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How has COVID-19 affected trust in scientists?

Survey research for UK Research
and Innovation carried out during the
COVID-19 pandemic

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Summary

This report covers a series of online surveys of UK adults aged 16+ that Ipsos MORI carried out on behalf of UK Research and Innovation from mid-April to late August 2020. The surveys explored attitudes to science, trust in scientists and science communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results show that **the UK public have a positive disposition towards science and scientists**, and this carries through to the role of scientists in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Over six in ten (63%) said the benefits of science to the UK are greater than any harmful effects. Three in five (60%) considered scientists in general to be trustworthy.

However, **this positivity is not evenly spread across different demographic groups** – those from social class C2DE (the less affluent) and non-graduates tend to be less positive and less trusting than the middle classes and graduates respectively. In this sense, our findings mirror other recent surveys on this topic, such as the [BEIS Public Attitudes to Science 2019 study](#). Nevertheless, this series offers further unique and important insights into science communication and public trust in science.

Science communication

There is an appetite for scientific information on COVID-19. Over twice as many people thought they saw and heard too little scientific information about it (34%) than thought there was too much (13%), and around nine in ten (89%) said they saw this kind of information over the course of this survey series. Moreover, this desire for more information has grown over the course of this series, and since June it has stayed at around four in ten of the public, despite other issues outside of COVID-19 taking over the news agenda. This is just as much the case among those with a negative outlook on science as those with a positive outlook. It challenges the narrative that people do not want to hear from experts.

However, **the less affluent and non-graduates tend once again to be more disengaged.** This reinforces the fact that the scientific community needs to do more work to engage these groups.

This series also helps us understand *where* people receive scientific information on COVID-19. Major broadcasters such as the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky have consistently been the most common source of such information (for 59%). They are also among the most trusted sources (by 65% of those who recall getting scientific information from these channels), alongside scientific journals and science websites (69%). Nevertheless, **the importance of social media, word-of-mouth and WhatsApp communications among younger audiences should not be underestimated** – those aged 16-24 were just as likely to recall seeing or hearing scientific information on COVID-19 on social media (44%) as through traditional broadcast media (45%). This presents a significant challenge for public engagement, given the proliferation of misleading information about COVID-19 on social media.

Public trust in science and scientists

We find that **most people trust scientists, including the scientists specifically advising on the UK government's response to COVID-19** – 55% considered these COVID-19 scientists to be trustworthy. This also reflects other research, such as [Ipsos MORI's Veracity Index](#), which has consistently shown scientists to be one of the most trusted professions in the country, and the COVID-19-specific research by the [Nuffield Foundation](#), which found high levels of trust for COVID-19 information emanating from scientists, doctors and other experts.

However, even here, less affluent and less educated groups, as well as those who were previously sceptical about the benefits of science, are consistently less trusting of scientists. The trust gap between graduates and non-graduates, and between those who see science as beneficial and those who do not, was present in every wave. This suggests that **public trust in science and in scientists does not solely move up and down in response to good and bad news** – in fact, we saw that potentially damaging media coverage around the resignation of a prominent government scientific advisor for breaking lockdown rules made relatively little difference to public trust beyond June 2020.

Instead, **there are likely to be deep-rooted reasons behind distrust.** [Public Attitudes to Science 2019](#) highlights the link between trust and science capital, suggesting a need to build up the latter to increase the former. A recent paper by [Jennings et al. \(August 2020\)](#) also highlights how the perceived competence of political leaders has shaped public trust during the pandemic. These works indicate that trust in science and scientists depends on a much wider range of factors. Therefore, organisations like UK Research and Innovation must maintain a diverse range of public engagement activities, not only addressing people's information barriers and exposure to science and scientists, but also dealing with the underlying factors and perceptions that stop certain disengaged groups from participating.

1 Background and methodology

UK Research and Innovation commissioned Ipsos MORI to monitor public opinion towards science, scientists and scientific information during the COVID-19 pandemic. This involved a fortnightly online survey from mid-April to late August 2020 with UK adults aged 16+ (c.1,100 per wave, for 10 waves).

The survey series tracked positivity towards science, trust in scientists generally and the scientists specifically advising the UK government on COVID-19, the public's appetite for scientific information on COVID-19 and their trust in different information sources.

The exact fieldwork dates and sample sizes for each wave are included in the appendix.

Technical details

Data for each wave are weighted to match the profile of the population by gender, age, social grade, work status, region and qualifications (graduates vs. non-graduates).

All polls are subject to potential sampling error. In this survey series, this is approximately ± 3 to 4 percentage points for each wave and ± 1 percentage point for the combined sample across all 10 waves (although the margin of error will be higher for subgroups). Across the report, wherever we comment on differences across waves or between subgroups, these are differences that are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Primarily, our reporting focuses on the aggregated results when combining the samples (11,646 UK adults) across all 10 waves. All demographic subgroup analysis (differences by gender, age, social class and education) are based on this combined data so we can carry out more granular analysis (e.g. gender within age bands). We also reflect on the wave-on-wave trends.

Where results do not sum to 100 in charts, this may be due to computer rounding, the question allowing multiple responses or the exclusion of the "don't know" response from the chart.

Timeline of events

The COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly evolving series of events. Although our survey series started after the UK entered a nationwide lockdown on 23 March, there were several subsequent events that are likely to have impacted on the findings and help to explain the trends over time in our data. The following timeline covers the main events that may have played a role in shaping people's attitudes and desires for scientific information on COVID-19. It focuses mainly on the staged easing of lockdown restrictions, new rules being introduced (e.g. around masks and quarantining) and other major news events that are not strictly related but highlight the changing news agenda (e.g. the Black Lives Matter UK demonstrations).

Date	Event
23 March	The UK government implements a national lockdown
5 April	Prime Minister Boris Johnson admitted to hospital with COVID-19
Wave 1 (10–14 April)	
Wave 2 (24–27 April)	
30 April	Mr Johnson declares UK as being past the peak number of COVID-19 cases
5 May	Prominent member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) resigns after breaking the government's lockdown rules

Date	Event
Wave 3 (8–11 May)	
10 May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First national lockdown easing – people can exercise whenever they choose ▪ “Stay alert” messaging introduced
11 May	Government starts to advise wearing face masks in public places
22 May	SAGE publishes advice on reopening schools
Wave 4 (22–25 May)	
30 May	Some government scientific advisors warn about lifting lockdown too early ¹
3 June	Government announces 14-day quarantine for people entering UK (comes into force on 8 June)
5–7 June	Black Lives Matter demonstrations across the UK
Wave 5 (5–8 June)	
13–15 June	Further national lockdown easing– non-essential retailers open and support bubbles allowed for those living on their own
18 June	Health and Social Care Secretary announces that AstraZeneca has struck a deal to manufacture the Oxford University COVID-19 vaccine
Wave 6 (19–22 June)	
23 June	Final government daily briefing on COVID-19
25 June	Further national lockdown easing – pubs and restaurants reopen outdoor spaces
26 June	Government publish "traffic lights" for countries where Britons need to quarantine upon returning
30 June	Local lockdown implemented in Leicester
Wave 7 (3–6 July)	
4 July	Further national lockdown easing – pubs, restaurants and hairdressers reopen; two households can meet indoors, and six households can meet outdoors
Wave 8 (17–20 July)	
14 July	Government makes it compulsory to wear face masks in shops and on public transport
17 July	Further national lockdown easing – people can use public transport whenever they choose
31 July	Any further lockdown easing in England postponed for two weeks
Wave 9 (31 July–4 August)	
2 August	Major incident declared in Greater Manchester followed by a local lockdown
14 August	Further national lockdown easing announced for following Monday – weddings, bowling alleys, casinos and soft play areas to reopen
Wave 10 (14–17 August)	

¹ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52858392>.

