

# **Irish audiences and news information from official sources during Covid-19**

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## **Abstract**

Audiences exist in highly personalised, high-choice media environments built on a hybrid of established traditional brands and informal digital networks. Officials trying to reach the public must navigate such spaces, but public reluctance to consume news coverage is a challenge for health and government officials when trying to communicate with and inform the public during a national health crisis like Covid-19. Based on a representative survey (N=2,031) from the 2021 *Reuters Digital News Report*, this article focuses on Irish audiences' information sources during the pandemic; in particular, how government and political sources were used and perceived. The article is a secondary analysis of the data set and focuses on three questions from the survey related to (i) sources of information about Covid-19, (ii) concern about sources of false or misleading information about Covid-19, and (iii) sources of local information about politics and local updates on Covid-19. The article finds that official sources were relatively effective in being heard, and that health agencies like the Health Service Executive and the National Public Health Emergency Team were more salient than politicians, suggesting the pandemic was perhaps apolitical in the eyes of the public, which is often a key strategy for effective crisis communication. Politicians and government actors also succeeded in not being perceived as the main source of concern in terms of false or misleading information, as audiences were more worried about activists. The article also reiterates the importance of health officials reaching out beyond traditional news distribution channels to engage groups who may not access news through traditional channels.

*Keywords:* Government, political communications, media, Covid-19, Ireland

## Introduction

On 22 December 2021 Ireland's Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Tony Holohan was concluding an interview on RTÉ Radio 1 explaining the latest public health guidelines regarding reduced social contacts and the booster vaccine roll-out. The more transmissible Omicron cases were rising and this variant had become the dominant strain of the Covid-19 virus. In closing the interview, the programme presenter thanked the CMO for his work over the previous year, and Holohan responded: 'And thank you for your help in getting our messages out.' That symbiosis – between official actors and the media – is at the core of public health messaging during a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, where officials and decision-makers rely on media access to disseminate information to the public. Yet inevitably, the success of this model hinges on public consumption of these media outputs; this article explores the extent to which Irish audiences accessed official sources of news and information about Covid-19. It does this by analysing data from the 2021 *Reuters Digital News Report* for Ireland, which asked more than 2,000 people about news consumption habits. This article focuses on three specific questions about sources of Covid-19 information at both the national and local level, and about misinformation, which can help our understanding of the state-level communication challenges for stakeholders seeking to influence public behaviour during a health crisis.

In their discussion of pandemic responses, based on a synthesis of existing literature, Hyland-Wood et al. (2021, p. 1) argue that effective government communication is a 'two-way process that involves clear messages, delivered via appropriate platforms, tailored for diverse audiences and shared by trusted people'. They make ten recommendations for the development and delivery of public health crisis communications, such as communicating with empathy, recognising uncertainty and proactively combating misinformation. One recommendation – striving for maximum credibility – is particularly relevant to the data discussed in this article: it includes the advice to leverage 'trusted, authoritative intermediaries such as medical and public-health experts to communicate key messages ... while political leaders typically announce crucial policy decisions, citizens have responded more favourably to policy proposals advanced by public health officials' (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021, p. 2). Ultimately, ensuring the messaging is seen as apolitical is key, according to the authors. Another of their recommendations is to account for varying

levels of health literacy and numeracy; this need for diverse and accessible information in appropriate forms and languages is highlighted in the Irish context by O'Brien et al. (2021), who also note the importance of officials using diverse channels to disseminate critical information. Further research has evaluated government messaging and responses during the pandemic in other regions; for example, using the five-stage crisis and emergency risk communication model in the United Arab Emirates (Radwan & Mousa, 2020), drawing on systems theory to explore and identify weaknesses in the initial US response to the virus (Kim & Kreps, 2020), and highlighting the Italian government's role in countering Covid-19 disinformation (Lovari, 2020). Elsewhere, there was a 'spread calm, not fear' approach from officials evident across online and offline platforms in Ghana (Antwi-Boasiako & Nyarkoh, 2021), while focus groups in Vietnam found that sufficient, effective messaging from state agencies ensured that the public felt informed and experienced low levels of stress and anxiety (Tam et al., 2021). The need for effective government communication is an important foundation underpinning this article and there is an assumption made throughout that it is beneficial for audiences to hear reliable information from official sources. However, the analysis does not seek to evaluate the Irish government's media strategies; instead, the focus remains on audience consumption patterns and understanding how material from official sources was accessed and perceived.

This article begins with an overview of existing research into Covid-19, media coverage and news consumption in Ireland. The study's methodology is then outlined before the findings are presented, structured around the three survey questions regarding (i) sources of information about Covid-19, (ii) concern around false or misleading information, and (iii) accessing news about local politics/government and local information about Covid-19.

