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Women's Use and Abuse of the News Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mumsnet

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses news sources used by women to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic on the UK parenting website Mumsnet. By using a non-political online “third space” aimed at women, Mumsnetters are able to avoid the aggression women face when they attempt to discuss news in the wider public sphere of the Internet. This third space can also act as a “trusted friend,” allowing women to access important news via a third party. Mumsnetters’ discussion of the news around COVID-19 complicates previous studies’ findings that women prefer to discuss news relating to health, education and the local community rather than politics and international affairs. Mumsnetters discuss the COVID-19 pandemic as both a health story and a political story. They use mainly digital journalism sources, either directly from the mainstream news media or indirectly via social media such as Twitter, thus participating in a hybrid media system. However, some Mumsnet discussants demonstrate a hostility and distrust towards mainstream news sources, even suggesting collusion between the media and the UK government, which has implications for the clear dissemination of government messages around the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Trustworthiness; Mumsnet; news sources; women's news consumption; pandemic

Introduction

This article analyses news sources used by women on the UK online parenting forum Mumsnet in their discussion of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, February to June 2020. Our aim was to explore whether the use of a female-dominated third space such as Mumsnet impacts on women's interaction with, and interrogation of, news sources, and how the pandemic has impacted on women's consumption of news. While previous studies from across the world suggest that women consume less news than men, the women discussants in this research are eager and enthusiastic gatherers and interrogators of news sources. By using a non-political online “third space” (Graham et al. 2016) aimed at women, Mumsnetters are able to avoid the aggression women face when they attempt to discuss news in the wider public sphere of the

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Internet. This third space can also act as a “trusted friend,” allowing women to access important news via a third party. At the same time, Mumsnetters’ discussion of the news around the new threat of COVID-19 complicates previous studies’ findings that women prefer to discuss news relating to health, education and the local community rather than politics and international affairs – in other words, news they can use (Poindexter 2010). Mumsnetters discuss the COVID-19 pandemic as both a health story, with implications for their local community, and as a political story. They use mainly digital journalism sources, either directly from the mainstream news media or indirectly via social media such as Twitter, thus participating in a hybrid media system where old and new media coexist (Chadwick 2017). However, some Mumsnet discussants demonstrate a hostility and distrust towards mainstream news sources, even suggesting collusion between the media and the UK government, which has implications for the clear dissemination of government messages around the pandemic.

Context

Research into women’s experiences of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes the nature and impacts on women of culturally embedded gendered inequalities, and highlights specific instances of these in relation to issues such as physical and mental health, economic and social factors, as well as impacts on personal safety (Alon et al. 2020; Gausman and Langer 2020; Osland 2020; Power 2020; Wenham et al. 2020). Collectively, these impacts present a compelling need for access to high-quality news resources by women. However, previous studies on news consumption have consistently found that women consume less news than men, and that one of the key drivers of this gender gap is the dual burden of paid and household work – women simply do not have the time or energy to access news (Benesch 2012). Women’s “second shift” (Hochschild and Machung 1989) has only been exacerbated by the demands of the pandemic and lockdown (McLaren et al. 2020). Studies have also identified differences in the *type* of news that men and women consume, with men being more interested in politics and international affairs and women more interested in health, local community, education and entertainment news (Fortunati, Deuze and de Luca 2014). Poindexter et al. (2010) suggest that women prefer information related to their daily needs and problems – news they can use – rather than more abstract political content.

Women may even be news avoiders, perceiving news, particularly when focussed on politics, to be a “man’s game” (Toff and Palmer 2019). They are also more likely to say that they find news depressing and to try to conserve their own emotional energy by avoiding it (Poindexter 2010; Toff and Palmer 2019). However, the news-avoider often has a trusted news informant, usually a family member or friend, who they rely on to keep them up to date with important news (Toff and Palmer 2019).

Women are generally less likely to comment on news websites or on social media, partly because of the way in which they are treated when they venture into public debate (Selva and Andi 2020). However, recent studies have suggested that women around the world equal or exceed men in news consumption via social media (Fortunati, Deuze and de Luca 2014; Newman et al. 2017; Gottfried and Shearer 2017).

In particular, they are likely to access news information on sites not usually identified as offering news, such as those related to their caring responsibilities, where other women act as trusted news informants. Non-political third spaces, such as Mumsnet and Netmums in the UK and Baby Center in the US, offer women the opportunity to consume news, both through links to the original article and, more frequently, through summaries and the ensuing debates (Graham et al. 2016; Selva and Andi 2020; Pedersen 2020).