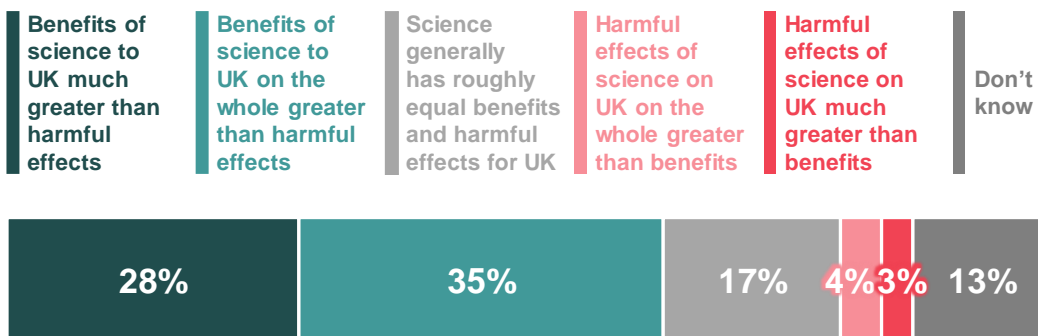
2 Positivity towards science

Key findings

- Over six in ten have consistently had a positive outlook towards science. This dipped slightly in early May but recovered in the next wave and has remained this high across the series.
- This positivity is not evenly spread across demographic groups. Men, people aged 55+, graduates and the middle classes (ABC1s) were typically more positive. This does not mean other groups were more negative – they were more likely to say they “don’t know”.
- Young men (aged 16-24) were the group most likely to see science as harmful on the whole – around a fifth thought the harmful effects are greater than the benefits.

The UK public largely have a positive disposition towards science. Over six in ten (63%) said the benefits of science to the UK are greater than any harmful effects. This was broadly split between those saying the benefits are much greater and a little greater (Figure 2.1). Fewer than one in ten (8%) took an overtly negative viewpoint.

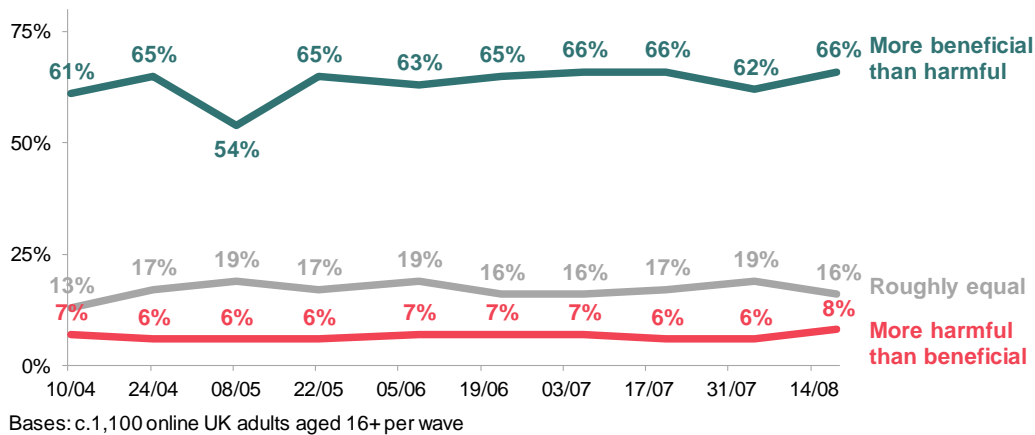
Figure 2.1: Which of these most closely reflects your view?



Base: 11,646 online UK adults aged 16+ interviewed from 10 April to 17 August 2020

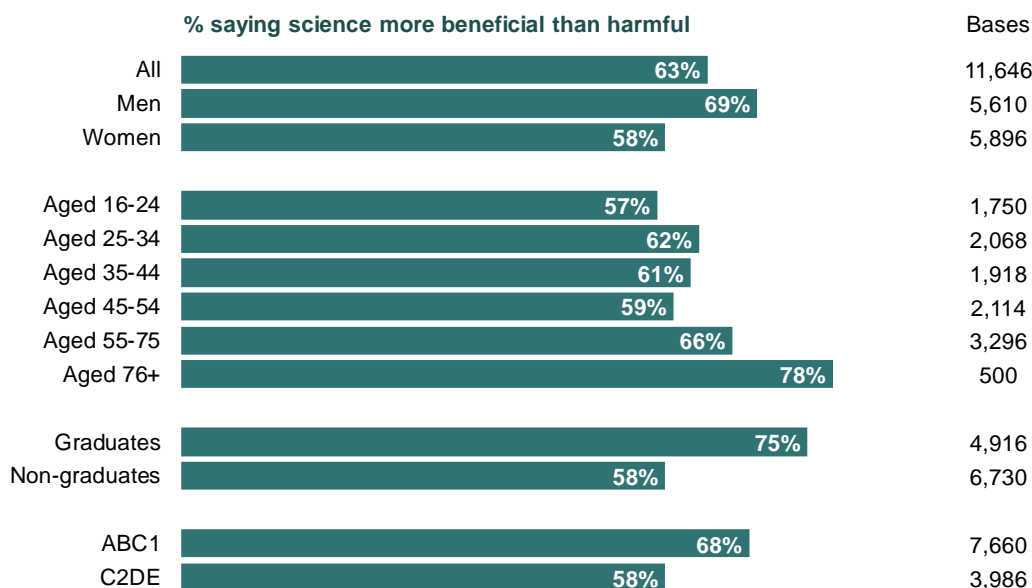
This positivity towards science was highly consistent across waves. There was a temporary dip in early May, although this fully recovered in the next wave (Figure 2.2). In this short-lived period, there was a slight rise in the proportion who were ambivalent or said they “don’t know”, but no rise in the proportion saying that science is more harmful than beneficial.

The very sudden recovery could suggest that we simply sampled a slightly more negative group in wave 3 – one that was less reflective of the overall population. However, the dip also coincides with the resignation of a prominent member of the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) some days before, which could be part of the explanation.

Figure 2.2: Trend over time in opinion towards science

Demographic differences

Across the series, **men, people aged 55+, graduates and the middle classes (ABC1s) were among the most positive** (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: Opinion towards science by demographic group

Bases as per bars (out of 11,646 online UK adults aged 16+ interviewed from 10 April to 17 August 2020)

However, this does not necessarily mean that their counterparts were more negative. Instead, women were twice as likely as men to say they “don’t know” (18% vs. 9%), as were non-graduates (17%, vs. 7% of graduates) and those in the C2DE social class (17%, vs. 10% of ABC1s).