## **Literature review**

### ***Coverage of Covid-19 in Ireland***

In Ireland the formative political response to Covid-19 was overseen by a caretaker government following the February 2020 general election, as a new administration was only formed in late June 2020. The pandemic's initial months saw a sense of national unity and solidarity as experienced elsewhere (Lilleker et al., 2021), with mass compliance with Irish public health measures and relatively high levels

of support for political leaders, who were perceived to be informed by – rather than at odds with – health and scientific advice (Wheatley, 2021). This emphasis on science seemingly translated into much of the media coverage. Based on Irish news reports and social media analysis from the first five months of the pandemic (January–May 2020), one study found that ‘science was privileged above potential alternative influences on policy decisions, such as political interests or public opinion’ (O’Connor et al., 2021, p. 14). Similarly, Sharp et al. (2021) analysed the accuracy of media coverage about ‘evidence output’ reports which the Covid-19 Evidence Synthesis Team within the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) produced in response to queries from policymakers and clinicians assisting the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The authors concluded that ‘coverage largely did not distort or misrepresent the results’, but noted:

Coverage appeared to focus more on ‘human-interest’ stories as opposed to more technical reports (e.g. focusing on viral load, antibodies, testing, etc.). Selective reporting and the variability in the use of quotes from governmental and public health stakeholders changed and contextualised results in different manners than perhaps originally intended in the press release. (Sharp et al., 2021, p. 246)

Such editorial modifications are unsurprising for anyone familiar with newsroom practices and news values (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017). Moreover, the use of ‘exemplars’ or human-interest anecdotes is especially common in health-related stories (Hinnant et al., 2013; Wheatley, 2020) and does not necessarily equate to poor-quality news content. Ultimately, despite some reservations from the HIQA researchers, they found that the media coverage remained accurate, indicating that the pandemic may not have been a particularly polarised or misleadingly sensationalised force in its initial stage. Furthermore, more generally we know that Ireland is not a particularly polarised country in its media/political dynamics (Fletcher et al., 2020). It is in this context that the term ‘politicisation’ of the pandemic is useful, which for the purpose of this article is considered as the extent to which polarising, partisan or ideologically driven division was a defining feature of decision-making during the pandemic and the associated media coverage. Covid-19 decision-making was, of course, inherently political, in that it originated from

state actors and institutions, albeit informed by scientific evidence, but this article considers whether it became depoliticised or apolitical among the public in terms of becoming non-partisan and not associated with, or ‘owned’ by, individual parties or ideologies, as recommended in Hyland-Wood et al. (2021).

### ***Social media & Covid-19 misinformation in Ireland***

The 2021 *Digital News Report* found that 45 per cent of Irish respondents cited online sources (including social media, news websites, blogs, etc.) as their *main* news source (Murrell et al., 2021, p. 28). Aside from news content, online updates about Covid-19 also came from sources like the World Health Organisation and Irish organisations such as the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health, who developed their social media presence to provide ‘clear and direct information to the public’ about the virus (O’Brien et al., 2020, p. 452). Disseminating basic public health guidelines was one element, but official institutions, health professionals and scientists around the world also had to address misinformation circulating about the virus (Ferrara et al., 2020). Based on information from fact checkers in 138 countries, internet-based sources accounted for 90.5 per cent of all misinformation documented (Al-Zaman, 2021). According to this study, the most active time for misinformation circulating in Ireland was between March and September 2020, the first six months of the pandemic in Ireland, and social media was the main source of such content. Concern around perceived false or misleading information circulating in digital social media spaces resonated with audiences: only 19 per cent of Irish respondents in the 2021 *Digital News Report* said they can trust most news on social media most of the time; this contrasts with 59 per cent of people who agreed that they ‘can trust most news most of the time’ (Murrell et al., 2021, p. 36). Confidence in public service broadcaster RTÉ was high, with 78 per cent saying they trusted it, while television news consumption enjoyed a Covid bump in 2021 (Murrell et al., 2021, p. 43). When asked about what kind of false or misleading information they had seen over the previous week, Covid-19 was the most salient, with 49 per cent saying they encountered such content about the pandemic (Murrell et al., 2021, p. 78).

In their recommendations for effective government communication during Covid-19, Hyland-Wood et al. (2021, p. 4) point out that fostering trust in science is essential and is ‘particularly important in situations where attacks on scientific expertise by segments of the

media and political actors are commonplace and contribute to science denial and evidence-based policy'. Polarisation (understood here as a trend that divides those with contrasting values or beliefs and is often accompanied by hostility towards, and mobilisation against, the perceived 'other side') and misinformation can often be intertwined with the politicisation of health issues (Lovari, 2020). Research by Roozenbeck et al. (2020) found that those in Ireland who identify as more right-wing or politically conservative are more susceptible to Covid-19 misinformation, as well as those from minority groups, while exposure to social media content is associated with higher susceptibility to misinformation. Considering Covid-19 vaccine resistance/hesitancy in Ireland and the UK, Murphy et al. (2021) found that vaccine-resistant respondents consumed significantly less information on Covid-19 from traditional sources (newspapers, television, radio and government agencies), and significantly more information from social media. Patterns of consumption mirrored the authors' findings on trust: those resistant to Covid-19 vaccines showed lower levels of trust in information that was disseminated via newspapers, television broadcasts, radio broadcasts, their doctor, other health care professionals and government agencies (Murphy et al., 2021). If an individual has been exposed to misinformation in health crises, van der Meer & Jin (2020) highlight the importance of 'corrective information' coming promptly to counteract the inaccuracy. Information from official sources and news media – which elaborates and explains (rather than briefly rebutting the original content) – was most impactful in correcting knowledge; these groups of media and officials were also seen as more influential sources than individuals' social peers in counteracting inaccurate material.