Women's comparatively limited consumption of news has wider implications in terms of political inclusion and representation. However, during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where women have been particularly hard hit by the economic consequences of the lockdown, increased demands for childcare and home education, and an increase in the incidence of domestic abuse, it is essential that they have access to news and information to help them survive and recover. Selva and Andi (2020) also note that news can serve as a source of companionship, solace, identity and even entertainment – again, valuable during lockdowns when women may have very limited real-life engagements with other people.

Kalogeropoulos et al. (2020) suggest that, after an initial surge in news consumption in the early stage of the pandemic in the UK, there was a significant increase in news avoidance, and gendered patterns once again emerged. Women were more likely to avoid the news than men and reported that they did so because of the effect it had on their mood and because they felt there was little they could do with the information gained. Investigating COVID-19 news consumption in the US, Reisdorf et al. (2021), found that women used fewer types of information source than men and checked the information less than men. In addition, a third of news avoiders in the UK, of both sexes, did not trust the news. Palmer et al. (2020) found that news avoiders saw the news media at best as irrelevant and, at worst, actively complicit with the political and economic establishment. A Reuters Institute study about the attitudes of people in the UK towards the media and government found that trust in government information declined from May 2020 due to perceived mismanagement and incompetence (Nielsen et al. 2020). Similarly, a study by Kyriakidou et al. (2020) found that government and media misinformation about the pandemic and lockdown was confusing the public, to the extent that some participants felt that the media and government were colluding to cover up issues such as a lack of face-masks.

This article builds on our previous work investigating the news information-seeking and content-checking strategies of discussion-thread participants on Mumsnet (Pedersen and Burnett 2018). An earlier study published in *Digital Journalism* presented the results of an analysis of Mumsnetters' discussion of news sources in the early months of the Trump presidency. The findings from this study suggest that groups of participants engaged in "citizen curation": the collaborative collection and somewhat subjective assessment and criticism of news information sources for the benefit of the group (Pedersen and Burnett 2018). Like the concept of "citizen journalism" (Luce, Jackson and Thorsen 2016), citizen curation highlights the role and significance of non-professional engagement with news sources. While citizen curation "incorporates elements of citizen journalism, such as an explicit (and proud) subjectivity" (Pedersen and Burnett 2018, 559), citizen journalism principally focuses on the reporting of news stories while citizen curation specifically addresses the thematic

organization and dissemination of extant news stories, identified from mainstream and social media.

Findings from this previous study show that participants demonstrate a clear awareness of the veracity and potential subjectivity of their sources, work collaboratively to verify news items, and are proud of their ability to “scoop” mainstream news media on occasion.

Mumsnet

The UK parenting website Mumsnet was chosen for this study. It is a popular parenting site predominantly used by women, not all of whom are mothers.¹ The site was established in 2000 and now attracts around 7 million unique visitors per month, who make 100 million page views.² Mumsnet is perceived as being influential with middle-class women, which has led to frequent webchats with politicians. The 2010 general election was referred to in the press as the “Mumsnet election” because of the number of politicians’ webchats on the site. Mumsnet is known for its campaigns on a variety of subjects related to the well-being of women and girls, and, in recent years, the growing discussion of feminism on some parts of the site (Pedersen 2020). The discussion forum on Mumsnet is made up of over 100 different topics, ranging from the more traditional pregnancy and childcare topics to feminism and international affairs. The majority of research relating to Mumsnet has focussed on its role in the construction of a neoliberal and consumerist motherhood (Gambles 2010, Jensen 2013, McRobbie 2013), although the site has been used as a source for studies on a variety of aspects of parenting and popular culture, from nits (Hine 2014) to zombies (Leaning 2015). Graham et al. (2016) note that, like its rival Netmums, Mumsnet offers an online “third space” in which people can meet and interact informally, and where political talk, organizing and action can occur. Pedersen (2020) notes that, in particular, the feminism boards of Mumsnet act as a space where offline campaigns are initiated and organized. Given the impact of the pandemic on women, and the lack of female voices in media coverage of COVID-19 (Kassova 2020), an investigation of women’s discussion of such news media coverage is both timely and important.

Methodology

In order to achieve the aims of this project, and cognizant of the highly phenomenological nature of the topic, a qualitative analytical approach was adopted and applied. First, a purposive sampling approach was employed to identify and select four threads on Mumsnet for analysis from a long-running series of threads entitled “Worried about Coronavirus” that started in February 2020. Purposive sampling was selected as an appropriate sampling strategy due to its reliance on the researchers’ domain knowledge and ability to focus on specific data sources and subject content (Etikan 2016).