Among non-graduates, those with no formal qualifications were particularly disengaged, with almost a quarter (23%) saying they “don’t know”.

The [BEIS Public Attitudes to Science 2019 study](#) highlights that both women and non-graduates, especially those without any formal qualifications, tend to have lower science capital, which correlates with less positivity towards science. In that sense, these results mirror considerable previous survey research in this area.

While men are typically more positive, **young men aged 16-24 were the group most likely to see science as actively harmful** – around a fifth (18%) thought the harmful effects are greater than the benefits. This compares to eight per cent of women in the same age group.

3 Trust in scientists

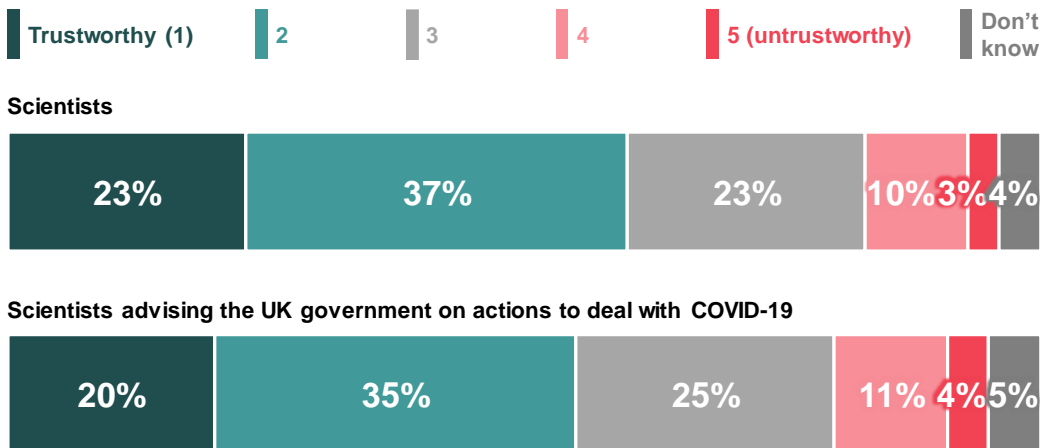
Key findings

- Three in five have considered scientists in general to be trustworthy over the course of the pandemic. A similar, albeit slightly lower proportion have felt the same about the scientists specifically advising the government on COVID-19.
- Trust in both sets of scientists followed broadly the same trajectory over the course of the pandemic. There was a dip in trust in early May, roughly coinciding with the resignation of one of the government’s science advisors for breaching lockdown rules. Both trust scores recovered in subsequent waves. However, trust in COVID-19 scientists has more typically remained below its high point, recorded in the first wave (just over three in five).
- There are similar demographic patterns when it comes to trust in both scientists generally and COVID-19 scientists. Across the series, those aged 55+, ABC1s and graduates tended to be among the most trusting.

3.1 Trust in scientists in different contexts

Across the series, **three in five (60%) considered scientists generally to be trustworthy** (a score of 1 or 2 in Figure 3.1). This was higher than for the scientists advising the government on COVID-19 (55%). In each context, a similarly low proportion felt these figures were untrustworthy (13% and 15% respectively giving a score of 4 or 5). It is worth noting that, in both cases, around a quarter were neutral (a score of 3), leaving a sizable proportion who did not actively trust scientists.

Figure 3.1: In general, do you think that the following groups are trustworthy or untrustworthy? Please use a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very trustworthy and 5 is very untrustworthy.

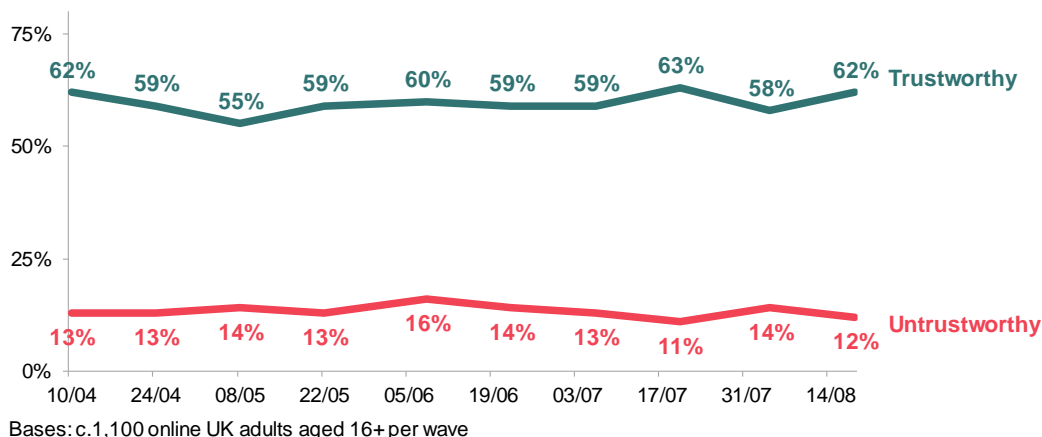


Base: 11,646 online UK adults aged 16+ interviewed from 10 April to 17 August 2020

Trend over time: trust in scientists generally

Trust in scientists generally has been consistently high throughout this series (Figure 3.2). There was a statistically significant drop from wave 1 to wave 3, although this did not reflect a longer-term trend. The movement across the last four waves also seems to suggest a hovering around the typical result of three in five.

Figure 3.2: Trend over time in trust towards scientists



Previous Ipsos MORI data from comparable surveys on trust in professions allow us to take a protracted view of these results. They show that trust in scientists generally was at a similar level among the UK public back in October 2018 (62%). It was higher in July 2019 (68%), although at the time, this unusually high result may have reflected the rise in public concern about climate change, as evidenced elsewhere in the survey data.

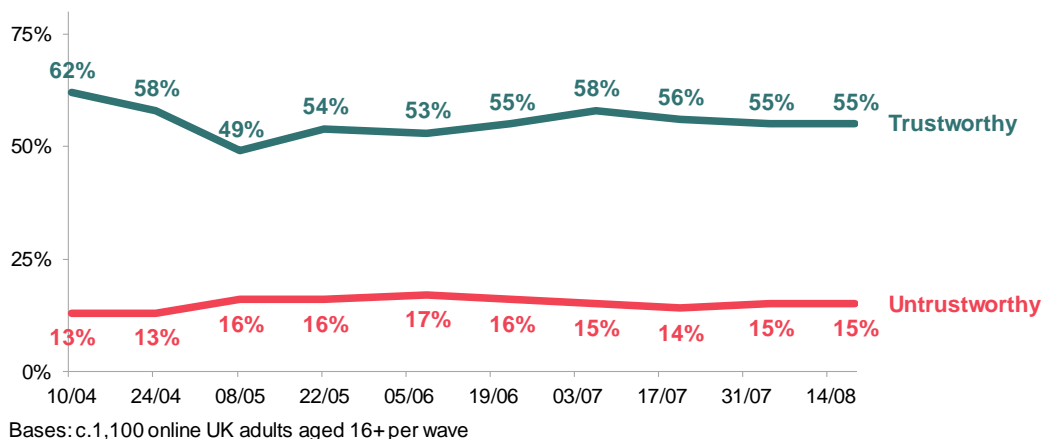
However, in both years, the proportion finding scientists to be untrustworthy was lower than the typical results recorded across this latest survey series (7% in October 2018 and 9% in July 2019). This suggests that **there has been a real increase within the last two years in the minority of people who consider scientists to be untrustworthy.**