### ***Consuming and avoiding Covid news***

Irish audiences are relatively engaged with the news: 86 per cent say they access news at least once a day; 70 per cent of respondents say they are extremely or very interested in news, compared with the EU average of 60 per cent and 51 per cent in the UK (Murrell et al., 2021). However, in the latest 2022 edition of the *Digital News Report*, 41 per cent of Irish respondents said they often or sometimes avoid the news, up from 29 per cent in 2017, with the main reason cited as 'too much coverage of subjects like politics/coronavirus' (Murrell et al., 2022, p. 29). According to Skovsgaard & Andersen (2020), news avoidance can either be (i) unintentional, through changing habits and choosing easily accessible alternatives such as entertainment or sport, or (ii)

intentional, whereby people consciously try to avoid news coverage. They identify three reasons why people avoid the news: scepticism and issues around trust of news outlets; a sense of information overload; and the negativity bias of news, which can be associated with a sense of helplessness and impact on mood. Vandenplas et al. (2021) draw on the term ‘coronablocking’ among those avoiding pandemic-related news content, while another study highlighted the seemingly contradictory but undeniable trend of Covid-19 leading to an increase in news consumption and also an increase in news avoidance (de Bruin et al., 2021). This leads, the authors of the latter study argue, to a ‘dilemma’ for citizens in ‘striking a balance between consuming enough news to be well-informed while simultaneously not consuming too much to avoid detrimental effects on mental well-being’ (de Bruin et al., 2021, p. 1299). Feelings of relevance may also be an important consideration: for example Mäkelä et al. (2020) found that people engage with certain types of news content if they feel it serves a function for them (such as local traffic updates). Furthermore, ‘proximity’ is a key news value, especially for local reporters (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020); therefore, local angles on the national (or, in this case, global) story of Covid-19 may connect with readers, thus highlighting the value of potential local newsmakers and source actors.

Overall, we can see how officials seeking to communicate with the public must navigate complex media spaces, especially online, where they also work to correct misleading information. Concurrently, from the audience’s perspective, there may be a reluctance to consume news coverage – where the up-to-date and accurate messages are being disseminated – which poses a challenge for health and government officials trying to inform the public during a national health crisis. This leads to the article’s main purpose, which is to explore the extent to which Irish audiences accessed and trusted official sources and voices when engaging with news and information about Covid-19.

## **Methodology and survey context**

The survey is based on a secondary data analysis of *Digital News Report Ireland 2021*, with the main summary of results presented in the annual report (Murrell et al., 2021). The survey was a representative sample (N=2,031) collected in late January/early February 2021 by YouGov, using an online questionnaire. Nationally represented quotas for age, gender, region and education were in place, and the data were weighted to targets based on census/industry accepted data (Murrell et

al., 2021, p. 7). The online nature of this survey means older people and those who are less affluent may be somewhat underrepresented (the survey is not weighted for these particular characteristics), and the survey is also based on recall, which brings some limitations. Nevertheless, it provides valuable insight and is part of the standard survey template used in forty-six countries in 2021; this was the sixth year in which Ireland was included. This article focuses on analysing the responses to three particular questions in the survey, as outlined in Table 1.

These questions all have responses that include government, politicians or local politics, thus providing an empirical foundation to explore how official sources were used and perceived during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following analysis draws on these results through descriptive statistics: while initial findings were included in the 2021 *Digital News Report*, this article facilitates a deeper analysis, drawing on cross-tabulations between demographics, consumption of information from government and official stakeholders at both national and local level, and attitudes towards misleading information sources.

### ***Survey context***

The data were collected in late January/early February 2021, when Ireland was grappling with the post-Christmas 2020 wave of Covid-19, which saw the highest number of daily cases and deaths up to that point. The new Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael/Green Party coalition had taken office in June 2020 and navigated the second wave of Covid in early September 2020, which resulted in a tightening of restrictions in October/November, before many were eased in December 2020. As case numbers rose, heavy restrictions were reintroduced in the days after Christmas and remained in place until April 2021. At this point, people were limited to moving 5km from home (unless for essential travel), and pubs, restaurants, cinemas, theatres, etc. were closed. These restrictions were not a new concept at this point as the public had been dealing with the virus for almost a year. Vaccinations were starting to be rolled out but mass clinics did not open until late February/early March 2021.

### **Findings and discussion**

The following section is divided into subsections, each addressing one of the three questions outlined above. For each of the three



**Table 1: The three questions and their potential responses from the 2021 Digital News Report**

<i>Question</i>	<i>Options</i>
<p>Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news or information about coronavirus (Covid-19)? Please select all that apply. This could be by going direct to websites or apps, using social media, search engines, video sites or messaging apps, or in person.</p>	<p>News organisations                      The national government                      Individual politicians                      Global health organisations (e.g. World Health Organisation)                      National health organisations (e.g. HSE)                      Scientists, doctors or other health experts (e.g. NPHEIT)                      Ordinary people who I know personally                      Ordinary people who I do not know personally                      None of these</p>
<p>Thinking specifically about coronavirus (Covid-19) and its effects, which of the following sources, if any, are you most concerned about online? Please select one. False or misleading information from...</p>	<p>The government, politicians or political parties in my country                      Foreign governments, politicians or political parties                      Ordinary people                      Activists or activist groups                      Celebrities (e.g. actors, musicians, sports stars)                      Journalists or news organisations                      I am not concerned about any of these                      Don't know</p>
<p>Thinking about local news and information, which of the following topics have you accessed in the last week? Please select all that apply.</p>	<p>Local politics/local government                      Local information about coronavirus (Covid-19) (or other health news)                      Local crime news                      Local sport news and results                      Local weather                      Local traffic, roads and transport information (e.g. bus/train)</p>

