



Social Media Very Widely Used, but Use for News and Information about COVID-19 is Declining

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, and Richard Fletcher

Key findings

In this RISJ Factsheet we examine the use of social media to get news and information about the coronavirus pandemic in the UK based on a survey fielded from 18 to 24 June 2020.

We find that:

- The use of social media has remained broadly consistent during the coronavirus pandemic, with a slight decline following the lockdown surge in internet use in April. However, the use of many social networks specifically for news and information about COVID-19 fell from April to June as it became a less prominent news story and COVID-19 news use fell more generally.
- Facebook (used by 12%) and Twitter (12%) are the social networks most widely-used for news and information about COVID-19. Fewer people say they use YouTube (5%), WhatsApp (3%) and Instagram (4%) for news and information about COVID-19. Although much talked about, less than 1% say they use TikTok and Nextdoor for the same purpose.
- The majority of those who use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for news and information about COVID-19 say they mostly see such content while they are using these networks for other reasons. A smaller number say they see Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube specifically as a useful way of getting news about COVID-19.
- Just 10% say that they trust news and information about COVID-19 on social media, video sites and messaging apps. One in five (21%) say they trust news and information about COVID-19 on search engines. This leaves a significant trust gap between news organisations (trusted by 44% in our most recent survey wave) and different digital platforms.
- Around half (49%) of those who see news about COVID-19 on social media say they mostly see conflicting facts about it, compared to 28% that say they mostly see the same set of facts. For comparison, 56% say that they see the same set of facts from news organisations, and 34% say they mostly see conflicting facts.
- The proportion who think that the COVID-19 situation in the UK is heading in the right direction rose from 24% two weeks earlier to 32%. 22% think that the coronavirus situation in the UK is on the wrong track, down from 29% two weeks ago, but up from 10% in April. Many people (40%) still see a mixed picture.

Overview

This is the sixth in a series of ten factsheets based on an ongoing online panel survey of a representative sample of the UK population. The survey was designed by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of

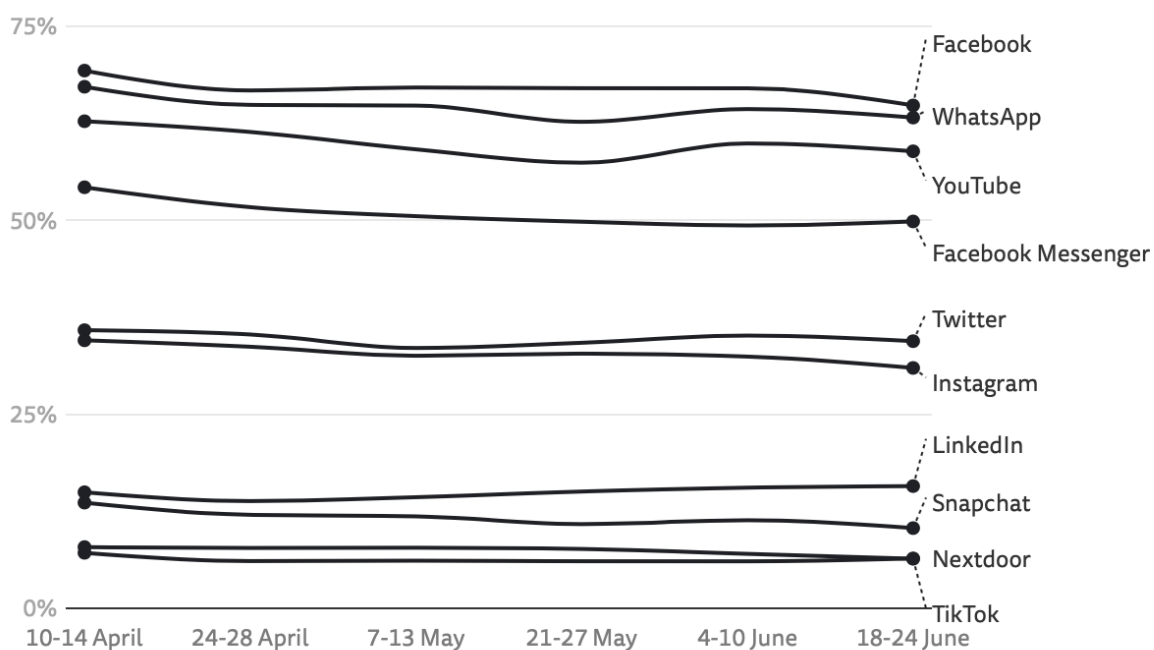
Oxford to collect data on how people navigate news and information during the coronavirus pandemic and was fielded by YouGov. Ten waves will be fielded at two-week intervals, top-line findings from each will be published soon after in a factsheet, with more in-depth analysis to follow. More details about the project and the methodology can be found on the [project website](#). The survey is a mix of tracking questions and specific questions fielded only in some waves.