Each Mumsnet discussion thread comprises up to 1000 posts, after which users have to start a new thread if they wish to continue the conversation. As of July 2020, there had been 39 threads in this series and therefore 39,000 individual posts. It should be noted that Mumsnet established a Coronavirus talk topic on its talk boards

at the end of February 2020, which by July 2020 had over 8000 separate discussions. The thread series chosen for this study was one of the fastest moving of these discussions and predated the establishment of the Coronavirus talk topic by several weeks. In comparison to other discussions, which were frequently about individual posters' problems, this thread series aimed at gathering and disseminating information and news about the pandemic. Posters demonstrated similar "citizen curation" habits identified in the earlier study investigating the gathering and assessment of news and information relating to Donald Trump's early weeks in office (Pedersen and Burnett 2018). All links to information and news sources were collected from the four threads, resulting in a dataset of 669 individual sources, ranging from foreign newspapers to the UK government's own website. Comments made by participants on the threads about these sources were also collected.

A hybrid inductive/deductive approach to thematic analysis was used to determine how the mainstream news media was used by Mumsnet users (Guest et al 2011). First, deductive thematic analysis was used in determining the types and sources of media content identified within the threads, and then an inductive approach was used to identify and analyse the subject focus of those threads (Mayring 2000).

This project is part of a long-term project investigating women's use of Mumsnet on the part of Pedersen, which has included a number of engagements with users, including webinars, discussion threads and blogs about her research.

Findings

February 2020 – Why Isn't the Media Reporting This?

The first thread selected (number three in the "Worried about Coronavirus" series) ran from 18 to 24 February 2020. The 1000 posts on the thread included references, usually containing links, to 232 news sources. The thread covered the period of early spring 2020 during which cases of COVID-19 were starting to emerge outside China, first in Iran and later Italy. Perhaps for this reason, many of the information sources shared by posters were from international sources. These ranged from *China Daily* and the Japanese broadcaster NHK to the *Jerusalem Post* and the Swiss magazine *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

Posters were ambitious and wide ranging in their search for reputable news stories, and it is clear that, on occasion, they resorted to online translation services to help them gather information. On other occasions, a poster demonstrated an ability to read languages such as French or Italian, sometimes because they were actually based in those countries. When searching for information about potential deaths from COVID-19 in Iran, one poster asked optimistically "Can anyone read Farsi?," linking to a site that had been described on Twitter as an Iranian news station that was reporting five deaths. Within a few minutes, another poster had responded correcting the number of deaths to two.

Several sites were used frequently during this thread. The first is worldometers (<https://www.worldometers.info>), a US-based digital-media company with the goal of making world statistics available to a global audience. This site's coronavirus statistics were used as a basic resource by Mumsnetter discussants, referenced 15 times in the

thread, with unquestioning acceptance of its data. On 19 February it was described approvingly by one poster as having “masses of figures and info.”³ Another frequently used source was BNO News, with stories either accessed directly or via Twitter. BNO News is an international news agency headquartered in the Netherlands, and was used as an information source 19 times in the thread, almost as many times as the various BBC sources, which included the BBC news website, radio stations and BBC sport, put together (22 times). Other news agencies referenced included Reuters (seven times), AFP news and the Italian news agency ANSA (both twice).

One of the reasons for the use of such global news sources is clearly that this was a global news story, with fast-breaking news focussed at this time primarily on China, Japan – because of the cruise ship *Diamond Princess* – Iran and then Italy. It therefore made sense for Mumsnet posters to go directly to sources such as the websites of Italian newspapers *Corriere della Sera* and *la Repubblica* or the Japanese broadcaster NHK. When the story focus shifted to Italy, these sources were also supplemented by personal testimony supplied by posters living in the north of Italy, who were the first in Europe to experience lockdown conditions.

Many of these information sources were sourced via Twitter. In addition, the accounts of individual Twitter users were sometimes referenced. This was particularly true when Mumsnetters attempted to access information about events in countries such as China, Syria, Turkey and Iran, where they suspected that official accounts might not be telling the whole truth. One poster commented approvingly “the citizen journalists in China are ... doing a brilliant job.” Another wrote on 21 February:

I speak a little Turkish (really only a little). According to Turkish netizens there has been a case in Rize, Turkey... but the doctor who diagnosed it has been fired and blamed of spreading fake news. They then said that the test was not valid and that the person had the flu. That is what Turkish people say on Twitter but I am not sure if it is true.