Trend over time: trust in COVID-19 scientists

Trust in the scientists advising the government on COVID-19 has broadly followed a similar trajectory to trust in scientists generally. However, **after the initial wave, trust in COVID-19 scientists was typically lower than trust in scientist generally.**

They both started from the same point in wave 1. However, there was a more marked decline from wave 1 to wave 3, and the trustworthy score did not fully recover to its previous level until wave 7, two months later (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Trend over time in trust towards COVID-19 scientists



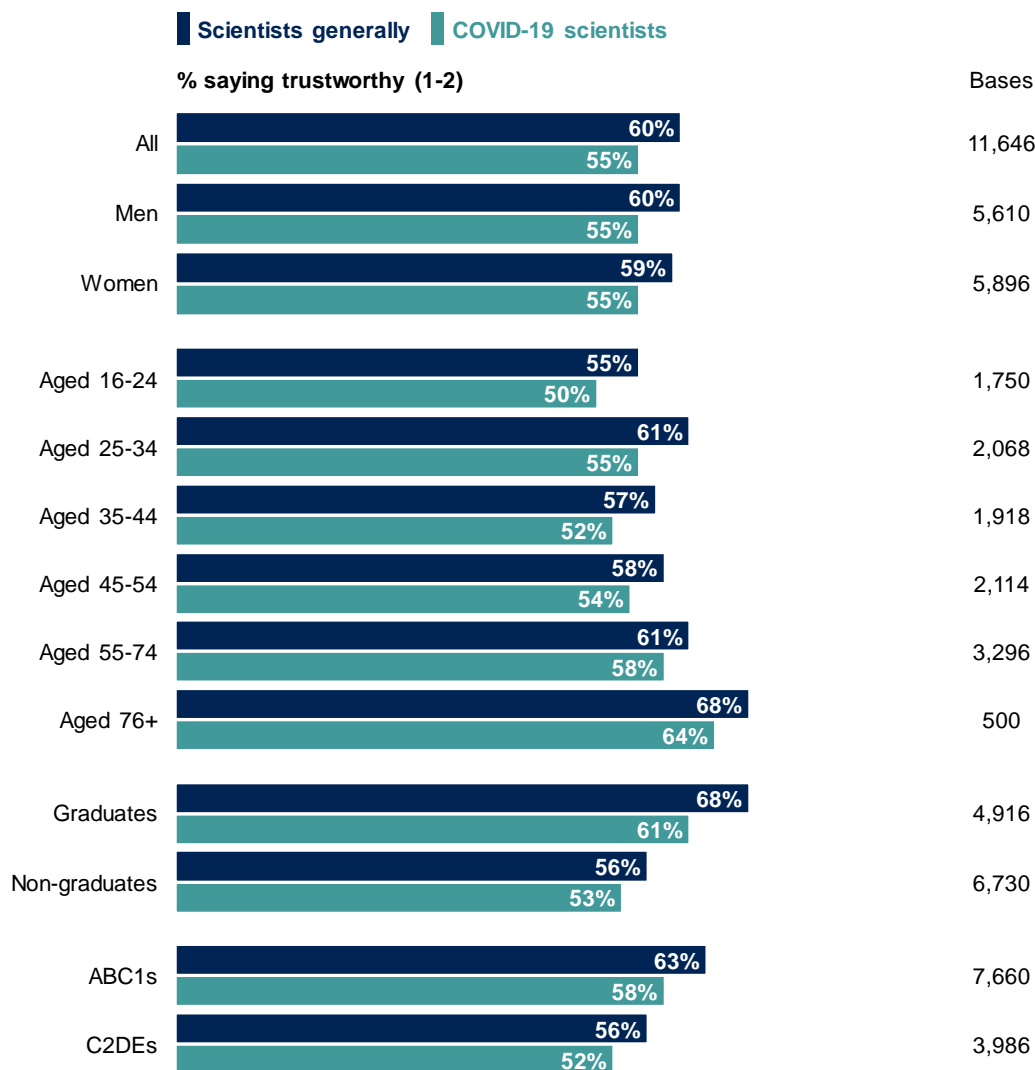
Regarding the dip at wave 3, it is possible that the resignation of a prominent member of the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) just before this wave made an impact.

On the other hand, it is equally noteworthy that this event made relatively little difference to public trust beyond June 2020, suggesting that **trust in COVID-19 scientists has been relatively resilient to media shocks** like this.

Demographic differences

Throughout the series, **people aged 55+, graduates and ABC1s tended to be more trusting of scientists** in both contexts (scientists generally and COVID-19 scientists), as Figure 3.4 shows.

Figure 3.4: Trust in scientists by demographic group



Bases as per bars (out of 11,646 online UK adults aged 16+ interviewed from 10 April to 17 August 2020)

Levels of trust were similar across men and women. Young men and women (in the 16-24 age group) were among the most likely to see scientists generally as untrustworthy (22% of men and 18% of women in this age group, vs. 13% of all adults). When it comes to COVID-19 scientists, this difference was more pronounced for young men (24% of men aged 16-24 felt they were untrustworthy, vs. 15% of all adults).

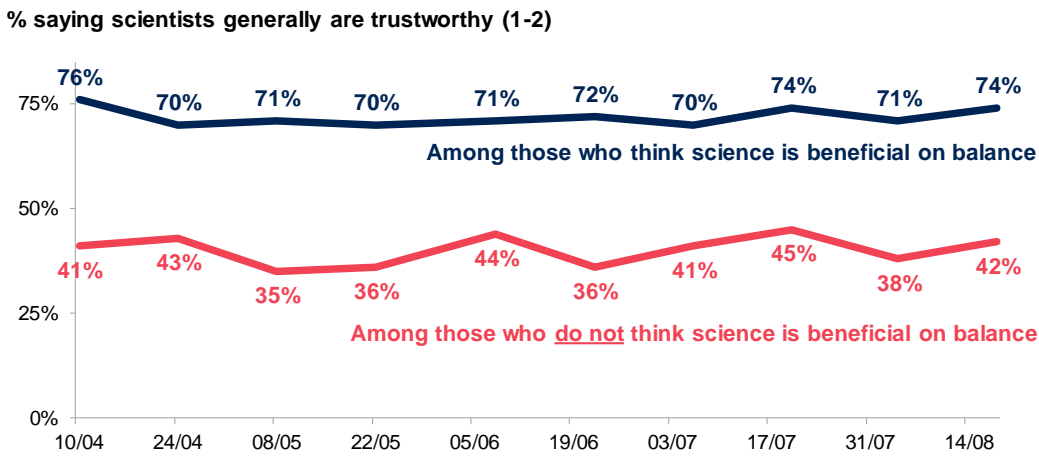
The differences between graduates and non-graduates break down more finely by educational attainment – those with no formal qualifications are among the least trusting of both scientists generally (51% consider them trustworthy) and COVID-19 scientists (49%).