Findings

Social media are a key part of the UK media environment. The use of social media has increased significantly over the last decade, and in early 2020, 30% of internet news users in the UK said social media was the main way they came across news online (Newman et al., 2020).

Overall, the use of different social networks has remained consistent over the course of the COVID-19 crisis (Figure 1). Although our survey data suggest the use of many networks has fallen slightly since April – when internet use surged as the population went into lockdown – social media use remains at slightly higher levels than we saw in our Digital News Report survey from February (Newman et al., 2020), and we have seen little change in the relative popularity of different networks. Facebook remains 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.

Figure 1. Proportion that used ____ for any purpose in the last 7 days



Q8M. Which of the following have you used in the last 7 days for any purpose? 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.

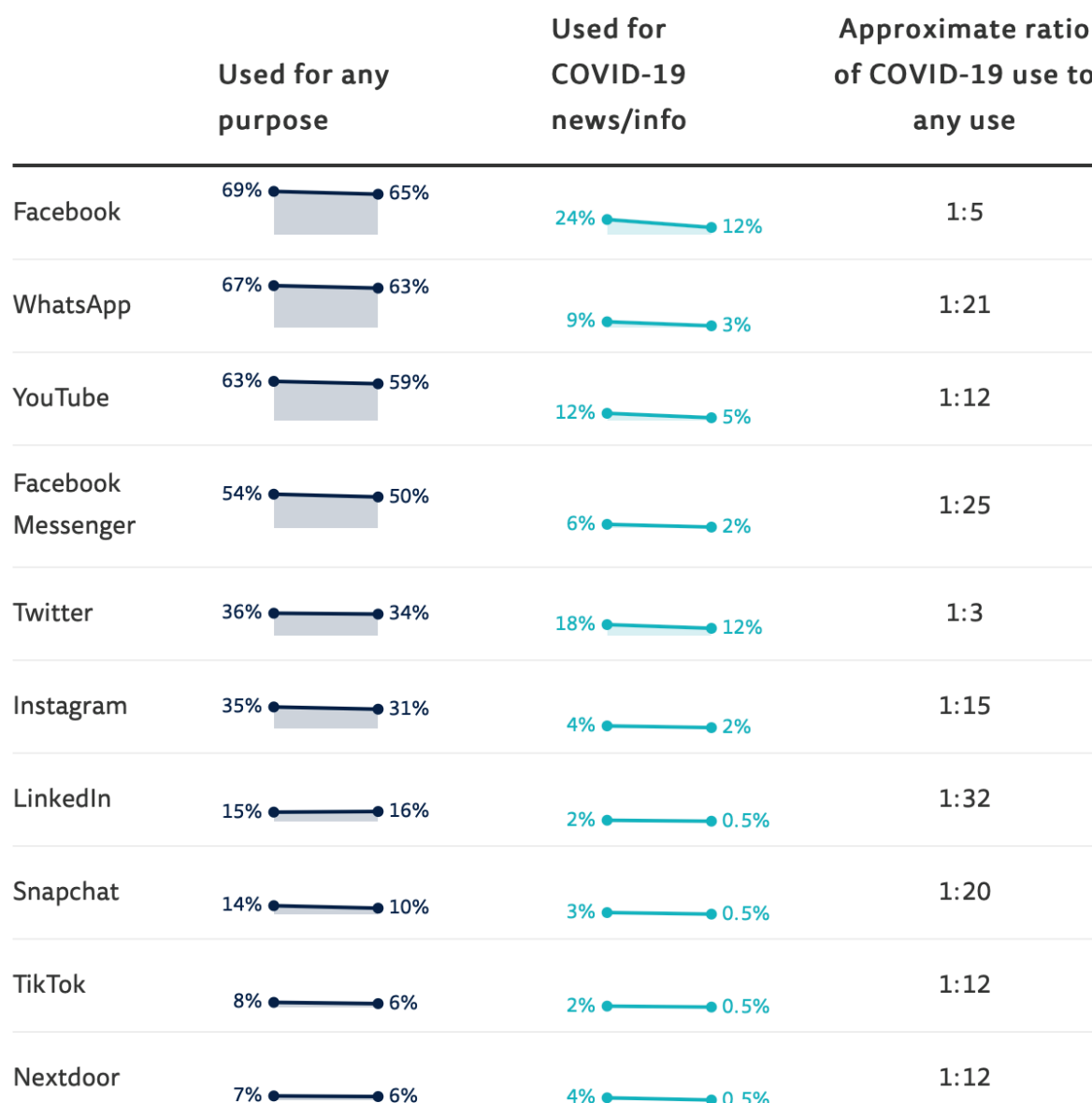
People often struggle to fully remember the news they have seen on social media (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019), so self-reported