Stories such as this found solely on Twitter tended to be treated sceptically if they could not be supported by other evidence. As one poster pointed out, “there are a lot of fake things on Twitter and misinformation.” When one poster reported “Twitter says a child has died from the virus in Damaskus” another responded immediately “It’s not verifiable given the situation in the country.” However, the majority of Twitter accounts that were used for news information on Mumsnet were either those of mainstream media companies, such as BNO news, or individuals associated with such companies, such as Will Ripley of CNN or Helen Branswell, global health reporter at the US-based *Stat News*. Twitter was also used to access individual users’ photographs of empty supermarket shelves and panic buying in Italy.

Another reason for the use of so many international sources in this thread was the frustration posters expressed at the lack of coverage of the COVID-19 story in the British news media. There was a general agreement amongst posters that the British media were ignoring the story. “I also find the lack of mainstream news coverage odd. It’s being reported, but usually something like this would whip the media into a frenzy, and at the minute the reporting is pretty nonchalant” (21 February). The lack of reporting – or what posters considered to be the downplaying of a potential crisis – was particularly discussed as news started to be shared about the situation in Italy. “I think it’s bad reporting. This is a major event in Italy with entire towns on lockdown.

Why aren't they reporting it?" The BBC, in particular, was criticized by posters for not prioritizing the Italian situation in its news bulletins. "WTF is going on with the BBC though? Nothing about Italy whatsoever in the headlines on the website. South Korea gets a mention and the DP [*Diamond Princess*] passengers but you'd think nothing had happened in Italy. It's OK though because there's a headline about a *Friends* reuniting." Depoux et al. (2020) note that a striking particularity about this crisis is that social-media panic about COVID-19 travelled faster than the virus spread, meaning that social-media users, such as the posters on Mumsnet, were keenly aware of the oncoming pandemic – and critical of the mainstream news media's apparent ignoring of the situation.

Some posters went so far as to suggest that pressure had been put on British media outlets to downplay the situation. "I'm sure media will have been asked specifically to not sensationalize this." "It is bizarre how it's not being picked up by the media, unless they've been instructed to not cause alarm." Here, Mumsnet discussion confirms the findings of Kyriakidou et al. (2020) that government mismanagement and miscommunication of the pandemic led to suspicions that the UK media and government were colluding in cover-ups. However, it should be noted that any collusion might have benign motivations – in March 2020 CNN published news of a lock-down in Lombardy hours before the official communication by the Italian Prime Minister, which precipitated a mass exodus to other regions and disrupted a government initiative aimed at containing the epidemic (Cinelli et al. 2020).

Other posters, however, felt that the British media had, for the most part, reported the situation responsibly: "I think most of the UK media have been reporting it all very responsibly (bar some tabloid hysteria I have seen). For me the Guardian coverage has been best UK-wise; more informed than the likes of the BBC but calm and measured at the same time." It was also pointed out that other European news media were reacting similarly, with a poster from Sweden remarking that the Swedish press had prioritized "Eurovision qualifier drama" over the news from Italy. When the British press started to report the news about the lockdown in Italy, however, the Mumsnet thread had already moved on to discussing four British cases of COVID-19. Once again there were suggestions that the Italian news had been moved up the news agenda in order to divert attention from what was happening closer to home. "Italy story gets moved up to distract from the four new uk cases."

A few posters criticized the UK government rather than the media, particularly in relation to a lack of communication. "Little or no embassy engagement with overseas brits it seems. Accurate communication Boris FFS." One poster who wondered why there was no government statement on a Sunday was told: "You know how bad the UK are at communicating ANYTHING over the weekend." However, at this stage posters were generally more critical of the media than the government.

There was also a tendency to position Mumsnet posters as different to, and more knowledgeable than, the general British public: "The general public are just looking at mainstream news. Which has very little updates just now. Once it arrives here and is in mainstream news will be when people start worrying." There were several reports of family members who were relying only on the mainstream news media in the UK and had to be educated by more knowledgeable Mumsnet posters about the reality

of the situation. “My SIL [sister-in-law] has got a work trip to Milan on Tuesday. Why aren’t the UK press reporting much about coronavirus situation in Italy? She had no idea and thinks it’s fine to travel as it’s not being made a big deal.” Mumsnetters were thus able to play the role of “informed friend” for others, having gained up-to-date news via the site. One commented “I’m actually thinking - is it just me? (and most of you lot on this thread). No one else appears to be that concerned in real life or the media.”

