Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak

05 October - 05 November 2020

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Key insights

Coronavirus vaccine
The dominant coronavirus vaccine narratives in this reporting period included conspiracy theories, discussion of political motives of key figures, and discussion on how vaccine regulations (mandatory vaccination) would impact personal liberties.

Spike in conspiracy content
Key terms including “microchipping”, “deep state” and ideas of measures to “control the population” were most highly engaged with. The majority of content about conspiracy theories related to coronavirus vaccines. Bill Gates was also mentioned in coronavirus vaccine conversations online.

Polarisation around the second nation-wide lockdown
Much criticism of the reinstated lockdown measures centred around the damage to the economy, the impact on people’s mental health and questioning around the effectiveness/necessity of it. In contrast other social media users welcomed the lockdown as a means to control the virus and save lives.

Social analytics
Overall sentiment statistics were similar to the previous reporting period, with 17% of content classed as negative, 7% as positive, and 76% as neutral. The main emotion being expressed was love (300k), followed by joy (182k). Some of the most common hashtags were #lockdown2, #covidtesting, #Covidiots, #mentalhealth, #wearamask, #trump and #nhs. The top Twitter authors continued to be news outlets, such as the BBC, football clubs, and public figures such as Piers Morgan.

Methods
This report focuses on social media conversations and attitudes in English in the UK between 05 October and 05 November 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 2020’¹ and ‘Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 27 July to 09 August 2020’².

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/5d4d746d648a4e0001186ce38/5e6b69fa85705f01fa44fc05/1589360289531/Media+monitoring+report+UK+COVID-19+6-19+April+2020+Final+updated.pdf

² Marks T, de Graaf K, Pertwee E, Larson HJ, Paterson P. Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 27 July to 09 August 2020. Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d4d746d648a4e0001186ce38/5f5a0f1cefb2c772e0e98df1/1599737807542/Media+monitoring+report+UK+COVID-19+27July-09+August+2020.pdf
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Conversations about the coronavirus outbreak
There was a total of 6.83M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 05 October and 05 November 2020. Please note the higher number due to the increased length of the reporting period for this report. The majority of mentions (5.4M, 79%) continued to come from Twitter.

Figure 1. Number of mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media in English in the UK between 27 January and 05 November 2020.

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.

Lockdown continued to have the highest overall levels of interest, followed by wearing masks, social distancing, self-isolation and coronavirus vaccine.
We further analysed sentiment towards preventive behaviours through the automated sentiment analysis provided by Meltwater®, which uses natural language processing algorithms. In this reporting period, we see a significant decrease in negative sentiment associated with lockdown (71.5% to 18%, Figure 3). Wearing masks had the smallest proportion of negative content (14%), followed by Coronavirus vaccine and social distancing (both 16%). Self-isolation, social distancing and lockdown had the largest proportion of positive content.

Figure 3. Automated sentiment analysis of posts around the coronavirus outbreak on social media in English in the UK between 05 October and 05 November 2020, by behaviour.
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**
The conversation around lockdown was highly polarised. There were negative narratives and conversations surrounding lockdown including distrust of the government’s response and linking lockdowns, mandatory mask wearing and compulsory vaccination to increased control of the public’s lives by the government. Further, much criticism of the reinstated lockdown measures centred around the damage to the economy and the impact on people’s mental health. Other social media users welcomed the lockdown as a means to control the virus and save lives. Prominent public figure, Piers Morgan, called for a national lockdown in late October 2020 – his posts about this had a high reach and engagement. News of the Brexit Party relaunching as an anti-lockdown party (Reform UK) was also featured in social media conversations around lockdown.

**Wearing masks**
There continued to be negative conversations around mask wearing. Many individuals who have had COVID-19, or have a family member who has, took to social media to implore the public to wear masks to prevent the further spread of the virus. The topic of mask wearing in schools also featured in conversations online. Issues about this included fear for the safety of students and teachers despite wearing masks due to crowded spaces, inadequate ventilation, prolonged time with the same people. There were also arguments that face masks do nothing to protect against coronavirus. Some social media users shared a link to outdated advice on a Sky News clip from 4th March 2020 where Chris Whitty advised people to only wear masks if they were positive for COVID-19, to prevent further spread. This clip was used as evidence to support the case against mask wearing.

**Social distancing**
There was some discussion about the aerosol spread of the virus with links to social distancing as a prevention measure. Social media users often use pictures of groups (from protests, religious gatherings, public spaces etc.) to express frustration over people not distancing or adhering to COVID-19 measures. The hashtags #NoNewNormal and #NewAbnormal were used in relation to criticism of social distancing. Islamophobic and misinformation content which linked Muslims to the spread of COVID-19, showing Muslims as a key contributor to the spread of the virus was also featured in social media conversations about social distancing.

**Coronavirus vaccine**
The dominant coronavirus vaccine narratives in this reporting period included conspiracy theories, discussion of political motives of key figures, and discussion on how vaccine regulations (mandatory) affect personal liberties:
- Conspiracy theories included discussion of an unlicensed, experimental mRNA vaccination “whose manufacturers are indemnified from being sued when it goes wrong”. A well-known misinformation public figure and a number of very highly engaged Tweets including about Bill Gates and a coronavirus vaccine (linking to an article that states that “many suspect that the
coronavirus pandemic has been hijacked by the elite to carry out a ‘great reset’. Key terms including “microchipping”, “deep state” and ideas of measures to “control the population” were highly engaged with. Discussion of Bill Gates plays a role in coronavirus vaccine conversations online.

- The political motives of Kate Bingham, who heads the UK’s vaccine task force, were questioned.
- There was also speculation and concerns about mandatory vaccination, if and when a coronavirus vaccine becomes available. There was discussion about written evidence submitted to Parliament about compulsory vaccination. Many social media users linked this article and cited infringement on their civil liberties.

Conversations around a potential vaccine were also often connected to the second nation-wide lockdown and other containment measures (social distancing, contact tracing, etc.). A Tweet from the University of Oxford’s account about developing a safe vaccine had high reach and engagement levels.

**Self-isolation**

Most of the online conversation revolved around sports players needing to self-isolate after testing positive or coming into contact with a positive case. Some social media users posted about the Prime Minister’s claim about those self-isolating getting £500 a week – the statement was later corrected to be a one-off payment of £500. Criticism of the NHS COVID-19 app included it failing to send alerts to self-isolate to people who came into contact with a positive case. Concerns were raised about the levels of public compliance with the Test and Trace system, including not isolating for the entire 14-day period. One social media user stated they heard stories of teachers told to delete the NHS app to avoid alerts telling them to self-isolate.