**Table 1: The three questions and their potential responses from the 2021 Digital News Report (Contd.)**

<i>Question</i>	<i>Options</i>
	Local announcements (e.g. obituaries, births, marriages)
	Local jobs
	Things to do (e.g. entertainment, culture, walks, events)
	Local services (e.g. plumbers, electricians, decorators)
	Information about shops and restaurants in my area
	Local economy news
	Local schools and education, child care
	Information about housing and properties
	Other local information (e.g. history, religion, environment)
	None of the above

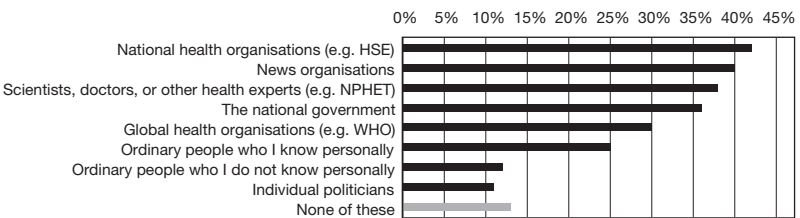
subsections, the results are presented and then followed by a short discussion, before moving on to the next question. It begins with the findings into sources of information about Covid-19, before moving on to concerns about sources of false or misleading information, and concludes with news about local politics/government and local information about Covid-19.

**Question 1: Sources of information about Covid-19**

Figure 1 shows that national health organisations were cited as the most common source of news or information about Covid-19, with 42 per cent of respondents saying they had used them. Of course, these groups’ inputs may be included through various other channels (such as material from the HSE being used by news organisations or appearing on social networks) but, regardless, they remained the source with the greatest identified reach. Typically intertwined with national health organisations in terms of Covid guidance, the ‘national government’ as a source was connecting with around one in three people (36 per cent). The ‘individual politicians’ source was much lower (11 per cent), suggesting that public representatives were somewhat crowded out by organisations, political parties or others such as scientists.

Looking at the two most relevant categories for this article – the national government and national health organisations like the HSE – Figure 2 shows the demographic variations for usage of both these categories of official sources. We find slightly more women than men accessing information from the two sources, and they were also more popular with older cohorts. Both the higher educated and those with higher incomes were also more likely to be using these official actors as sources of information, and politically it was relatively evenly

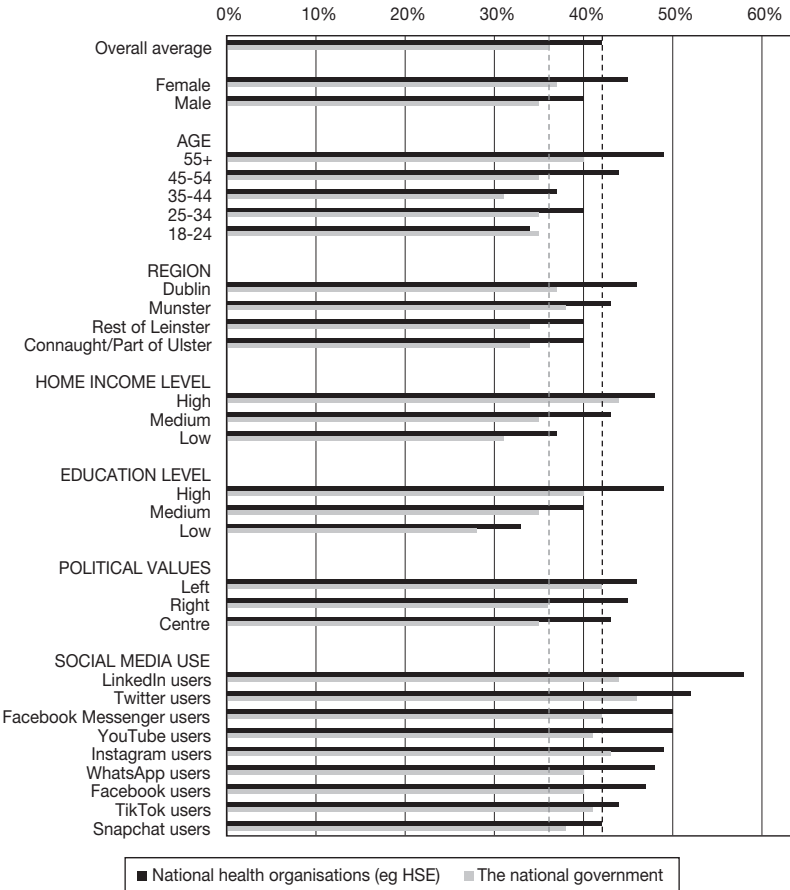
**Figure 1: Sources of news or information about coronavirus (Covid-19)**



Note: Full question and potential responses listed in Table 1.

spread, but with those on the left more disposed to the national government as a source than the centre- or right-leaning voters.

**Figure 2: Percentage of respondents from each listed category who had used (a) the national government and (b) national health organisations as a source of news or information about Covid-19**



*Note:* The dashed vertical line shows the overall average of 36 per cent and 42 per cent, respectively, for both sources. N=2,031. For example, 49 per cent of the 55+ age group had used the national health organisations as a source of news or information, and 40 per cent of WhatsApp users had used the national government as a source. Full question and potential responses listed in Table 1.

Figure 2 also demonstrates that those who use social media – all the major platforms are listed here – were more likely than average to access information from the government or national health organisations like the HSE. In particular, almost 60 per cent of users who use LinkedIn said they got information from the national health organisations, suggesting these institutions may be reaching professional workers slightly ahead of those who use other platforms.

