedUK, #Covidiots, #Brexit, #recession, #WearAMask, and #alevelresults. The top Twitter authors continued to be news outlets, such as the BBC, football clubs, and public figures such as Piers Morgan (the latter two groups largely due to high numbers of followers rather than high numbers of posts).
Methods
This report focuses on social media conversations and attitudes in English in the UK between 10 and 23 August 2020. For further details, including methods, please refer to ‘Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 06 to 19 April 2020’ and ‘Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 27 July to 09 August 2020’.

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Conversations about the coronavirus outbreak
There was a total of 2.1M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 10 and 23 August 2020. This represents a 13% decrease to the previous two-week monitoring period (see Figure 1). The majority of mentions (1.66M, 79.0%) continued to come from Twitter.

1 Marks T, Larson HJ, Paterson P. Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 06 to 19 April 2020. Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d4d746d648a4e0001186e38/t/5ebbb69fa8570501f4a4fc05/1589360289531/Media+monitoring+report+UK+COVID-19+6-19April2020+Final+updated.pdf

Preventive behaviours, accessing of health services and anticipating a coronavirus vaccine

We assessed changing levels of interest and sentiment towards five behaviours: social distancing, self-isolation, wearing masks, lockdown, and a coronavirus vaccine. Overall, 25.7% of all posts mentioning coronavirus mentioned at least one of these preventive behaviours.

Lockdown continued to have the highest overall levels of interest, however there was a 22.6% decrease from the previous reporting period, followed by wearing masks, social distancing and coronavirus vaccine (with a 5.5% increase in interest). Interest in self-isolation increased by 31.7% but remained the behaviour with the overall lowest interest.
We further analysed sentiment towards preventive behaviours through the automated sentiment analysis provided by Meltwater®, which uses natural language processing algorithms. Coronavirus vaccine continued to be the category with the smallest proportion of negative content (11%, Figure 3). There was a slight decrease in negative sentiment associated with self-isolation (from 16% to 13%). Lockdown had the highest proportion of both negative (22%) and positive content (11%).

By manually reading through the most highly engaged with social media and news posts, we further identified some common themes for each of these behaviours.
Lockdown
Lockdown continued to be the most polarising of the preventative behaviours analysed for this report. For one group of users, news that lockdown measures would be further eased from 15 August 2020 highlighted to them that the government was easing restrictions too early, compounding (in their view) the error of locking down too late during the spring. An opposing group, critical of lockdown measures, highlighted the socioeconomic costs of lockdown restrictions and argued for further easing. Some people expressed fears that the UK government would follow the path of New Zealand, which imposed a second lockdown in Auckland on 12 August 2020 after four new cases were discovered, arguing that there needed to be stronger public opposition to further restrictions.

In many cases, these groups drew their diametrically opposed conclusions from the same information. For instance, a viral image of partygoers at a pool party in Wuhan, none of whom were social distancing or wearing masks, drew sharply contrasting responses from social media users. For proponents of lockdown measures, the return of normal life in Wuhan showed the efficacy of early and stringent restrictions and extensive testing and tracing. They argued that if the UK government had pursued similar policies life would also be returning to normal in the UK by now. For opponents of lockdown measures, the photo showed that the virus was not as serious as the UK government was making out and that mask wearing and social distancing were not necessary. A few conspiratorially minded users speculated that China must have already developed a vaccine or cure which it was concealing from other countries.

Wearing masks
The announcement on 16 August 2020 that fines would be doubled for repeat offences for not wearing a mask, attracted some negative commentary. Some users viewed it as authoritarian, while others pointed out that it contradicted earlier government advice that mask wearing was not necessary to contain Covid-19. In some cases, this was linked to a broader argument about government competence. This latter group of users drew attention to other areas where government policy has shifted, such as the NHS surcharge for migrant workers, and characterised the more stringent approach to masks as the latest example of changing or contradictory policy.

Social media is also becoming an important tool for the coordination of organised opposition to mask wearing and other Covid-related public health measures. Groups like StandUpX, which organised “anti-lockdown” protests in London, Birmingham, Hull, Bournemouth and Sheffield on 15 August are using social media platforms to advertise their public events. These groups either deny any threat from Covid-19, or claim that the threat has now passed, and oppose mask wearing as an infringement on civil liberties. Other social media users are contesting their arguments, describing them as “conspiracy theorists” and emphasising the importance of following the latest public health advice.

Social distancing
Some social media users continued to express frustration at apparent violations of social distancing guidelines, particularly in pubs. These users were concerned about a potential second wave and emphasised the importance of continuing to follow social
distancing guidelines and not “dropping our guard”. On the other side of the conversation, some users argued that if Covid-19 is unlikely to be eradicated there is little point in social distancing and we “just need to learn to live with it”, like the flu.

**Coronavirus vaccine**
The conversation around a coronavirus vaccine was dominated by discussion of ongoing vaccine trials in the UK and news that a vaccine had been approved for use in Russia. The posts with the highest levels of engagement were tweets by the composer Andrew Lloyd Webber about his participation in the Oxford vaccine trial. Tweets by Health Secretary Matt Hancock and Chief Medical Officer Chris Witty encouraging people to participate in the trials also got high levels of engagement. The discussion remained quite polarised, with some users expressing fears that a future vaccine would be made mandatory, and that those who refused would face sanctions such as losing their jobs (this specific fear seems to be driven by reports of Australian business groups lobbying for powers to sanction workers who refuse a future vaccine).

**Self-isolation**
Announcements of changes to the list of coronavirus travel corridors by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps were widely shared and a number of users complained about having their holidays curtailed or needing to self-isolate on their return. There were reports of the UK Government’s Coronavirus Isolation Assurance Team attempting to contact people returning from abroad to check they were self-isolating, but the people being contacted thinking it was a scam as there were no return contact details and no mention of such an agency anywhere online.