March 2020 – Who Should Be Blamed?

The March thread selected was number 28 in the thread series and, unlike the February thread discussed above, was filled up in just one day – 16 March 2020. It contained 177 sources of news information and, in comparison to the first thread analysed, the vast majority of these were British. 16 March was the day on which Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivered a public statement asking those who had symptoms to quarantine themselves for 14 days and encouraging those who could work at home to do so. However, he did not go as far as imposing lockdown, relying instead on people voluntarily restricting their movements.

There was a clear change in the news sources used on this thread in comparison to the February thread. While much of the news discussed still came via Twitter, there was little reference to sources that were not British mainstream media. In addition, 70 pieces of information were taken from the individual Twitter feeds of leading British journalists, such as Sky news’ political correspondent or the deputy political editor of *The Times*. It was of course easier for Mumsnetters to use Twitter to access the thoughts of journalists from newspapers that use paywalls such as *The Times* and *The Telegraph*. To a certain extent, the dominance of *The Guardian* and BBC as news sources must be related to their free-to-access model. However, the focus on political journalists is noteworthy – while the February discussion had focussed on news relating to an unfolding global health emergency, for Mumsnet posters this had now become a political story, demonstrating that Mumsnet offers a place for women not just to discuss “news they can use,” for example about health crises, but also the type of political news usually supposed to be of more interest to men.

In comparison to the first thread, which was focussed on sourcing information on a fast-breaking health story that was at that time outside the UK, the thread on 16 March dealt with a country facing what Boris Johnson described as “the fast growth part of the upward curve.” The focus of the threads therefore changed from criticism of the UK news media and information-gathering in light of what was perceived to be wilful ignoring of the situation to criticism of the government response. The British media was now offering wall-to-wall coverage of the crisis, and, with the focus shifting from the international situation to the domestic one, Mumsnet posters drew their information almost exclusively from British mainstream sources.

As already mentioned above, Twitter, particularly the individual accounts of journalists, was an important source of information in this thread, and the majority of journalists referenced held a politics brief. To those already listed can be added the political editors of BuzzFeed UK, Sky News and the *Daily Mirror* and a political columnist at *The*

Times. Internet-only news sources such as Huffington Post and in particular BuzzFeed were referenced almost as much as the favourite sources of Sky News and the BBC, but there was also a reliance on broadsheet newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Guardian*, rather than tabloids. Out of the tabloids, only the *Daily Mirror* was referenced more than once. Right-wing newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* were only used once as information sources, but there were also comments about the *Daily Mail* website in particular being a site for uninformed and misleading discussion: “You only have to look at the daily mail comments to see all the “look numbers are going down” shit.” This is in direct contrast to our earlier analysis of Trump news threads on Mumsnet, where news and opinion was frequently sourced from right-wing newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, and indeed was celebrated when these sources were perceived to be critical of Trump (Pedersen and Burnett 2018), which demonstrates that Mumsnetters were happy to use more right-wing sources when they confirmed their own subjectivities, but not when they told a different story.

There was some use of other social media as information sources, but only to discuss local issues. For example, Facebook was mentioned in reference to rumours about local school closures and infections in the area. There was also an interesting suggestion by one poster that one of the reasons women were turning to Mumsnet to share fears about the pandemic was because they were finding their voices censored elsewhere on social media: “Has anyone else noticed how many women are getting shut down on social media? Literally on Facebook admins are shutting off commenting when women write something about being worried about Covid, whether others are keeping kids off school, but men are OK to make jokes about it?” This, and the comment about the *Daily Mail* website above, again feeds into the framing of Mumsnet as a safe space for more informed women to discuss their fears, and the rest of the general public (particularly the joking men) as being uninformed, if not misled, by mainstream and social media. This framing might even stretch to government officials, with one poster commenting after the government press conference: “I am very concerned that the CMO [Chief Medical Officer] and CSO [Chief Scientific Officer] aren’t keeping up with developments, though. I knew about the woman in Japan, and I have a full-time job which is nothing to do with coronavirus!” “Fuck me, a team advising cobra [shorthand for the Civil Contingencies Committee] have realized their modelling would lead to 250,000 deaths. Us lowly Mumsnetters had worked that out after 5 min!”