As the results show, ‘individual politicians’ were not prominent as sources of information in much of the public’s recollection of Covid-related news content. The government – and senior cabinet members, who made public/media appearances – had more reach, yet was still somewhat seemingly overshadowed by the national health organisations and other health/science experts. This suggests something of a partisan depoliticisation of the Covid pandemic in terms of the issue-ownership extending beyond individual partisan political figures, certainly at the time of this survey being completed, which was at a period of high concern around post-Christmas 2020 rising case numbers and a vaccination programme not yet widely rolled out. Elsewhere, we see the further reach of scientists, doctors and health experts as sources. Throughout the pandemic, these voices effectively became household names via frequent media appearances and had the profile, credentials and expertise to help explain, critique and contextualise government decisions, filling a role that, in many other topics, would often be held by opposition politicians. Each day, science and medical experts were present on television and radio programmes, so it is unsurprising that they appear to have resonated with audiences, and this science-led response was likely part of the actual strategy from government, and resonates with the ‘apolitical’ approach recommended (Hyatt-Wood et al., 2021), where science and medical experts are centred and amplified.

Furthermore, the survey responses within this category also included NPHET, the advisory group providing guidance to the government on public health measures. Although linked with government, they were a separate entity and the CMO and other NPHET members did communicate directly to the public (via media reports, press conferences and media appearances). Given the broad range of scientific, public health and medically focused expertise that was circulating within the information landscape throughout this period, the survey results support what O’Connor et al. (2021) noted regarding the privileging of scientific information over political sources in news reports.

Also, as discussed below, the fact that both national health organisations and health experts – combined with the dissemination platform of news organisations – were the most wide-reaching sources is an important component in combatting misinformation, given van der Meer & Jin's (2020) findings regarding the importance of 'corrective information' coming from official sources and news media. It is worth pointing out that the emphasis on government, health service actors and health experts is arguably a positive from a communication perspective where there is cohesion regarding key points and messaging, with all sides in agreement on appropriate actions. However, if tension arises between these groups, such conflict runs the risk of becoming the story in the eyes of the media and the public, and thus absorbing attention. While there had inevitably been some disagreements between the government, the HSE and NPHET throughout the pandemic (Chambers, 2021), much of it arguably stayed out of the public domain. Nevertheless, one example of such tension was evident in late 2021 following something of a 'power struggle' over leaked information and who had the power to provide updates to the public (Ryan, 2021). If such divisions escalate and conflict between official actors becomes public, it has the potential to distract and undermine any centralised messaging strategies.

It is not possible from the survey data to capture a direct link between the particular source organisation/individual and the channel of accessing that source, as respondents were not asked to determine which platforms or modes of access were used. Nevertheless, the results in Figure 2 may suggest that users who are active on these social networks potentially have an above-average interest in public health and current affairs updates, assuming that information can reach them via these platforms. The challenge for source actors – those stakeholders contributing to news programmes – is that social media feeds are highly personalised spaces (through both self-selection, such as following certain accounts or not, as well as algorithmically and data-driven personalisation based on demographic preferences, browsing history, and so forth) and organisations may need to rely on targeted advertisements rather than expecting the content to reach the audiences organically. This aligns with the point made in one study regarding vaccine hesitancy in Ireland: those who are most sceptical are less likely to be accessing information from traditional sources, which poses challenges for public health officials who will need to 'disseminate information via multiple media channels' (Murphy et al., 2021, p. 10).

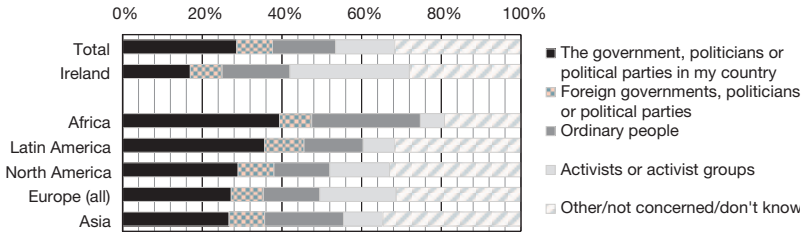
Finally, regarding news avoidance, it is not possible to determine whether those accessing news from any of these sources are actively avoiding the news elsewhere. Nor is it possible to determine if the updates from these official sources and experts are permeating through some sort of news avoidance barrier – the particular ‘corona-blocking’ which Vandenplas et al. (2021) described – or whether those receiving these updates are those still actively and willingly consuming news content. Given the various waves of Covid-19 (Delta and Omicron appeared in late 2021), high case numbers and continued deaths in late 2021 and early 2022, it would be surprising if both information overload and the negative nature of news – both identified by Skovsgaard & Andersen (2020) as factors affecting those who were seeking to avoid exposure to news updates – were not relevant when considering any dips in news consumption habits. The reality of the public actively avoiding updates brings challenges for health officials trying to provide updates on pandemic and vaccine roll-outs. The third element of news avoidance which Skovsgaard & Andersen (2020) describe, regarding mistrust in the news, is discussed further below.

### ***Question 2: Concern about false and misleading information online***

When asked about concern regarding sources of false and misleading information, as Figure 3 shows, ‘activists or activist groups’ was the most common response in Ireland (30 per cent), jointly followed by ‘the government, politicians or political parties in my country’ and ‘ordinary people’ (both 17 per cent). The remaining categories were much lower: only 8 per cent said they were most concerned about ‘foreign governments, politicians or political parties’, while ‘journalists or news organisations’ and ‘celebrities’ both received 7 per cent. A further 7 per cent – the equivalent of around one in every fourteen people – said they were not concerned with any of these.