3.2 The relationship between positivity and trust

As might be expected, those who had already had a positive disposition towards science, as explored in Chapter 2, were significantly more trusting of scientists generally and in the scientists advising on COVID-19. As Figures 3.5 and 3.6 illustrate, this gap between those with a positive outlook and others persisted across waves.

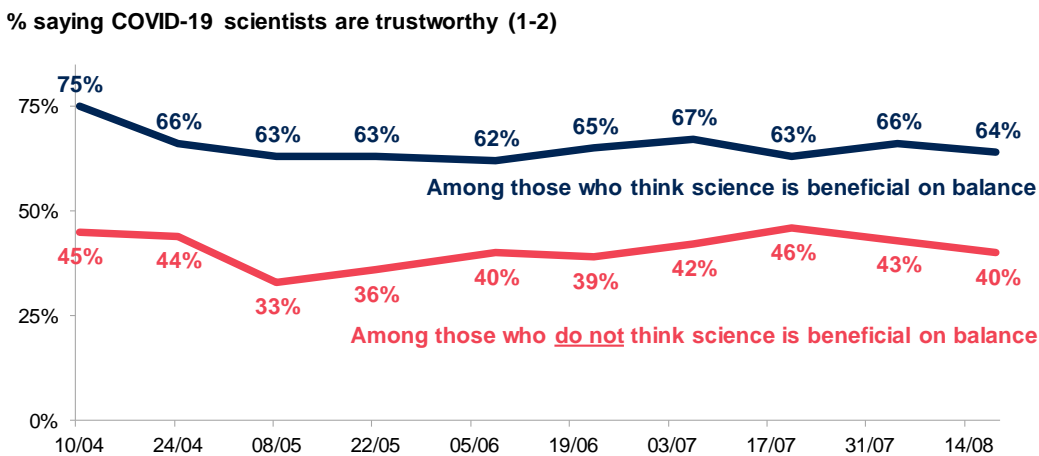
There is also an indication in these charts that the loss of trust seen in wave 3 was primarily among those were not inherently positive about science. This suggests two things – firstly, that **trust in scientists among those who are already positive about science is extremely resilient** and not easily moved by negative news coverage or events. Secondly, **trust is hard to build among those who do not have a positive disposition to science already**. It may move around in response to media coverage, but there are deeper reasons for distrust that keep these two groups apart.

Figure 3.5: Trust in scientists generally based on people’s existing dispositions towards science



Bases: c.750+ per wave who think science is beneficial on balance, c.250+ per wave who do not think science is beneficial on balance

Figure 3.6: Trust in COVID-19 scientists based on people’s existing dispositions towards science



Bases: c.750+ per wave who think science is beneficial on balance, c.250+ per wave who do not think science is beneficial on balance

4 Engagement with COVID-19 science

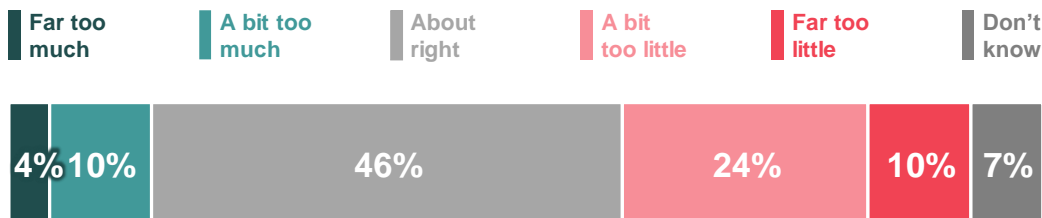
Key findings

- On balance, all demographic groups want more rather than less scientific information on COVID-19. This grew from a quarter saying there was too little information in mid-April to four in ten saying this in June 2020. It has since remained at this level.
- Throughout the pandemic, major news broadcasters and the government have consistently been people's most common sources of scientific information on COVID-19.
- Social media, word of mouth and WhatsApp groups have consistently been more common sources for this scientific information for young people aged 16-24 than for older age groups.
- Major broadcasters and the government have also been the most trusted sources for this scientific information. Trust in these information providers fell from an initial high point but has been relatively stable since early May, at around six in ten among users.

4.1 Do people want more scientific information on COVID-19?

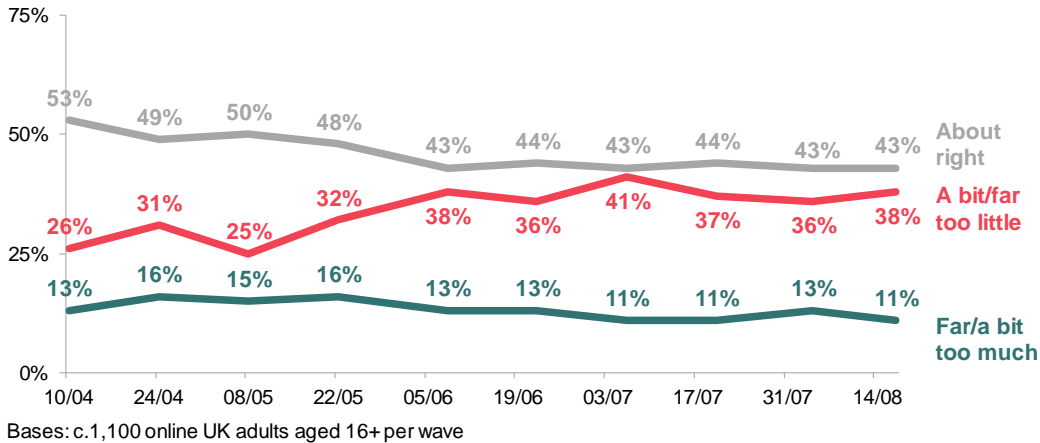
Across the survey series, a third (34%) felt they had seen or heard too little scientific information on COVID-19 over the previous fortnight. This is more than double as many as said that there was too much information (13%), as shown in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Over the last two weeks, would you say that the amount of scientific information that you have seen or heard in relation to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has been...?



Base: 11,646 online UK adults aged 16+ interviewed from 10 April to 17 August 2020

There were equally just under half saying that the amount of scientific information they saw or heard was about right. However, Figure 4.2 shows that **the desire for more information grew from mid-April (the first survey wave) to early June** and has remained very stable since then, at closer to four in ten.

Figure 4.2: Trend over time in views on the amount of scientific information

As with the trust indicators in the previous chapter, there was a dip in wave 3. The longer-term trend suggests we may have sampled a slightly more disengaged group in wave 3. It may also have been a temporary reaction to the news coverage at that specific point, rather than growing a sense of information fatigue.