Criticism of the mainstream news media continued on this thread, this time for its perceived contribution to the crisis engulfing the nation and in particular the deficiencies of the National Health Service (NHS). For example, one poster commented, “Much has been done to undermine the NHS over previous decade one way or another aided and abetted by the MSM [Mainstream Media].” There was also criticism about media framing of particular stories. One frequently discussed story focussed on the death of a 21 year-old football coach in Spain. This was presented by the press as worrying confirmation that COVID-19 was not just killing older people. However, several Mumsnet posters complained that the media did not explain clearly enough that the man had underlying health issues since he suffered from leukaemia. “This is how newspapers

scaremonger people.” “It’s bad enough without people/press trying to make it even more frightening!” Nielsen et al. (2020) found in their surveys of news trustworthiness during the first six months of the pandemic that one in three respondents felt that the media had exaggerated the problem. Casero-Ripollés’ (2020) investigation of US news consumers over the same period suggests that a rise in news consumption was partnered with a slight improvement in the positive assessment of media coverage, associated with credibility. However, overall, increased consumption of news about Coronavirus did not translate into a significant increase of trust towards the media. Similarly, the Mumsnet threads analysed demonstrate an eager searching for news about COVID-19, the majority of which was sourced from mainstream news media sources. However, posters also demonstrate issues of trust towards these same media.

There was also a growing tide of criticism of the UK government on the threads, and in particular its poor communications with the public. Boris Johnson’s 16 March press conference was much criticized on Mumsnet for the confusing messages presented. One poster commented “1st rule of comms: Tell them what you’re going to tell them. Tell them what time you’re going to tell them. Then fucking tell them.” The fact that much of what Johnson had to say was framed as guidance rather than command was also criticized. Posters were particularly critical that more detailed guidance was not available to the general public immediately after the press conference: “I just get so frustrated. Why isn’t this information ready to go as soon as the press conference is finished?” Nonetheless, the thread contained 12 links to the government website, where Johnson’s speech was posted and further updates were later added in reference to social distancing and vulnerable people. In comparison, posters were more complimentary about the press conference given by Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon later in the day. “Here is Nicola Sturgeon giving her version of Boris’ speech in a much less bumbling and easier to understand way.”

Posters continued to be careful about their information and news sources, warning when information came from an unchecked or uncertain source. One warned “I can’t remember where I read it but I’m trying to look it up again. I don’t want to present it as fact because until I find the source again I don’t know how credible it is, so definitely take that with a pinch of salt.”

April 2020 – Irresponsible Reporting

The April thread selected for analysis was number 37 in the series and ran between 10 and 18 April 2020. The UK was now firmly in lockdown, however some voices in the media were beginning to ask when lockdown would be lifted – a question that irritated Mumsnetters. Boris Johnson left hospital on 12 April and moved to Chequers in order to convalesce after his brush with Coronavirus. There was a growing appreciation of the number of deaths in UK care homes. This thread made use of 155 different news and information sources.

Information sources continued to be dominated by the British mainstream news media, with *The Guardian* leading the field in terms of frequency of reference (18 links). Posters made particular use of *The Guardian’s* live news feed to gather up-to-the-minute news and information, particularly during the daily government news

briefings when not all posters had easy access to a television. Thus Mumsnet was used as an intermediary to deliver news updates and analysis quickly to users wherever they were and whatever they were doing. They also continued their use of Twitter to access news directly from individual journalists. However, there was also some use of overseas news sources, particularly when they offered criticism of the UK government's response to the pandemic. For example, a *New York Times* story of 16 April entitled "UK paid \$20 million for new coronavirus tests, they didn't work." Foreign sources were mainly used, however, to give insight into how other countries were dealing with lockdown and to offer comparative mortality statistics, such as the *santepubliquefrance.fr* website (France) and *El Pais* newspaper (Spain). The experience of other countries was generally contrasted favourably to the situation in the UK.

Key issues discussed in this thread included the emerging scandal of the number of deaths in care homes and the question of lifting lockdown. Posters were critical of both the government and the mainstream news media in their discussions of the rising number of deaths in care homes. "Glad people (media) now seem to be waking up to the care home issue. Fucking livid it's taken this long." The coverage of the issue by Channel 4 News was particularly singled out for praise – "Brilliant coverage on the care home issue on Channel four news tonight" – although the story was also described as "terrifying" by several posters. Even the *Daily Mail* was praised for covering the issue. On the evening of 13 April, a poster reported that the care homes story would be the front-page lead in the *Mail* the following day. Another poster commented "Good. Even if it is the mail." She was corrected, "It's even better that it's in the mail. Isn't it the most widely read (together with the sun) paper in the UK?" Thus posters demonstrated an appreciation of the realities of the news-media situation in the UK and the need for news to be covered by leading newspapers, whether or not these were papers they themselves read or even approved.

