



COJO Against COVID

Academics and Journalists Working Together for Pandemic Recovery

THE PANDEMIC NEWS EXPERIENCE: COVID-19, NEWS CONSUMPTION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE DEMAND FOR POSITIVE NEWS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
A YEAR OF CHANGES IN NEWS HABITS	4
THE “INVERSE BELL CURVE” OF PERSONALISED SURVEILLANCE	5
SWITCHING OFF: COVID-19 NEWS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS	8
POSITIVE EFFECTS OF PANDEMIC NEWS	12
AUDIENCE DEMAND FOR POSTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE NEWS AROUND COVID-19	13
REPORT AUTHORS	16
REFERENCES	17

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For further information, please visit: <https://cojouk.org>.

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INTRODUCTION

COJO for COVID Recovery is a UKRI/AHRC-funded rapid Covid-19 response research project that addresses the role that constructive journalism (COJO), particularly solution-focused journalism, can play in the pandemic recovery. The research set out in this report details the findings of the project's initial in-depth interviews and survey with UK news audiences.

In-depth interviews were held with 59 members of the public, including 20 community leaders, between 15 February and 3 March 2021. Community leaders were self-defined and included people in positions such as school governors, local community activists, local business leaders and so on. The interviews were semi-structured and asked participants to respond to questions with three broad themes:

1. General news consumption in normal times (before the pandemic)
2. Pandemic news consumption and experience
3. Their responses to the potential values of constructive to solutions-focussed journalism both in general and in the context of the pandemic.

The findings of these interviews then fed into the design of a national survey on the pandemic news experience. It gathered more information to quantify and scale the phenomena observed in the in-depth interviews, as well as to explore other relevant issues that have been raised in the research literature on news consumption in times of crisis. Questions were specifically asked about, *inter alia*, their uses of Covid-19 news "in the past 12 months", its impact on mental health, how it has shaped the respondent's pandemic experience, what constructive journalism can do to help them to exit from the pandemic in an informed, motivated and inspired manner. The survey was completed by a representative sample of 2015 UK residents aged 16+ that was randomly drawn and recruited by Opinium, a professional research firm. The survey was live from 22 to 24 March 2021, exactly one year after the UK went into the first lockdown, and was administered by Opinium.

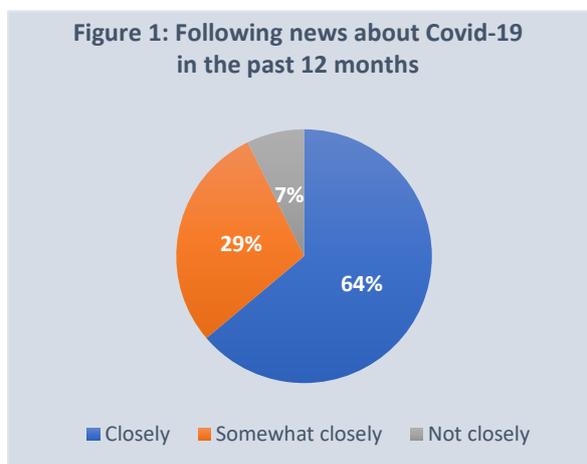
This report will summarise the key trends from our preliminary analysis of 24 of the 59 interviews and key descriptive data from the survey. Four key sets of findings regarding Covid-19 news consumption and experience emerge from this analysis.

1. The high interest in Covid-19 news was associated with the need to monitor and navigate the uncertain evolution of the pandemic as it affected audiences.
2. There was a clear fluctuation that followed "an inverse Bell curve" (up-down-up) pattern of Covid-19 news consumption which was in parallel with the severity of the pandemic and its associated lockdown restrictions.
3. Many of our participants reported switching off from the news or avoiding it for reasons linked to mental and emotional health, including negativity, repetitive reporting and information overload.
4. Participants demanded the media provide more positive news that helps to lift the mood of the public and/or offers ways out of the pandemic.

For the purpose of anonymisation, all participant names in this report are pseudonyms.