figures do not always accurately capture exposure. Nonetheless it is striking that although the use of different social networks for any

purpose has changed little, the use of some specifically for news and information about

COVID-19 has roughly halved between April and June (Figure 2).

Figure 2. 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%.

In April, 24% of our respondents said they used Facebook for COVID-19 information, now the figure is down to 12% – meaning that Twitter and Facebook are now used equally widely for news and information about the coronavirus (though Facebook remains far more widely

used overall). Although not a like-for-like comparison, MailOnline (10%) and Sky News online (9%) are now both about as widely used as a source of news about COVID-19 as Facebook, and the *Guardian* (21%) and BBC News (43%) are both far more widely used as a source of news.

Fewer people say they use YouTube (5%), WhatsApp (3%) and Instagram (4%) for news and information about COVID-19. Although much talked about, less than 1% say they use TikTok and Nextdoor for the same purpose.

Twitter, which, unlike the more popular Facebook, tends to be used by highly-engaged news lovers than by the general population (Newman et al., 2020), has the highest proportion of COVID-19 news use relative to the proportion that use it for any purpose, with about 1 in 3 users saying they use the platform for coronavirus information (see 'Approximate Ratio' in Figure 2). The use of Twitter for news about the pandemic has also fallen less compared to other networks. The comparable ratio for Facebook by the end of June was 1 to 5, for YouTube 1 to 12, and for WhatsApp 1 to 21. Clearly, these widely used platforms are primarily used for other purposes than accessing news and information. Nextdoor was used by 4% for COVID-19 news in April, but now the figure is less than 1%. The general decline in the use of social media for news and information about COVID-19 is steeper than the decline in news use around COVID-19 more generally, but probably also reflects the fact that it is now simply a less prominent news story than it was in April.

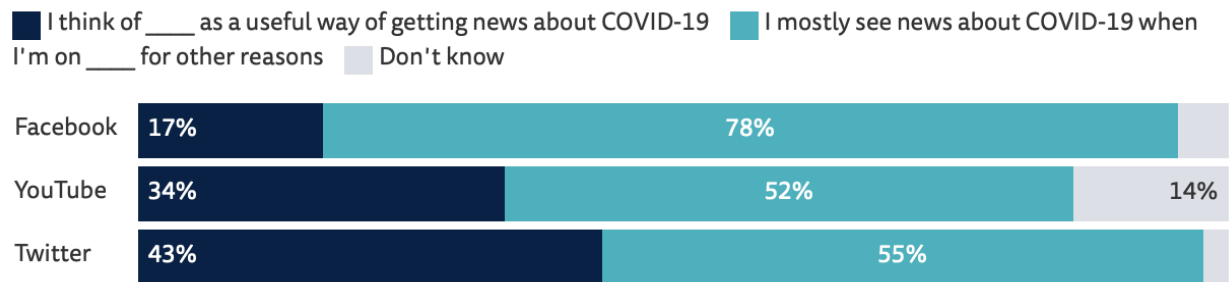
Some people see social media as a particularly useful source of information about COVID-19, and will often access social networks with the intention to find out the latest news. But our data shows that for most, exposure to news about COVID-19 on social media is incidental,

because they come across it when they log on to networks for other reasons (eg to connect with their friends, to pass the time, or to look at other non-news content).