Later in May 2020, aspects of the public narrative shifted more towards lifting lockdown restrictions and reopening schools.² Over the next waves, there were several stages of lockdown easing and media stories around vaccine development (as per the timeline in Chapter 1). This may all have continually refreshed the public's desire for scientific information. Moreover, it is worth noting that other prominent news events, such as the Black Lives Matter demonstrations which started in early June, have not displaced this desire for more information on COVID-19.

The research did not cover reasons for the peak result in early July (when 41% said there was too little scientific information). This was significantly higher than in the previous survey wave. However, it is noteworthy that this wave took place in close proximity to two stages of very substantial lockdown easing in England (on 25 June and 4 July – see the Chapter 1 timeline), publication of the travel corridors for England (on 26 June) and the first local lockdown in Leicester (on 30 June). Other Ipsos MORI polling also shows that public concern about COVID-19 rose from mid-May to late June, which may also help to explain the trend we see in this survey.³

Demographic differences

Across survey waves, **the proportion saying there has been too little scientific information has been relatively consistent across genders, age bands, social class and geographic location** – all these groups are more likely to want more information than less (Figure 4.3).

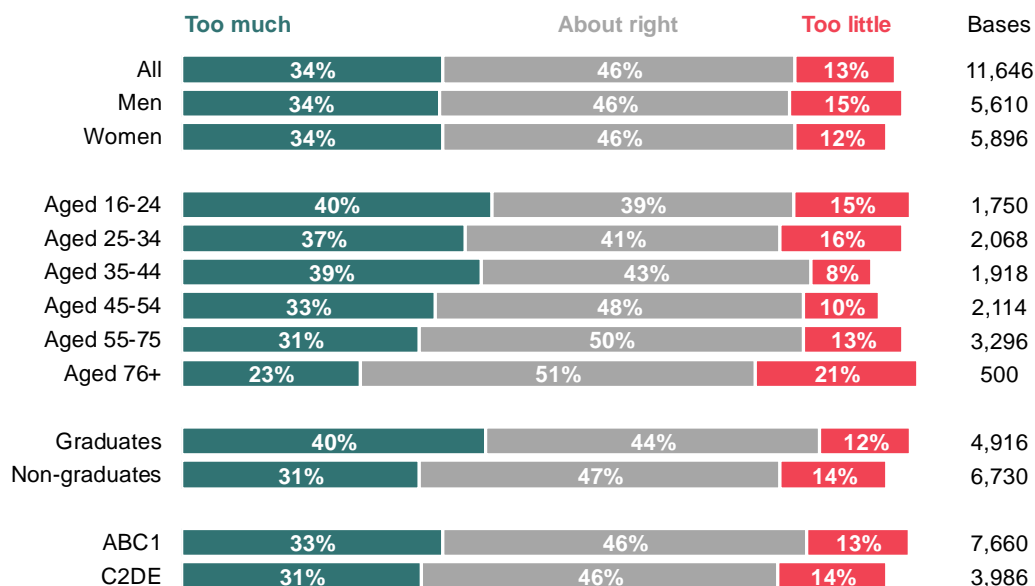
One exception is when considering the gender split among young people. Women aged 16-24 were more likely than men in this age group to say there has been too little information (43% vs. 36%). The genders are more aligned among older age groups.

² On 10 May, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced plans to reopen society, including reopening schools (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52609952>).

³ See <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-comfortable-are-britons-returning-normal-coronavirus-concern-rises-again>.

Graduates were also more likely than non-graduates to say there has been too little information (40% vs. 31%). However, even non-graduates were very unlikely to say there was too much information (14% said this).

Figure 4.3: Views on the amount of scientific information by demographic group



Bases as per bars (out of 11,646 online UK adults aged 16+ interviewed from 10 April to 17 August 2020)

The [BEIS Public Attitudes to Science 2019 study](#) offers useful context here. It finds that 47 per cent of the public feel they see or hear too little about science in general, but this is higher among those aged 16 to 34 (59%) and graduates (50%, vs. 33% of non-graduates).⁴ This indicates that scientific information on COVID-19 is perhaps of more universal interest across age groups than other science news, but it similarly splits people based on their education status.

Other subgroup differences

Although the narrative around schools reopening has dominated media coverage in some waves, we have not seen any significant differences at this question between parents (of children under 17) and non-parents – both groups are equally interested in seeing and hearing more scientific information.

There was also, broadly, a consistent desire for more scientific information regardless of where people get this information (discussed in the next section). One exception was the relatively small subsection of the public who recalled information from scientific journals or websites (9% in the final survey wave) – looking across all 10 waves, they were more likely to say there was too little scientific information (45% vs. 34% on average).

And it is not simply those who are more positively disposed to science who wanted more information. There was no statistically significant difference at this question between those who think of science is beneficial and those who do not see it as beneficial on balance (as discussed in Chapter 2) – both groups were equally likely to say there was too little information.

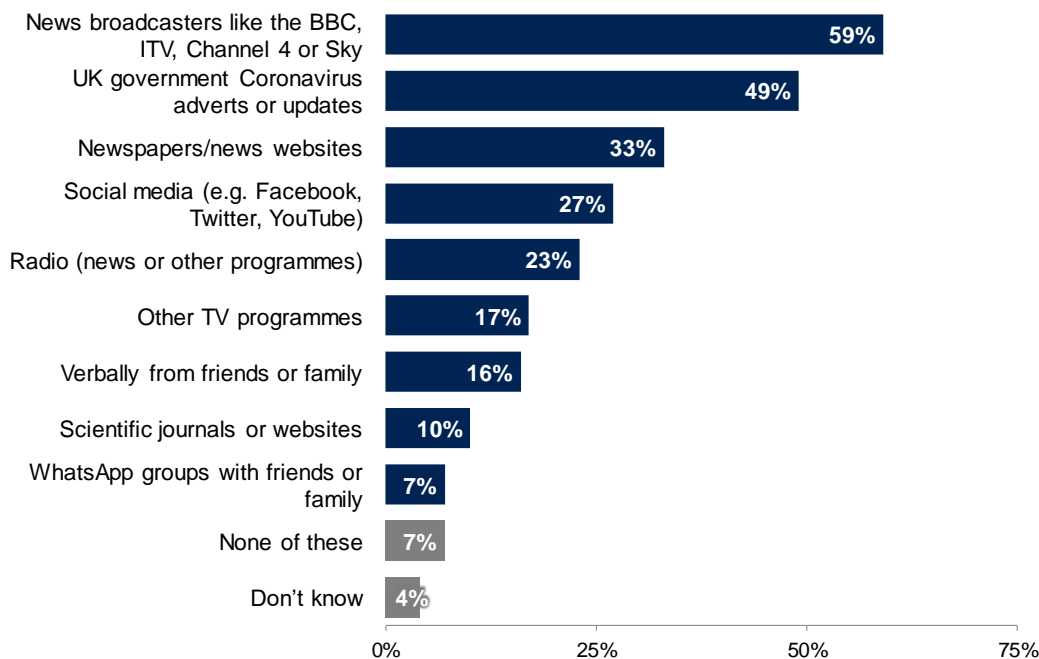
⁴ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-attitudes-to-science-2019>. This serves only as an indirect comparison rather than a direct comparison to our results, given differences in the data collection method and question wording.