A YEAR OF CHANGES IN NEWS HABITS

In times of crisis, public consumption of news often changes dramatically (Westlund and Ghersetti, 2015), and the Coronavirus pandemic is no exception. Our survey data point to a very strong pattern of news usage, with nearly two-thirds of the UK public following news about Covid-19 “closely” in the previous 12 months and another three in ten did so “somewhat closely” (Figure 1). Our in-depth interviewees attest to this, reporting a general increase in both the frequency of and time spent on news consumption from pre-pandemic levels. Many have developed some new news habits during the pandemic. One is *an increase in the use of smartphone news apps* among some users, such as Helen:



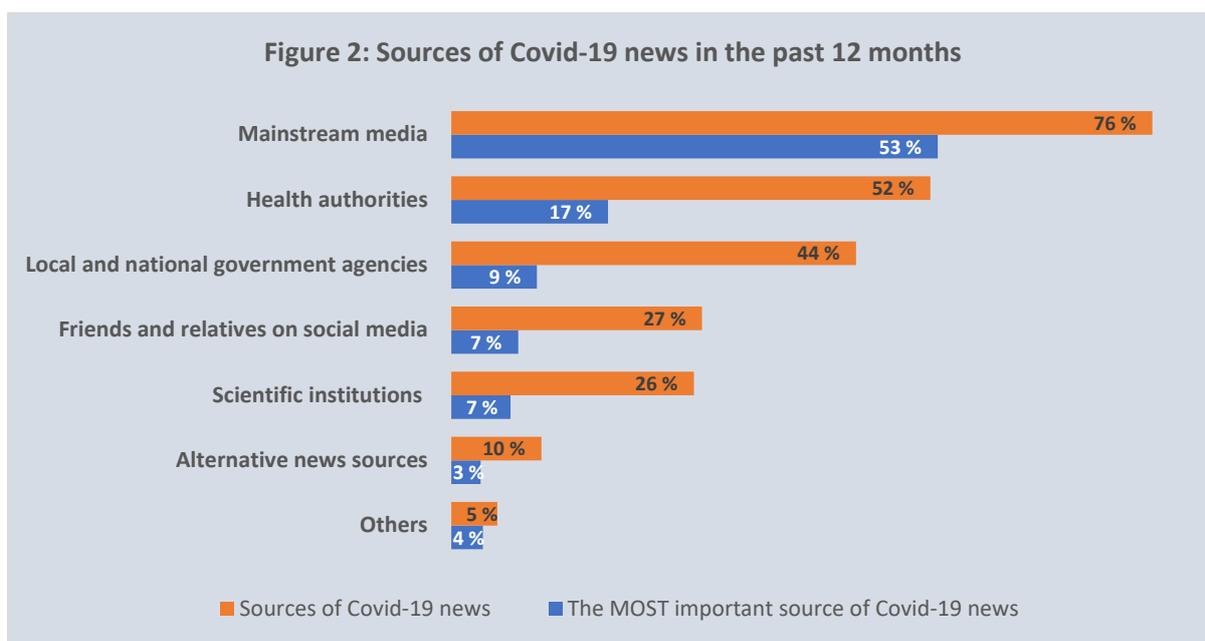
Normal times, I want to use the radio and TV now I’m looking at my phone more to find out more detailed information. So, to get that information about particular trends of Covid in our particular district, I need to go to some online sources, a number of news (sources) to actually drill down, and where they were reporting what about my district, and things like that.

The other, more remarkable, trend is *the expansion of news sources beyond mainstream media*. These ranged from official government data to random people on social media platforms:

I have looked at things I wouldn’t have looked up before – (such as) government interactive maps showing you what the coronavirus rates are all over the country and right in your area as well. So that’s something new. I (had never looked) at specific data and I’ve now even looked at the local council’s website on ... more specific data that I wouldn’t have gone into (with) that. (Irene)

I started to pay more attention to online sources and see the other side, people who claimed other things, people who saw in a different aspect... I’m looking more on an independent website, a lot of people would talk about it on YouTube, Facebook. (Christopher)

Our survey shows that mainstream news media outlets were still the predominant source of pandemic news for the UK public (Figure 2), being used by more than three quarters of our sample (76%) and selected as the “most important news source about Covid-19” by more than half (53%). What is notable here, however, is the popularity of non-journalistic sources of pandemic news, which builds on our qualitative findings. Before the pandemic, we would



not expect health authorities such as the NHS and WHO to be used as news sources by more than half of the population (53%) and government by more than four in ten (44%). Two related phenomena likely explain this change: first, during a national emergency, citizens often turn to authorities for leadership, guidance and *news*, therefore elevating the power and influence of governments during such crises; and second, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the daily government briefings (featuring government scientific and public health advisors) became major news events in themselves, attracting huge audiences and dominating the agendas of news organisations (Mayhew, 2020). With the added presence of many journalists at these government briefings, it is little surprise that government and health authorities scored so highly as news sources. Indeed, during interviews our participants frequently described the government briefings as an important part of their daily news diet.