In fact, when we surveyed people between 10–14 April, we found that most of those that use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for COVID-19 news say that they mostly see news and information about COVID-19 when they are using them for other purposes (Figure 3). Twitter was the most likely to be used intentionally as a source of news about COVID-19. Of those that use it for COVID-19 news, 43% said they think of it as a useful way of getting news about COVID-19. The equivalent figures for both YouTube (34%) and Facebook (17%) are lower.

Incidental news exposure is a key area of interest for communication scholars right now – but as yet, we know relatively little about how it works on different platforms, and there is no consensus on how it affects knowledge about current affairs, political participation, and other outcomes typically associated with intentional news use (eg Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016; Heiss and Matthes, 2019). Therefore, we should not directly equate intentional news use with incidental news exposure. It is also important to remember that people are not only incidentally exposed to news and information on social media, but also sometimes to various kinds of potentially false and misleading misinformation, and about a third of UK internet users say they are concerned about misinformation from Facebook specifically (Newman et al., 2020).

Figure 3. Proportion of COVID-19 news users on ____ that think of it as a useful way of getting news about COVID-19 (10-14 April)

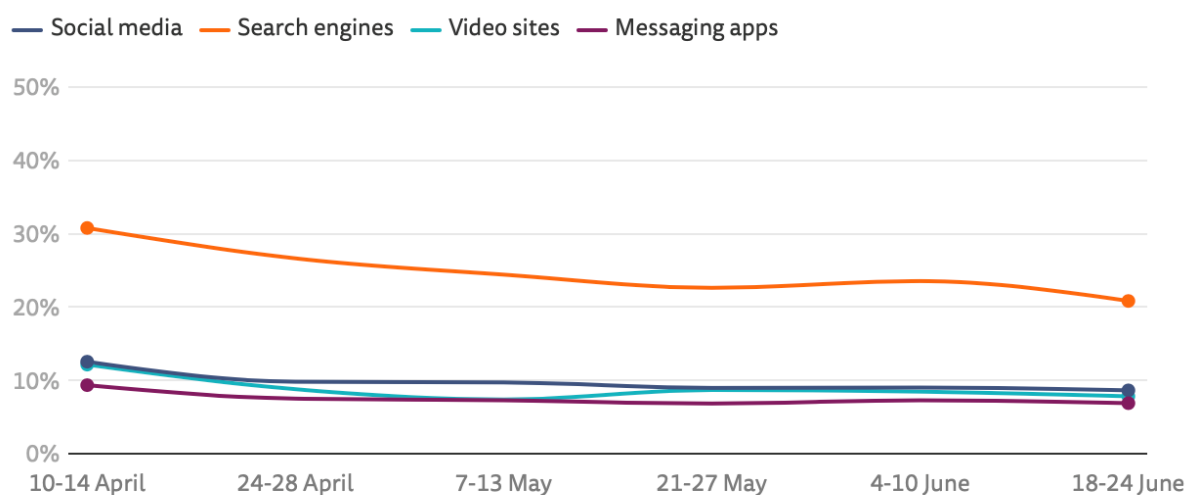


Q12Dii/OptQ12Fi/Q12Cii. You said that you use Facebook/YouTube/Twitter for news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19). Which of the following statements applies best to you? Base: Facebook = 678, YouTube = 321, Twitter = 498.

We should also avoid conflating exposure to information (or misinformation) with believing it. Many people approach social media with a sense of 'generalised scepticism' (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2019), meaning that although they may not fully understand how news is selected on social media, that does not mean they uncritically accept it.

This is very clear from our most recent survey data. Simply put, people do not have much confidence in news and information on social media – or indeed other digital platforms – when it comes to COVID-19. Just 9% say that they trust news and information about COVID-19 on social media – with similar figures for video sites (8%), and messaging apps (7%). Trust in COVID-19 news on search engines is higher at 20% – though it has fallen from 30% in mid-April (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Proportion that trust news and information about COVID-19 on ____



Q11. How trustworthy would you say news and information about coronavirus (COVID-19) on each of 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.

Trust in COVID-19 news and information from different platforms is consistently lower than trust in information specifically from news organisations (44%), with a significant trust gap, especially for social media, video sites, and messaging applications. This is consistent with what we have found previously in comparative work (Nielsen et al., 2020).

Around half of people (49%) who see news

about COVID-19 on social media say they mostly see conflicting facts about it (Figure 5).¹ By comparison, 34% say they mostly see conflicting facts when they use news organisations. This situation is likely to be partly due to the fact that social media use can be associated with diverse media diets (Dubois and Blank, 2018) – and partly because people otherwise tend to choose news sources aligned with their political views, and/or use only a very small number of sources.