4.2 Where have people seen and heard scientific information?

Across the survey series, nine in ten (89%) recalled seeing or hearing any scientific information about COVID-19 in the fortnight before taking part.

Major news broadcasters like the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky were a source of scientific information on COVID-19 for over half the public. The next most common sources, mentioned by around a third of the public, were the government (via adverts or briefings) and newspapers or news websites (outside the major broadcasters). The full list is in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.4: Over the last two weeks, through which of the following, if any, have you seen or heard any scientific information about the Coronavirus (COVID-19)?



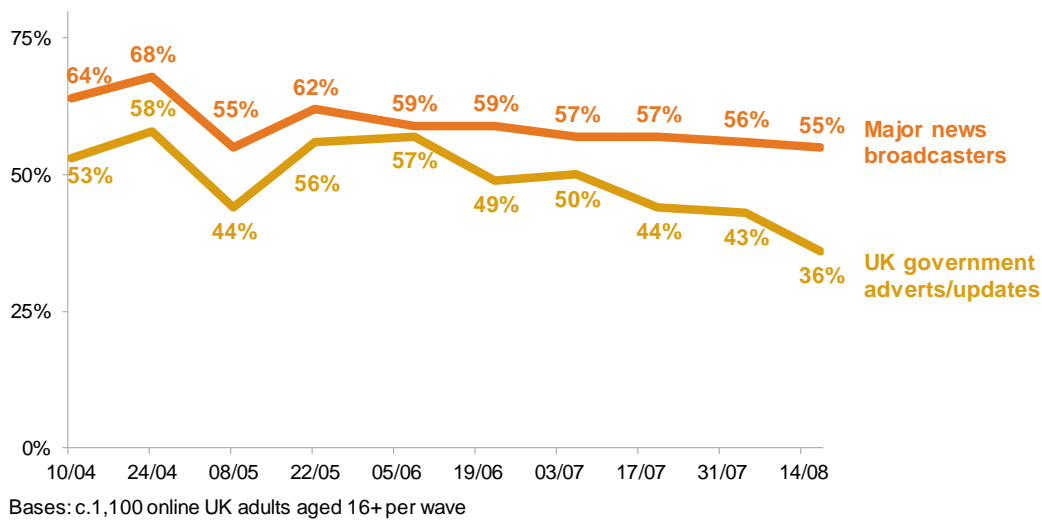
Base: 11,646 online UK adults aged 16+ interviewed from 10 April to 17 August 2020

The proportion seeing any scientific information has consistently been at nine out of ten or higher across all the survey waves, again suggesting **an ongoing strong appetite for this kind of information**. The top sources of information have also been highly consistent across all waves.

Nevertheless, there has been a decline in the proportions who recall getting this information from either major broadcasters or the government, from their respective high points in late April (Figure 4.4). This decline has been steeper for those recalling government information – likely to be linked to the fact that the government scaled back its daily COVID-19 briefings on 2 June (moving to weekdays only) and ended them altogether on 23 June.

As with the other survey questions, there was a temporary dip in results in early May. This was across all information sources, which could again reflect that we simply had a more disengaged sample for this one wave.

Figure 4.5: Trend over time in people recalling getting scientific information on COVID-19 from major broadcasters or the government



Demographic differences

Information sources have typically been highly aligned across genders. When looking at all 10 waves together for a higher sample size, there were clearer differences by age, social class and education.

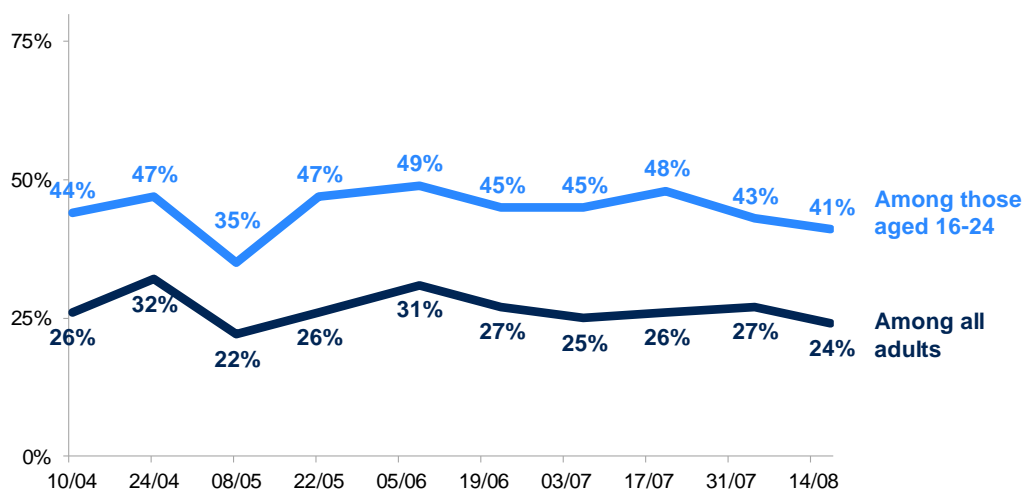
Across all waves, younger people aged 16-24 have been more likely than average to recall seeing or hearing scientific information:

- on social media (44%, vs. 27% overall)
- through word of mouth (25% vs. 16%)
- on WhatsApp (14% vs. 7%).

They were less likely to remember seeing or hearing any information through major broadcasters (45% vs. 59%) or the government (44% vs. 49%). Figure 4.5 charts the importance of social media in particular as an information source for this age group. This partly reflects that younger people are more likely to be social media and WhatsApp users, as previous Ipsos MORI polling has shown.⁵

⁵ See <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/almost-2-3-gb-adults-feel-concerned-about-their-online-privacy>.

Figure 4.6: Trend over time in people aged 16-24 recalling getting scientific information on COVID-19 from social media, compared to the average