Also notable here is the relatively low reliance on alternative news sources during the pandemic. Recent years have seen both a decline in trust in mainstream media (Newman, 2020) and the growth in audiences and influence of alternative news sites such as those attached to the rise of the ‘Alt-right’ phenomenon in the US, or alternative election news sites on the right and left in the UK (McDowell-Naylor and Thomas, 2020). Our findings seem to offer some evidence that during a crisis – as “sphere of consensus” events (Hallin, 1986) – some audiences have gone back to mainstream media and official sources.

THE “INVERSE BELL CURVE” OF PERSONALISED SURVEILLANCE

High levels of news consumption seem to have been driven by two key factors. One is *the amount of free time afforded by the lockdown*, as reflected in Mikaela’s description:

I'm definitely reading my phone more, because we're not doing as much, we're not going out as much ... we're in lockdown. As soon as lockdown is lifted, I'll probably read a lot less. But yes, the last few months, because there's not a lot going on and I'm spending more time in the home, I've got the telly on (and) I've got the phone by me. I definitely do consume more (news) at the moment, probably because of the weather as well.

The other driver is the overwhelming lockdown-induced need for people *to survey the pandemic situation as it affects their daily life routines and concerns*. Our preliminary analysis reveals several areas of Covid-19 news that were on high demand. One is detailed statistics and trends on the pandemic, such as the transmission rates and deaths, especially those in their local areas. As seen in the following:

"I think the first thing that I looked at when Covid started was the numbers in England and then (whether) the numbers around my local area increased, so gradually I looked at that quite regularly... I regularly look for how it's going to affect me and the people around me." (Toby)

"What are the trends within my district death rates and hospital admissions and things like that. Whether the hospitals were overwhelmed or not, vaccination rates, how quickly they get into the priority groups, what kind of vaccines are being used." (Helen)

Another, closely related, category of heavily consumed news is updates on local pandemic restrictions.

Participants cited the need to understand what to do to comply with them and, not less importantly, when to expect them to end. For Davide, for example, news is where he learns when and how he could return to all sorts of mundane daily routines – such as “when I'm going to see my family again, (whether I am) going to be able to go back to work or not, ... how (going back to office) is going to look, ... whenever we're going to be able to go (to the cinema) again.” For Nadia, an isolated university student, the news is where she anticipated information about a possible return to normality.

I am at university and ... I am literally in my room all day, all my friends are in their rooms all day, we cannot do anything. It's kinda sad. So (I checked news) just to see when life can go back to normal again. That's actually the only reason. (Nadia)

Some, like Christopher, are driven by specific events being impacted by lockdown rules.

A lot of news that I look for is based on that: what are we having to do now? For instance ... I wanted to go to the States in mid-January, and obviously that completely fell through because of new lockdown. And so, I'm looking at this. (Christopher)

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- Nadia -

The strong focus on news about local and national pandemic conditions is probably not surprising: in unsettling times of uncertainty like the pandemic, people would probably look out to their immediate environment first – at least to assess the situation, to know what to do, and probably to have a sense of security that they are on top of the situation. “Just to prepare,” said Nigel when asked about the reason for using Covid-19 news. “I don’t know whether they would even have helped me prepare because nothing really helps prepare you for this, but I think knowing was a little bit more, better than just not being aware.”

“
I followed it more right at the beginning, and then, when everyone was getting out in August, I relaxed a little bit thinking ‘okay yeah ... we're getting back out there, we're going back to college now, here's my summer holiday.’ And then from September because we were back on campus, I started following it really closely again.

- Chloe -

That is not to say that the international situation of the pandemic did not constitute an important area of news content. Some interviewees frequently sought it but, again, this is more often for updates about places with which they have some personal connection. For example, Helen looks for news about the pandemic “not just here but elsewhere as well, because I have two children, both of them are living abroad.” Meanwhile, Anthony reported using the BBC’s Africa section for some Covid news because he had “lived in South Africa for a few years (and) would try find out what’s going on there as well.”