It is worth noting that this survey is not examining specific content so it is difficult to speculate on what kind of material each respondent considers false or misleading and there would likely be disagreement over the veracity of information and the credibility of sources. Nevertheless, concern in Ireland around government and politicians is much lower than elsewhere (Figure 3): the average among survey respondents in forty-six countries was 29 per cent, reaching 39 per cent in Africa; Ireland is also much lower than the European average of 27 per cent (other European examples: Spain – 42 per cent, Hungary – 41 per cent, Poland – 41 per cent, Slovakia – 37 per cent, Croatia – 36 per cent, France – 31 per cent).

**Figure 3: Main regional variation in concern regarding sources of false and misleading information**



*Note:* The ‘Other’ category includes ‘journalists or news organisations’ and ‘celebrities’, as well as ‘not concerned about any of these’ and ‘don’t know’. N=2,031. Full question and potential responses listed in Table 1.

Conversely, and perhaps because of this relative trust in government, there is more scepticism in Ireland towards activists or activist groups: at 30 per cent, it is double the international average (15 per cent), and 11 percentage points higher than the European average. This source is similarly high in Germany (31 per cent) and Denmark (30 per cent), peaking at 37 per cent in the Netherlands, all countries which have similarly low levels of concern as Ireland towards government sources and misinformation (19 per cent, 13 per cent, 17 per cent, respectively). It appears, therefore, that trust in government and media is often evident alongside suspicion towards activist groups.

Ireland’s relatively low rate of concern with journalists or news organisations (7 per cent) may also indicate general support for the more traditional institutions, and mistrust of those often on the fringes of activism. Of course, these trends are not always consistent *within* populations, and fluctuations can be expected. Table 2 provides some further demographic information about those who are, or are not, particularly concerned with each of the categories in Ireland. This is not comprehensive in terms of all demographic breakdowns, instead providing the groups at each extreme in terms of responses for each source, as categorised in the original survey data.

Despite relatively low concern overall, the group most concerned about the reliability of information from government, politicians and political parties are those who identify as very left-wing (26 per cent). While that might suggest scepticism towards a government led by two centre-right parties, many who identify as having centre politics also share this concern (21 per cent). Those with lower levels of education



**Table 2: Some of the variation in the survey results showing demographic groups’ concern about Covid-19 misinformation stemming from various sources**

<i>Average % who said they were most concerned about each source</i>	<i>Less likely to be concerned</i>	<i>More likely to be concerned</i>
Activists (30%)	21–24-year-olds (11%)	Men over 65 (47%) Over 55s (43%) Slightly right of centre (39%) Slightly left of centre (37%)
Government (17%)	Over 65s (13%) Men aged 18–20 (13%) Very right wing (12%)	Very left wing (26%) Low level of education (22%) Men aged 45–54 (22%) Women aged 21–24 (22%) Centre politics (21%)
Ordinary people (17%)	Men aged 65+ (7%, compared with women aged 65+, 17%)	Men aged 18–20 (38%) Very right-wing (33%)
Foreign governments (8%)	Women aged 34–44 (4%) Women 65+ (2%)	Aged 21–24 (15%) Fairly left wing (12%)
Journalists or news organisations (7%)	Over 65s (3%) Women over 65 (1%)	Very right wing (14%) Men aged 25–34 (14%) Dublin (10%)
Celebrities (7%)	Aged 45–54 (4%)	18–20 years old (17%) Very left wing (16%) Very right wing (14%)
Not concerned with any of these (7%)	High household income (4%) 18–24-year-olds (3%)	Low income household (11%) Women aged 45–54 (12%)

are similarly concerned with the political establishment (22 per cent). Elsewhere, one of the most striking gaps relates to age and attitudes for ‘activists’: almost one in every two men aged over sixty-five (47 per cent) cited activists as their biggest concern, compared with around one in ten (11 per cent) of young adults aged between twenty-one and twenty-four.

Meanwhile, the concerns expressed towards ‘ordinary people’ is worth noting, evident at the same level of concern as government/

politicians/political parties. It is only possible to speculate, but this concern may be fuelled by content circulating on social media and in private messaging groups regarding Covid-19, transmission and vaccines, which has been a consequence of living in the first truly digital pandemic, where anecdotes and rumours of individual experiences can gain traction with little supporting evidence or verification.

Finally, the source which most people were concerned about in Ireland was ‘activist groups’. Throughout the pandemic, there was some resistance to social restrictions and specifics such as requirements around face masks, but such hostility generally remained on the fringes. Vaccine uptake was among the highest in Europe, while compliance with restrictions remained generally strong: one opinion poll in December 2021 found two-thirds agreed with the latest restrictions.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that while the initial sense of national unity from the first wave may have passed, there was not the same deep division in Ireland as manifested elsewhere, with activists failing to mobilise and gain mass support. Nevertheless, given younger voters are less wary of activists in this context, the support of government and officials evident in these results may shift in years to come.