While Mumsnetters were using the media to gain news, information and opinion, there is evidence that the media were also using Mumsnet. The site is frequently used by newspapers to identify stories or to garner particular shades of opinion with which to personalize news stories (Pedersen 2020). This also happened in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. One poster on this series of threads identified herself as the manager of a care home, and her posts were particularly damning of the government's response to the crisis and the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) available to care-home workers. On 14 April she reported that she had been asked to speak about the situation on the Nicky Campbell show on Radio 5 Live. A listener immediately telephoned the station to offer a supply of PPE and tests for the staff. "I nearly cried."

The other main story discussed by posters on this thread was the possibility of an end to lockdown – or rather the way in which the press was now raising this question. Posters were infuriated by the frequency of questions on this subject during the daily government press conference. "Why do the press keep asking the same questions every day and pushing for information about coming out of lockdown when there are far more important questions we could be pushing for answers for."

However, there was also criticism of a government that appeared to have no concrete plans about how to get out of lockdown when the time came, with several posters suggesting that the government was guided by public pressure rather than taking

a leading role. There was continued criticism of government press conferences. A poster who stated that she had been trained as a journalist complained, “These pressers are supposed to reassure the public that the government know what they are doing and are in control of the situation. If you can ‘read’ a presser for what’s NOT being said and what’s being omitted, the reality is much much scarier.” Another poster described the press conferences as a “shambles.” On 18 April one poster discussed articles from BuzzFeed and *The Telegraph* which suggested that there was no exit plan from lockdown: “they only did the lockdown due to public pressure and are waiting for the public to get sick of it before they lift it and go back to the herd immunity plan.” Another poster commented, “Public pressure or media pressure?” The idea that the media, or at least sections of it, and the government were working together to push particular framings of the crisis was a frequent suggestion, with one poster stating “the BBC are basically the mouthpiece of the government at the moment. It is totally irresponsible reporting.”

Outwith the mainstream media, posters demonstrated a willingness to tackle more academic sources of information, such as preprints from medrxiv, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the National Centre for Biotechnology Information. Posters who stated that they had degrees in biology and biochemistry worked as “trusted friends” to help others understand the complexities of articles on neutralizing antibody responses and the plasma metabolomic and lipidomic alterations associated with COVID-19. Even with such sources of information, posters took a cautious approach, urging others to read not only the articles posted in the pre-print archives but also the comments from other scientists posted below.

May 2020 – Accusations of Collusion

The May thread selected ran from 6 to 30 May 2020. The longer length of the thread demonstrates a reduction in the perceived need to find information and news relating to the pandemic felt by Mumsnet posters. 105 information and news sources were posted on this thread. The quality press continued to provide the majority of sources of information for the list, from both the left- and right-leaning broadsheets. This was either directly from the newspaper websites themselves or via the Twitter feeds of particular journalists. BBC and Sky news were also used throughout the thread.

However, while Mumsnet posters continued to use mainstream news media as their main sources of information, they also continued to criticize these media. These criticisms centred around perceptions that the press was both colluding with the government and mis-reporting situations. For example, on 20 May many newspapers and broadcasters such as the BBC and Sky showed images of bank-holiday crowds on popular beaches in England such as Brighton and Bournemouth on the hottest day of the year so far. The crowds were described as “flouting social distancing rules” (*Evening Standard* 20 May 2020). Mumsnet posters were critical of the press framing:

The beach photos can be misleading. The papers want to blame ‘the public’ for any subsequent waves. They have been caught using pictures of Brighton last year, and using a misleading zoom which makes people look much closer together

It's so irresponsible. Stirring up division. And it could encourage those with the 'If you can't beat 'em, join them' attitude to head to the beach when they wouldn't had they not read the article.

Others criticized the way in which the impact of the pandemic in the UK had been reported, comparing the UK news media with the reporting of Italian and Spanish media, which of course this group of posters had accessed earlier in the spring. "I personally blame the lack of media not showing the devastation like they showed in Italy and Spain, some people need the shock instead of these lost lives being just another number." Another poster responded to this comment, "our MSM [mainstream media] are mainly a shitshow."

The government's communication also continued to be criticized, particularly the daily press conferences, which posters described as "pure gaslighting" and "a party political broadcast." Again, connections were made between the government and what was seen by some posters as a colluding media: "The only way they can get away with whitewashing is with the collusion of the media. The media are responsible for what and how they report. It is on them to challenge this. The question is, will they?"