It is probably in part because of such personalised surveillance purposes and of the fluctuation in free time between lockdowns that pandemic news consumption tended to follow an up-down-up rhythm in parallel with its severity and ensuing lockdown restrictions. Following an increase during the first lockdown, engagement with news reduced with the ease of lockdown restrictions over the summer months, and then rose again, at least to some extent, in the autumn and winter, when cases and deaths increased and forced the UK into the second and third

lockdowns. Chloe, a typical user of this “inverse bell curve” (rising, falling and then rising again) pattern, described her primary desire to stay informed of the reopening of education as follows:

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Similarly, Rohan cited a feeling of there being an end to the pandemic in sight to explain why he had been maintaining a lower level of news consumption in recent months:

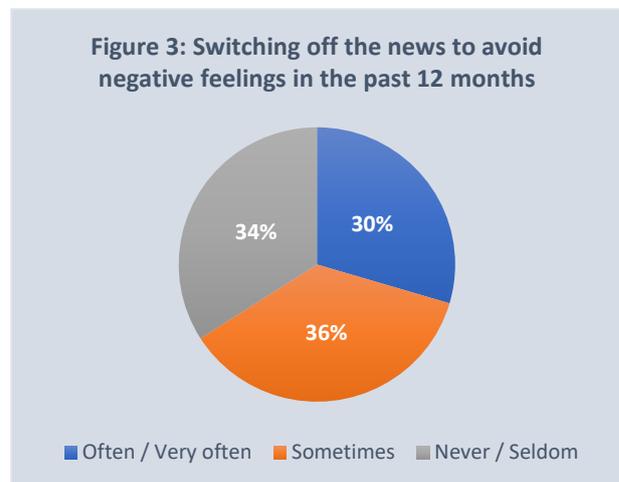
I feel like [my news consumption] has been up and down. Sometimes during the main block of the pandemic last year, I was more focused on stuff so I was looking at more articles, I might say it increased. But now it feels like we're near the end of the pandemic, so I feel less worried about it. I know the vaccines are rolling out but there's

less to focus on. So maybe every now and again I like to check the R rate of the UK and see where that is – maybe every week or so, so that I feel better when I go to shops.

SWITCHING OFF: COVID-19 NEWS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

The “inverse bell curve” pattern, as noted, can be explained in part by a combination of more free time during lockdowns and the highly personalised drive to survey an uncertain and continually evolving situation. But our data also show that some participants never returned to their initial high rate of news consumption for another set of reasons: the various mental health problems associated with Covid-19 news consumption.

In fact, many interviewees, including even some avid news users, reported deliberately switching off for periods of time from a few days to several months for reasons related to mental health. In our survey, about two-thirds (66%) of the UK public “switched off the news to avoid negative feelings” at least sometimes during the pandemic, with three in ten doing so often or very often (Figure 3).



Participants who avoided Covid-19 news pointed to the negative bias and repetitive nature of Covid-19 news as two key contributors to their ill mental and emotional health. One common problem is the feeling of being overloaded and fatigued with the sheer volume and intensity of rather repetitive news about Covid-19. 81% of our survey respondents at least sometimes felt “overloaded with Covid-19 news in the past 12 months”, with 43% doing so often or very often (Figure 4). Further, two in three agreed that “news about Covid-19 is rather repetitive” (Figure 5). During the in-depth interviews, if participants mentioned a period of news avoidance, they were asked to provide information about why they switched

off or reduced their news consumption. Here are some examples from our interviews:

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It was just a saturation point. It had been so intense for so long that I just needed a break from it... If it's brought up on the news, or it's on the news or an app I'll just not even read about it because I am almost exhausted of it.