Bases: c.1,100 online UK adults aged 16+ per wave; c.175 aged 16-24

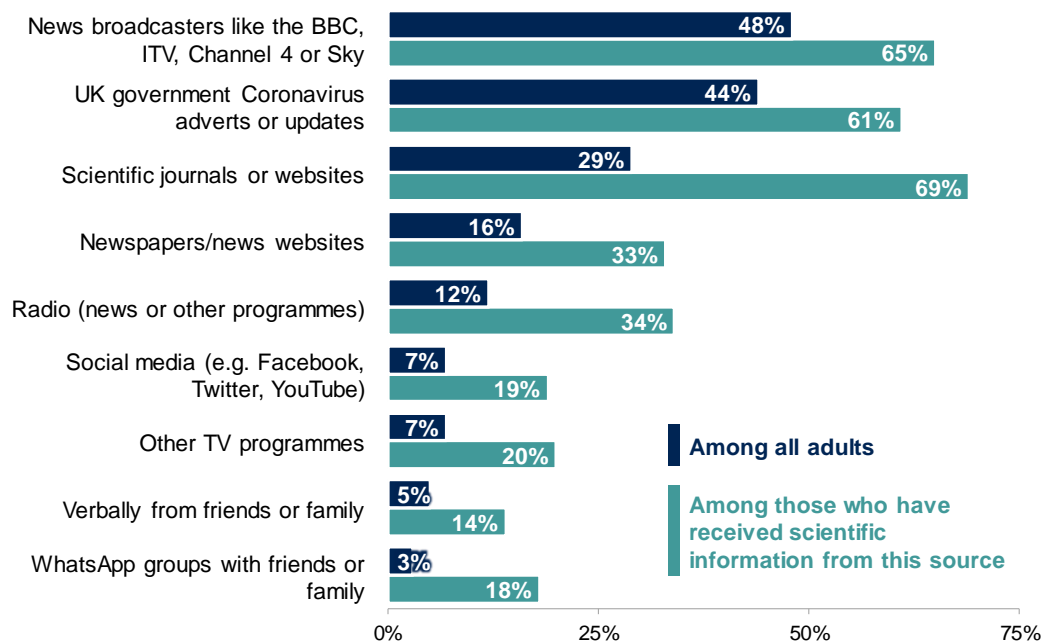
The middle classes (ABC1s) were more likely than those in the C2DE social classes to mention major broadcasters (62% vs. 55%), the government (51% vs. 46%), newspapers or news websites (37% vs. 28%) and radio (25% vs. 20%) as information sources. The same pattern of differences also exists for graduates compared to non-graduates.

There was also an important urban and rural split, with those living in rural areas more likely than urban dwellers to mention major broadcasters (65% vs. 58%).

4.3 Trust in information providers

Of the information providers we ask about in the survey, **the three that have consistently been the most trusted to provide reliable scientific information are major broadcasters, the government and scientific journals or science websites.** In each case, these were trusted by over half the people who had seen or heard from that respective source in the final survey wave in mid-August (the green bars in Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.7: Which two or three of the following, if any, do you most trust to provide reliable scientific information about the Coronavirus (COVID-19)?

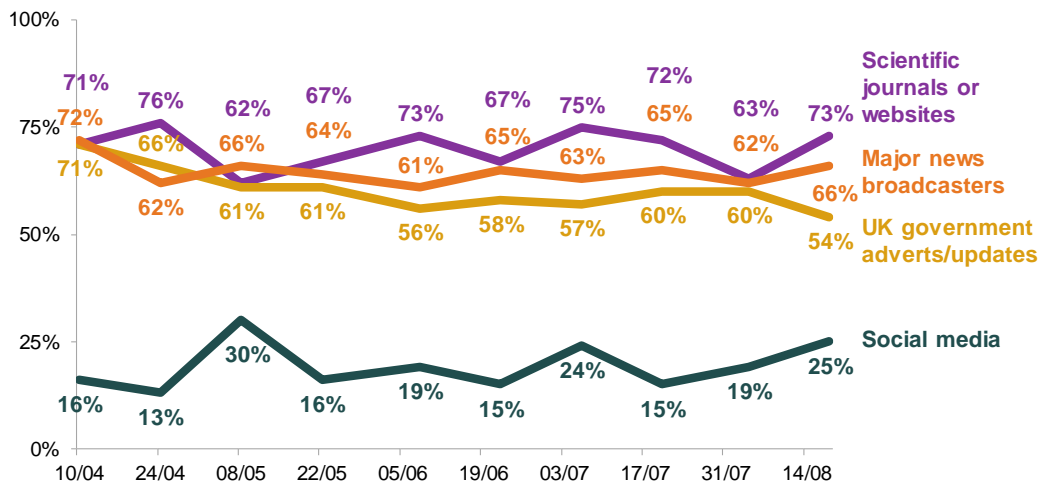


Base: 11,646 online UK adults aged 16+ interviewed from 10 April to 17 August 2020

In terms of the time series analysis, we focus on the people who recall receiving scientific information from each source (i.e. the green bars in Figure 4.6 above). This helps to standardise the findings, given that relatively few people recall being exposed to scientific findings from scientific journals or science websites, for example.

As Figure 4.7 shows, trust in major broadcasters has also been consistent at around six in ten to two-thirds, despite dropping from an initial high point in the first wave. By contrast, **trust in the government has shown a more protracted decline over the 10 waves**. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the changes for trust in the government between early June and mid-August (where this result hovered between 54% and 60%) are not statistically significant – the overall pattern is that trust in the government to provide reliable scientific information declined from mid-April to early June and has broadly remained around the same level since then.

Figure 4.8: Trend over time in trust in information providers to provide reliable scientific information on COVID-19, among those that recall seeing scientific information through each source in the past two weeks



Bases: c.600 seeing information through major broadcasters per wave, c.400 through government, c.300-400 through scientific journals or science websites, c.200-300 through social media

Trust in scientific journals and science websites has been relatively erratic over the course of the 10 waves, as has trust in social media. The reasons for this are unclear, and the sample sizes are smaller for both these sources, which naturally makes the data noisier. However, it does highlight that the scientific information spread through social media channels, while typically being treated with scepticism by the public, can garner trust from as many as three in ten of the people who see this information.

Of course, we do not know the provenance of the information that people are recalling in this question. It may be, for example, that the information they see on Twitter can be traced to a reputable source. However, it is also true that social media and WhatsApp are more associated with unverified information on COVID-19. Research by Kings College London and Ipsos MORI in June 2020 found that people getting their information on COVID-9 from these platforms were more likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and to have broken lockdown rules.⁶

Demographic differences

Trust in the different information providers was similar across men and women but differed across other demographic groups. For this analysis, we have combined all 10 waves again and focused on the overall results (i.e. the blue bars in Figure 4.6). This gives us a higher sample size and means that the results reflect the overall population (e.g. all young people, not just the young people who read newspapers).

Young people aged 16-24 were more likely than average to trust social media (18%, vs. 7% overall), word of mouth (10% vs. 5%) and WhatsApp (6% vs. 3%) to provide reliable scientific information on COVID-19. This is linked to the fact that young people tended to consume more of this information from these places, as well as greater social media and WhatsApp users in general. Within this age group, these sources were trusted more by men than by women – for example, 21 per cent of men aged 16-24 trusted social media, compared with 14 per cent of women.

The middle classes (ABC1s) were more likely than less affluent groups (C2DEs) to trust newspapers or other news websites (19% vs. 13%).

⁶ See <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/belief-among-britons-coronavirus-myths>.

Appendix

Fieldwork dates and sample sizes

Wave	Fieldwork dates	Sample size
1	10–14 April 2020	1,169
2	24–27 April 2020	1,160
3	8–11 May 2020	1,166
4	22–25 May 2020	1,151
5	5–8 June 2020	1,163
6	19–22 June 2020	1,170
7	3–6 July 2020	1,170
8	17–20 July 2020	1,179
9	31 July–4 August 2020	1,177
10	14–17 August 2020	1,141

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