Figure 5. Proportion that have seen COVID-19 news from ____ that say they have mostly seen the same set of facts (21-27 May)



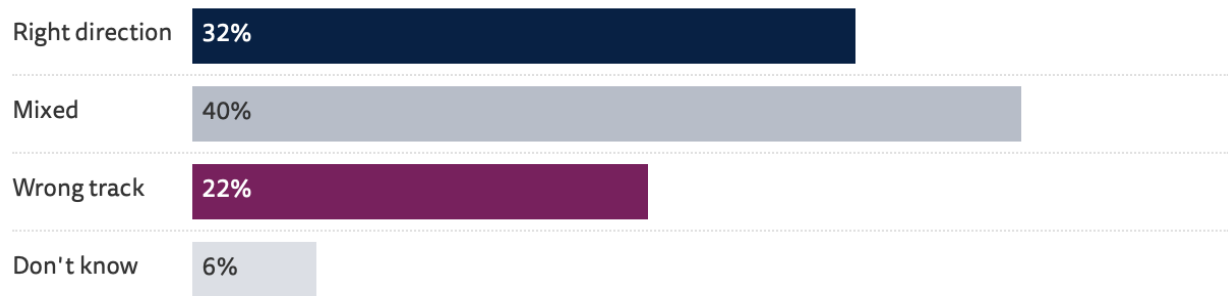
Conflict_news/social. Thinking about the news and information about the coronavirus pandemic you have gotten from news organisations/social media, which better describes you? *Base: News organisations = 1,709, Social media = 1,258.*

Finally, our survey was in the field from 18 to 24 June, a period in which confirmed hospital deaths from COVID-19 in the UK grew from 42,153 to 42,927 (Roser et al., 2020), and the government announced the further lifting of lockdown restrictions. This may be one reason why for the first time since April, we saw an increase in the proportion of people who think

that the COVID-19 situation in the UK is heading in the right direction, rising to 32% from 24% two weeks earlier. 22% of respondents thought that the coronavirus situation in the UK was on the 'wrong track', down from 29% two weeks ago, but up from 10% in April. However, many people (40%) still see a mixed picture (see Figure 6).

¹ This question is adapted from one fielded by the Pew Research Center as part of their 2020 Election News Pathways project. We thank them for making their survey questions publicly available. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/03/18/americans-immersed-in-covid-19-news-most-think-media-are-doing-fairly-well-covering-it/>

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



Q19. All in all, do you think the Coronavirus situation in the UK is generally headed in the right direction, or do you feel things are off on the wrong track? Base: Total sample: 1,467.

References

- Dubois, E., Blank, G. 2018. 'The Echo Chamber is Overstated: The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media'. *Information, Communication & Society* 21(5): 729-745.
- Heiss, R., Matthes, J. 2019. 'Does Incidental Exposure on Social Media Equalize or Reinforce Participatory Gaps? Evidence from a Panel Study'. *New Media & Society* 21(11-12): 2463-2482.
- Fletcher, R., Nielsen, R. K. 2019. 'Generalised Scepticism: How People Navigate News on Social Media'. *Information, Communication & Society* 22(12): 1751-1769.
- Kalogeropoulos, A., Fletcher, R., Nielsen, R. K. 2019. 'News Brand Attribution in Distributed Environments: Do People Know Where They Get Their News?' *New Media & Society* 21(3): 583-601.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andl, S. 2020. *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Nielsen, R. K., Fletcher, R., Newman, N., Brennen, J. S., Howard, P. N. 2020. *Navigating the 'Infodemic': How People in Six Countries Access and Rate News and Information about Coronavirus*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Roser, M., Ritchie, H., Ortiz-Ospina, E., Hasell, J. 2020. 'Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)'. Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>.
- Valeriani, A., Vaccari, C. 2016. 'Accidental Exposure to Politics on Social Media as Online Participation Equalizer in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom'. *New Media & Society* 18(9): 1857-1874.

About the Authors

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen is the Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Professor of Political Communication at the University of Oxford.

Antonis Kalogeropoulos is a Lecturer in Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool and a Research Associate of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Richard Fletcher is a Senior Research Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and leads the Institute's research team.

Funding Acknowledgements

Factsheet published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism as part of the UK COVID-19 News and Information project funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org