- Anthony -

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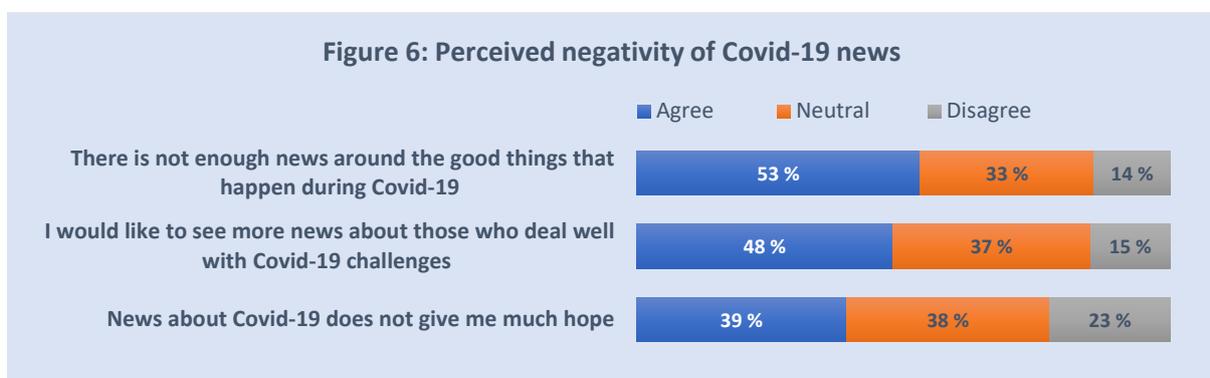
I think [my news usage dwindled] because I realized at that, looking back there hadn't been actually much progression in the news so things became very 'samey'... Yeah, I think maybe just my general interest in it has waned a fair bit in the last little bit. (Isaac)



The problem of repetition is worsened when it is combined with very negative bias of Covid-19 news. Many interviewees saw media coverage of the pandemic as just an extension of the general and inherent imbalance between positive and negative stories in everyday news. Evident in their accounts is that there *are* positive stories around the pandemic that the news media could be telling, but that they are choosing not to run with them. Christopher’s comment is typical of such observations:

We have COVID news... well the cases are rising, but how often do we hear about people recovering? To give a little positive, like it's not only the grim reaper walking through the streets. There are people recovering and the recovery rate is great, but nobody's talking about it. (Christopher)

Our survey data (Figure 6) put such accounts in perspective: more than half (53%) agreed that “there is not enough news around the good things that happen during Covid-19” and nearly half (48%) that they “would like to see more news about those who deal well with pandemic challenges”. In addition, 39% agreed, while only 23% disagreed, that “news about Covid-19 does not give me hope”.



Although participants acknowledged that negativity is unavoidable in pandemic reporting, it was felt overall that repeatedly hearing and seeing the same terrible news and statistics

contributed to a decline in mental health. Various feelings of being depressed, anxious, fearful, sceptical, angry, helpless, and frustrated were reported because of exposure to relentless repetition of “bad news”, especially the influx of case data, death statistics and lockdown uncertainties. As seen in the following comments:

I probably consume news a lot less now because I tend to find that it tends to be quite negative. So, especially around six, seven months ago, it tended to be focusing a lot on it and all you see is death, death, death. It doesn't tend to be a lot of positive things, so I tend to just to avoid a lot of the news lately. (Alexander)

I think it's a good idea for people to switch off from the news nowadays because there's not much positivity on there. While we're in lockdown you've got to be positive, and if you just keep regurgitating the same information and being told there's extensions to lockdowns, it's nice to be able to just come away from it (to read a book or watch a film. (Jack)

The (mainstream news) outlets would draw a very grim picture of the whole thing... Interesting enough that now TV is not my main source at all, mainly because it keeps repeating the same story, but with a bit of a twist or towards 'it's worse, it's getting worse!' You start thinking TV is just pushing one angle. (Christopher)

In our survey, we asked participants about a range of emotional reactions typically found to be related to news consumption such as anger and sadness (Kim and Cameron, 2011), fear (Altheide, 2016), and powerlessness (Newman, 2019). As seen in Figure 7, the vast majority of respondents reported having at least sometimes felt “disgusted by the action of some people in the news” (92%), “angry because of something mentioned in the news” (80%), “despair at the current situation” (79%), “anxious about thing that might happen to me” (71%) and “fearful about what might happen to me” (68%).

