

Using online news comments to gather fast feedback on issues with public health messaging: The Guardian as a case study

Emma McClaughlin, Elena Nichele, Svenja Adolphs, Pepita Barnard, Jeremy Clos, Dawn Knight, Derek McAuley, Alexandra Lang

Effective **public health messaging** supports the implementation and uptake of **public health measures**, by persuading the audience to follow guidance, countering any resistance, and resolving any confusion surrounding complex guidance.

The Coronavirus Discourses project addresses key challenges that the coronavirus pandemic presents in relation to understanding the flow and impact of public health messages in public and private communications. It focuses on **messaging around geographical borders** and **messaging related to BAME populations**.

The Study

This study uses **corpus linguistics** to analyse opinions on messaging and public health measures from one resource—comments posted in response to articles from The Guardian online.

Corpus linguistics uses specialist software to identify common **patterns that occur in language**. This includes exploring words that commonly go together and the meaning that they help to create in a text.

The results reported here will inform our investigation of the **reception and evaluation** of public health messaging and the measures behind it.



C19COMMS

Coronavirus Discourses

The University of Nottingham in collaboration with Cardiff University is working in partnership with Public Health England, Public Health Wales, and NHS Education for Scotland to investigate linguistic evidence for effective public health messaging.

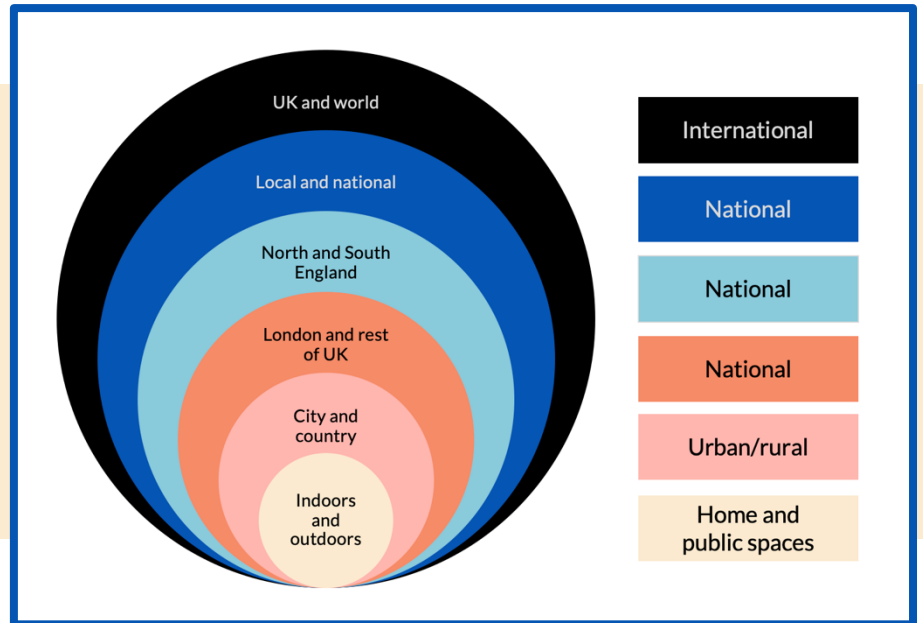


Arts and Humanities Research Council

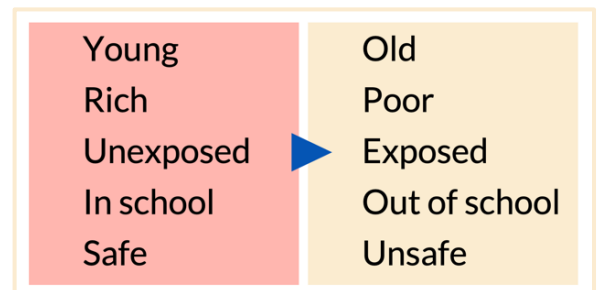
Coronavirus Borders

The Guardian's news coverage of the pandemic features **geographical borders** which mark the boundaries between physical or (geo)political spaces.

From March 2020 to March 2021, public health measures relating to COVID varied across the four UK nations and other regions according to geographical and political borders, which underlined socio-economic differences.



The Guardian's news coverage also features **social boundaries** and contrasts between social groups, which are more abstract. As with physical borders, public health messaging applied differently across these boundaries.



The Comments Data

We gathered 773,000 words from 10,393 top-level reader comments on 50 news articles published by The Guardian. Original articles contained references to sociopolitical borders in the headlines:

'national', 'local', 'global', 'regional', 'wales', 'welsh', 'scotland', 'scottish', 'england', 'english', 'britain', 'british', 'united kingdom', 'UK', 'community', 'communities', 'foreign'



Focus on Five Campaigns

- hands face space
- 1/2/3 metre rule
- the tier system
- stay at home
- rule of six

The search terms **metre***, **tier***, **stay at home**, **rule of six** and **hands face space** appeared 247 times in the comments



44% of the (247) comments contained criticism of public health measures and/or leadership delivering the messaging and associated guidance

Some commenters felt that messaging did not account for **nuance** in the underlying guidance or their exceptional personal **circumstances**

Criticism of the Messaging

- **not 'simple' to understand** due to exceptions to the rules, legal uncertainty, and changeable messaging
- **confusing** because there was incongruity in the way guidance applied across public (e.g., pubs and restaurants) and private domains (e.g., homes and gardens)
- **patronising and misleading** because the reality was more complex than the messaging implied
- **inflexible** because the guidance did not take their specific personal or exceptional circumstances into consideration
- **lacking evidence**, which meant some felt unsure about why they should follow rules without understanding the scientific motivations behind new guidance

None of the critical feedback we identified related solely to content of public health messaging. Criticism of the messaging was combined with criticism of associated guidance, and interpretation and delivery of the content, which are closely linked but less easily controlled by our partners. The **effectiveness** of the messaging was also found to be influenced by commenters' **political frustrations** with **leadership** due to perceived incompetence, as well as delayed and changeable responses.

These findings relate to commenters on articles published by The Guardian online only and are not representative of the general population.

The method can be applied to language data on any topic to reveal the opinions of other social groups, the results of which can be used to provide more personalised and effective public communications.

Overall, commenters:

- made international, national, and regional comparisons between the UK and other places, which they considered to be better models for public health (e.g., Scotland, Germany, and New Zealand)
- used criticism of public health measures and guidance as a means to politicise the pandemic; some ironically adapted campaign slogans to comment on leadership and its political decisions
- did not extend lenience to others, who did not follow guidance, despite otherwise finding the messaging confusing
- expressed concern over socio-economic inequalities (class, financial, and regional) resulting from, or exacerbated by, the implementation of COVID-19 measures
- offered little support for the measures or leadership but did offer recommendations for changes to measures

Over time, commenters:

1. were more critical of measures (by degree and volume)
2. were more critical of leadership
3. expressed more concern over non-compliance
4. made more national and international comparisons
5. were more likely to make recommendations to change measures

These results will inform a [wider investigation](#) into the [reception and evaluation](#) of public health messaging and related measures, and how these change over time following [interventions](#) such as the introduction of new messaging campaigns.

Credits

Banner imagery reproduced with permission from Shutterstock

Public health images reproduced from the UK Government, 2021. This information is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence> **OGL**

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to: Professor Svenja Adolphs (svenja.adolphs@nottingham.ac.uk)



University of
Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

The project Coronavirus Discourses: linguistic evidence for effective public health messaging is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), grant reference AH/V015125/1. It is led by the University of Nottingham in collaboration with Cardiff University, and working in partnership with Public Health England, Public Health Wales and NHS Education for Scotland.