### ***Question 3: Local politics/government and local updates about Covid-19***

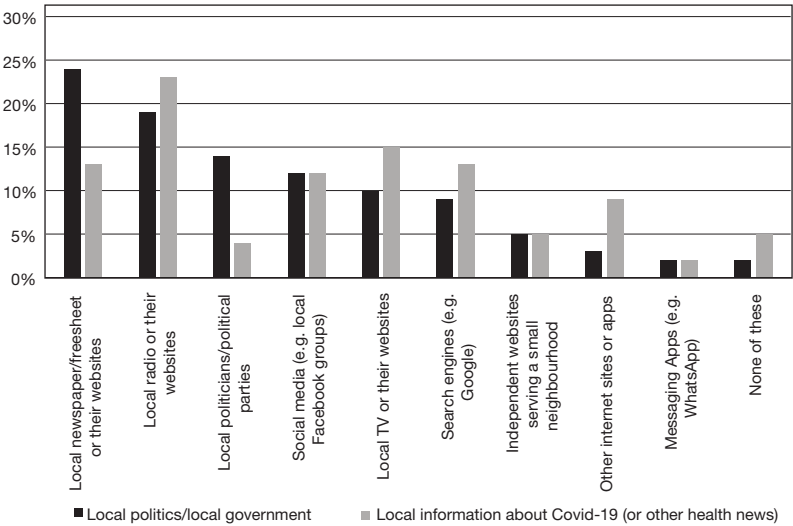
Survey participants were asked which local topics of news they had accessed over the previous week, and local politics/local government was encountered by approximately one in five people (21 per cent). This response was quite far behind that for ‘local weather’ (55 per cent) and ‘local information about Covid-19’ (46 per cent). Both latter topics have tangible repercussions and perhaps a more obvious and immediate relevance for audiences, so it is unsurprising that they are both so persuasive. The local government/local politics figure is closer to other traditional news topics such as local crime news (28 per cent), or local economy news (18 per cent), suggesting that for audiences, politics fell into more of a current affairs sphere rather than being intertwined as part of the pandemic. It is also positioned below information about local shops and restaurants (24 per cent) and local announcements like births and obituaries (28 per cent).

Figure 4 shows some differences in *where* audiences accessed news content about local politics/local government, compared with local

<sup>1</sup> See [https://twitter.com/ireland\\_thinks/status/1467222588334170118](https://twitter.com/ireland_thinks/status/1467222588334170118)

information about Covid-19. The regional press (whether the print edition or website) was the main source for political updates, whereas local radio was the key source for Covid information. Social media was important for both, with one in eight people (12 per cent) saying they accessed most information about both these categories of local news via social media, which could include local community groups or politicians’ own pages, which people follow for updates.

**Figure 4: Differences in where respondents accessed information about (a) local politics/local government (n=432) and (b) local information about Covid-19 (or other health news) (n=927)**



Note: Full question and potential responses listed in Table 1.

Local politicians/political parties were not considered a key source of information for updates on what was happening in their area regarding Covid-19, with only 4 per cent referencing them as a source. While this finding might suggest a depoliticisation of Covid-19 – in terms of party politicians not having ownership of the issue in the minds of the public, despite the decision-making being inherently political – the explanation may not be so straightforward, as perhaps politicians were actually appearing in local newspapers or radio segments but were not considered as a source by respondents in the survey. Another explanation may be that the nature of the Covid regulations – and the HSE and Department of Health’s jurisdiction in

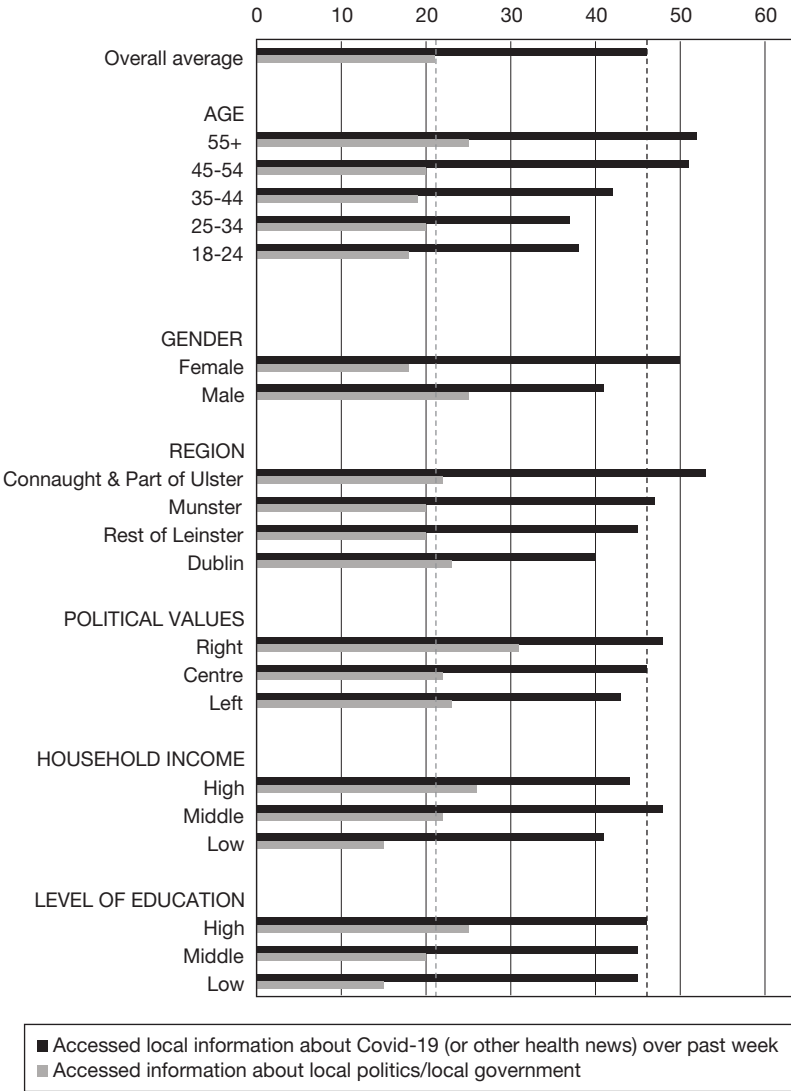
Ireland – meant most decision-making was made at a national level with only occasional county-specific regulations in place. This nationwide remit and reach of changing rules and guidelines may have somewhat eroded the space usually afforded to local political entities to take ownership and comment on developments uniquely affecting their area.