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- Jack -

Anger and disgust did not emerge strongly in our preliminary analysis of the interview data but despair and anxiety, with their ensuing depression, did. Rohan, for example, reported a depressing feeling with a “bleak outlook on the future” that came from consuming the news. Meanwhile, Greg’s early experience with Covid, which was reasonably typical of other respondents, was so dominated by anxiety that he decided to tune out at later stages:

I think too much news is negative. It just ... makes you too anxious and you think about things too much. Personally, right at the beginning I was staying very in touch with what was going on. And it kind of made you more worried about it and it made (the pandemic) more real. Whereas, now that I consume less news, especially less Covid-related news – not that I forgot about it because that's impossible to do – you kind of focus on just what's in your control, and I just crack on with doing what you're doing.

Figure 7: Mental and emotional state during Covid-19 news consumption



At a more extreme level, Chloe described how regular consumption of Covid-19 news contributed to a period of depression that saw her unable to get out of bed and function normally:

In the first lockdown, watching the news was really negative for me, and it did not help in any way, shape or form. ... I spent three or four months reading the news and then it got to a point where I just I didn't go out anymore. I didn't walk the dog every day. I stayed in bed, I wasn't eating properly, I went into a slump. ... I started to look a little bit away from Covid and try and find something else that was happening.

The profound impact of Covid-19 news on Chloe's daily life, especially the alteration of her regular activities might be extreme, but it does speak to a broader trend of Covid-19 news

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reports creating feelings of sadness and despair amongst the public. It fits with an emerging research literature that shows the impact, particularly on young people, of declining hope for the future, and it is evident that the steady consumption of news on economic slumps, joblessness, stymied social circumstances, and pervasive health issues deepens this sense of despair (Galan et al, 2019; Hermans and Prins, 2020).

Those interviewees who switched off the news saw it as an effective solution to their mental health problems. Regardless of the length of the switch off period, they felt that avoidance had a positive impact on their lives and helped them cope with feelings of depression and anxiety. Greg, for example, told us that “having consumed less news I do feel more positive

about the situation because I'm not bogged down by the stats around cases and deaths". Similarly, Chloe, above, decided to respond to her depression by looking for information on other topics and, at times, tuning off from Covid news completely. As she reflected on avoiding news over Christmas time:

I completely turned all of my social media apps off and everything just got away for the (Christmas) week. I was able to relax. I read the news a lot, so I don't relax because I'm constantly keeping up with everything that's going on in the country and, eventually, I suppose you get quite tired of that. Then I took the week off and I was like 'okay, I've got time, I can breathe'.

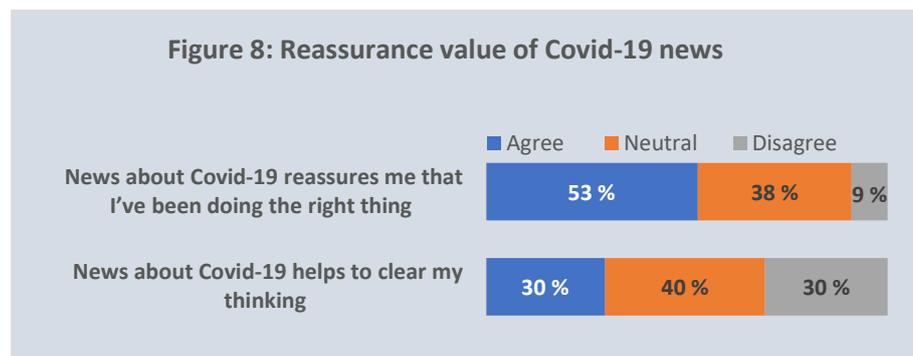
These findings cannot be removed from their context of the stress and turmoil caused by the global pandemic and lockdowns, but for our respondents, many mental health conditions were worsened directly by the types of reporting. The above speaks to a larger issue often expressed about the 24-hour news cycle – that news outlets must keep reporting, and that the story is always unfinished even if there is little new information (Howard and Feldman, 2008; Lewis and Cushion, 2009; Saltzis, 2012;). Add this regularly debated issue to the particularly depressing and prolonged repetition of the news about Covid-19, and it becomes clear why so many participants suffered from mental ill health connected to the news and why some chose to switch off.

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF PANDEMIC NEWS

That is not to say that pandemic news only has a negative effect on mental health. Many in-depth interviewees acknowledged some positive effects of their Covid-19 news intake on their mental wellbeing. The reassurance value of Covid-19 news came up strongly. Some participants said that the simple fact of having access to information was reassuring. Hannah, for example, said that the news has definitely made her pandemic experience better because "knowing what is happening around me and seeing the trends" made her feel in control of the situation, rather than "just imagining scenarios in my head". As she explained:

Even the slightest small news about the pensioners who got their first jobs, the planning for holiday ... gives me a sense of safety. Not safety – I should say it gives me a sense of being in control.