Conclusions

This analysis of women's discussion of news in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic on the parenting website Mumsnet confirms the findings of previous studies relating to both women's consumption of news and the general public's attitude to news and the UK government's communications during the pandemic. It is clear that the users of the "Worried about Coronavirus" threads used Mumsnet as a place to source and share what they perceived to be up-to-date and accurate news information about a swiftly changing global situation. Participants on the threads acted as "citizen curators," sourcing and assessing the quality and accuracy of news information for the benefit of the whole group, and engaging in discussion about the implications of each new finding for their own homes and families. Such news came from the mainstream news media, albeit usually sourced via social media such as the Twitter feeds of journalists, but also less traditional sources such as academic journals, social-media posts and personal anecdotes. It is also clear that, for some users, the Mumsnet threads acted as a "trusted friend," meaning that women did not have to source news items themselves, but still had access to what were deemed to be important news stories via Mumsnet. For some, this was because they were physically unable to follow the news themselves, such as the women who were unable to watch Boris Johnson's broadcast to the nation.

Participants in the Mumsnet discussions also demonstrated levels of distrust in both the mainstream news media and the UK government in relation to the pandemic, confirming the findings of previous studies (Kyriakidou et al. 2020; Nielsen et al. 2020; Palmer et al. 2020). There was a constant stream of criticism of the media in the threads analysed – for not adequately covering the pandemic before COVID-19 arrived in the UK; for not covering stories deemed important by Mumsnetters, such as the spread of the virus into care homes; for misleading coverage of particular stories; and for attempts to move the news agenda on, for example by focussing on the issue of

when to lift the lockdown. At the same time, Mumsnetters were critical of the government's (mis)communication and perceived lack of a clear strategy. Again, these findings support those of Kyriakidou et al. (2020), particularly in relation to the repeatedly stated belief that the news media, or at least sections of it, were acting in collusion with the government.

However, this study's findings also suggest that – in a safe “third space” such as Mumsnet – women are able to demonstrate a keen interest in political and international news, thus complicating previous studies' findings that women are less interested in political news than men. This is supported by our previous research into Mumsnetters' discussion of UK and US politics. Many of the news sources used by discussants on these threads came from political journalists and editors, and Mumsnetters were happy to discuss the political elements of the COVID-19 story, particularly criticisms of the government, and to make comparisons with the international situation. While COVID-19 is of course a health story, and the pandemic also had impacts on local community and education news, both of which have been identified as being of interest to women news consumers, Mumsnet discussants used political news sources to discuss the COVID-19 story, criticized government policies and communication strategies, and compared the British media and government to those overseas, both within and outside Europe.

One interesting finding of the study is the interplay between mainstream news sources and social media. The data shows that, while Mumsnet users made use of both channels to find relevant information, their use of social media was largely as a conduit to information content in the mainstream media, and to provide localized anecdotal evidence of the impact of COVID-19. However, internet-based media sources (such as Huffington Post and BuzzFeed in particular) were used to supplement content from the (broadsheet format) mainstream media. Little use was made of more right-wing tabloid sources. However, in instances where new information was sparse, users did make use of these tabloids out of necessity.

In addition to making use of content from both mainstream and social-media sources, the data shows a willingness and aptitude on behalf of Mumsnet users to engage with a wider range of formal information sources, including academic journal articles and government statistics. Expert Mumsnet users were also able to act as a trusted friend and help others understand these materials.

Casero-Ripollés (2020) suggests that one impact of COVID-19 on the news system in the US has included the resurgence of the role of legacy media, including television, as a news source and a general reconnection with the news amongst the public. Our findings support his suggestion that, in critical situations of high complexity and risk to human life, citizens consider the search for information and the following of news as key activities. The UK government's decision to produce daily televised news briefings, in particular, has led to more engagement with both the television channels that broadcast these briefings and newspapers that run rolling news coverage. However, our findings demonstrate that this renewed engagement with mainstream news frequently comes *through* social media, whether that is Twitter or sites such as Mumsnet. While posters on Mumsnet do engage with mainstream news media, they do this via a hybrid media system where old and new media coexist (Chadwick 2017). We also

note, however, that more use of mainstream media does not necessarily mean an improvement in trust of these sources and that the mainstream news media is at risk of accusations of bias and collusion with the government.

Notes

1. 9% of Mumsnet users do not have children (Selva and Andi 2020). Men make up 2-5% of core users (Pedersen 2015).
2. Personal correspondence with Mumsnet 2 March 2020.
3. Note that all quotations from Mumsnet are given as originally written.

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