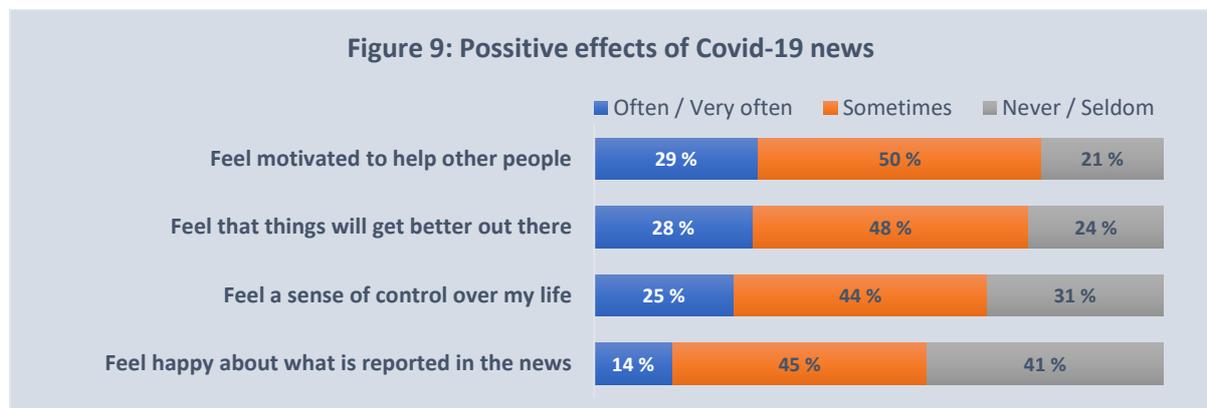
Hannah's observations speak very well to some of the survey findings. Although there was a divide in the perception of whether "news about Covid-19 helps to clear my thinking" (with exactly the same proportion of the respondents (30%) agreeing and disagreeing with that statement), 53% agreed (and only 9% disagreed) that "news about Covid-19 reassures me



that I've been doing the right thing" (Figure 8). Further, 69% at least sometimes felt "a sense of control over my life" from news consumption (Figure 9).

Other positive effects that were mentioned quite often included feelings of optimism, inspiration and empowerment. Christine, for example, commented on how some news reporting inspired and empowered her to help herself to escape lockdown depression:

They give you good ideas on what to do. 'Make sure you get outside' and things like that, so I have watched that kind of news. And I took on board some of the things that people have said to do. Because at one point in the second lockdown, I just felt like losing the will to live a little bit.



For Mandy, recent cheerful news that she consumed "obviously got a bit of a psychological emotional effect on all of us" because it provided "the hope (that) perhaps there's a light at the end of the tunnel". Irene commented on how positive news stories have increased people's capacity to cope:

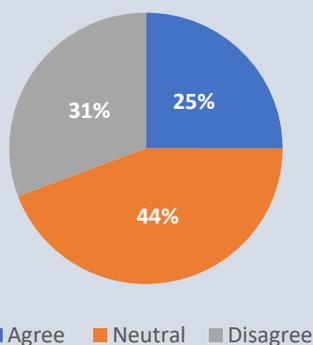
I think the more positive news you get the more you can cope with it ... Positive stories do help. Like Captain Tom, that boosted everyone's morale, didn't it? I think stories like that make people think that whatever was happening with the virus and with lockdown, that someone could do something positive, and that story was shared by all the media.

Our survey findings attest to these (Figure 10). Six in ten at least sometimes felt "happy about what is reported in the news"; three quarters (76%) still at least sometimes felt from their news consumption that "that things would get better out there"; and eight in ten at least sometimes felt "motivated to help other people".

AUDIENCE DEMAND FOR POSTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE NEWS AROUND COVID-19

This report has shown a mixed picture of the functions and impacts of Covid-19 news in the daily life of a pandemic-wounded public. Although many consumers see the news as a lifeline during the pandemic to keep themselves informed, inspired and assured in the face

Figure 10: Overall impact of news on pandemic experience



of uncertainties, this is not the case uniformly. For most people, the media is an abundance of repetitive bad news that leads them to experience, at least occasionally, some form of mental health problems. Overall, only 25% of our survey respondents agreed, while 31% disagreed, that “news about Covid-19 generally made my pandemic experience better” (Figure 10).

This analysis highlights the urgent need for news outlets to take lessons and think about the types of Covid-19 news that can make

their audiences feel not only informed and reassured but also inspired and empowered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when we asked interview participants what kinds of pandemic news they would like to see more of, the vast majority identified more *positive news* as desirable. Perceptions of what is positive news vary from one participant to the next. Some of these would go against the very purpose of journalism, such as the following suggestion that the media should be less critical and accept a “positive spin” on certain things:

The media have been quite critical of public bodies ... They've been very critical about the NHS, ... about the reporting of numbers, ... about the vaccine. I think they could definitely put a more of a positive spin on it, but (they've chosen to be) more negative. (Toby)

Most recommendations, broadly speaking, fall into two categories. First, given the aforementioned negativity bias in the news, there was a strong feeling that *positives could be emphasised more in the news coverage, to lift the mood of the public*. As Christine elaborated:

Obviously, we're in the third lockdown now, and we know all that's happening ... So now (we) probably try to focus on the positive stuff. I feel like it's gone on that long now and ... people are getting a bit like fed up with it all ... and they need to be lifted a little bit. So definitely more positive stories (are needed).

This is different from requesting journalists to put a “positive spin” on events, data and statistics: it means bringing to light the positive things that have come from the pandemic and associated lockdown. Chloe for example, wanted to see the benefits that lockdowns bring. One example she did not “see reported much in the UK is the environmental benefits that we've had”. Many others identified people-centred positive stories as an area they would like to see covered more:

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I'd like to see more stories regarding people beating Covid-19. Because I think that people have had enough with the negatives, they need hope to know that people are actually recovering from it.

- Nigel -

I'd like to see more stories regarding people beating Covid-19. Because I think that people have had enough with the negatives, they need hope to know that people are actually recovering from it. (Nigel)

I remember watching and reading one story about a volunteer like a vaccine centre. I didn't look out for it, as that's not the reason I logged in, but I read it and thought 'oh, that was nice to hear about.' There have to be hundreds, maybe thousands, of these volunteers but we're not hearing about. So, it would be nice to hear a couple more of their stories, like 'a day in the life of' stories could be nice. (Greg)

More personal experiences. I would love to read about stories about people who came out of it better or who got the jabs and are now feeling better and planning to have some sort of a normal life. So, if there are any personal experiences, I would love to read about that. When Captain Tom's story came out it was ... a very positive story and literally a ray of hope for us. (Hannah)

Second, there was a desire to see a shift from an excessive focus on Covid-19 problems to more attention to how these problems are solved. Davide's call for the news to focus on what governments and other authorities are doing to find a way out of the pandemic is typical of such responses:

If there are problems somewhere, what's happening? What's the way out? So, the NHS is overwhelmed what's the way out? How do we build a new hospital? Are we putting in applications into build new hospitals or we're recruiting more staff? ... So it might be bad news now, but is there anything beyond that ... to put a smile on our faces ... as well as the facts?

“
The more positive news you get the more you can cope with it ... Positive stories do help.

- Irene -

While participants like Davide did not namecheck this kind of news explicitly, their testimonies did articulate some core values of what has come to be known as constructive journalism, a journalism practice that breaks from traditional journalism's focus on social problems to a balance between problems *and* solutions to problems (Gyldensted, 2015; Haagerup, 2014). When we introduced this news practice to our survey participants, 41% said that it would be "very useful", with another 44% "somewhat useful", for the UK's exit from the pandemic. In the second report from this study, to be published in two weeks, we will provide more detail on how the UK public appreciates constructive journalism and its potential values to them in the forthcoming exit from the pandemic.

REPORT AUTHORS



Dr An Nguyen is Associate Professor of Journalism at BU and the Principal Investigator of the COJO for COVID Recovery project. He is a widely published scholar in news consumption and citizenship, digital journalism, citizen journalism, science journalism (including science-based solutions journalism), data journalism, and media for global developments. Prior to academia, he was a science and health journalist in Vietnam.



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