When we consider *who* is accessing news about local politics and local government, and local information about Covid-19, Figure 5 shows it is more likely to be those who are higher educated and with higher household incomes. There is some gender variation, a 7 percentage point gap, with more men accessing such information, while in terms of age, those aged over fifty-five are the most likely cohort. Those who define themselves as politically right-leaning are also seemingly more engaged in local political activity, and those based in Dublin are also slightly more attuned, which may perhaps be linked to the level of coverage the capital often receives in national media which may make the national-level coverage feel somewhat ‘local’. Meanwhile, we can see that more women than men accessed local information about Covid-19, and it was also a more accessed issue among older ages. Conversely, there is little difference here between those with different levels of income or education, or political ideology, demonstrating the pandemic’s impact – and the desire for local, relevant news and updates – across demographics.

## Conclusion

The results presented here suggest four key conclusions that can be drawn regarding how audiences consumed information about Covid-19 from government and official sources in early 2021, almost twelve months into the pandemic. Firstly, official sources and experts were seemingly effective in reaching the public, and there appears to be something of a partisan depoliticisation in terms of individual politicians and political parties being crowded out as sources of information among audiences and replaced by government, national health agencies and science/medical experts. This may provide a sense of cohesion if centralised messaging is agreed upon and communicated, and is in line with best-practice guidance on effective government communication strategy. This potential depoliticisation is also evident at a local level, indicative perhaps of the national-level nature of most pandemic regulations. While local/county-level lockdowns were a feature at one stage, which gave scope for local

**Figure 5: Level of audience responses when asked where they accessed information about (a) local politics and (b) local information about Covid-19**



*Note:* The average across all respondents was 21 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively, as illustrated by the vertical dashed lines. Full question and potential responses listed in Table 1.

actors to attempt to take ownership of these developments, most of the attention politically was at the national level.

Secondly, government and political actors are perceived as much less of a threat in Ireland than elsewhere in terms of being sources of false or misleading information. The converse side of this is a relative lack of trust in activists: this category inevitably spans a swathe of actors and motivations but points to sensitivity and public awareness towards those who may be trying to capitalise on the fear, uncertainty and stress of the pandemic. Yet for officials, it is worth noting the different attitudes and habits of younger audiences, which may manifest in a more challenging information landscape in subsequent years.

Thirdly, the link between traditional media and official sources has likely remained strong, and in many ways this is part of a media ecosystem in Ireland that is relatively moderate when compared with other countries regarding polarisation (Fletcher et al., 2020), with high trust in the national broadcaster. However, while that traditional model may be the fulcrum of government communication approaches, the activity around the fringes is where attention should also be paid, focusing on those sources of misinformation and those groups more likely to be affected. Social media is, therefore, a key information channel, especially for those with lesser usage of more traditional news media. In terms of policy lessons learned from the Covid-19 crisis, official government and healthcare actors may need to further establish a presence on these platforms through paid posts and advertisements to ensure they are not crowded out by algorithmically generated content of questionable quality. It may not be enough to completely win over sceptical audiences, but it may be sufficient to provide the 'corrective' information (van der Meer & Jin, 2020), which is needed to minimise harm from misinformation actors.

Finally, the data reported here can point to general trends but there will always be variation within populations. A deep understanding of concerns and behaviours within different communities and demographics will be key for effective messaging. The data suggest those on lower incomes and with lower education levels may be more resistant to certain sources, while other research points to different factors such as non-Irish nationals being more unsure about vaccines, for example. As O'Brien et al. (2021) argue, government and state actors may need to be proactive in seeking to understand the variation in the consumption habits and ensuring accessibility of information

among diverse social groups, which may require strategic and messaging modifications.

The study has some limitations which should be addressed. This survey provides a snapshot of early 2021, a time when the Covid-19 landscape felt bleak (given the high level of cases and deaths) and yet showed some glimmers of hope as the vaccine roll-out began. This was a specific set of unprecedented circumstances making it difficult to determine how replicable the patterns observed would be in ‘normal’ (i.e. non-pandemic) times. Another limitation is that the results provide descriptive observations rather than using statistical tests to present inferences, so caution must be taken in drawing conclusions. Nevertheless, the insight provided from a crisis communication perspective is valuable as it demonstrates the permeance of government and institutional voices at a time of heightened public concern; these official actors established a presence despite patterns of news avoidance and pandemic fatigue among audiences. Perhaps this may only come from some distance from the pandemic, but one issue worth considering in future research is how audiences distinguished between the government, the HSE and NPHET during the pandemic messaging campaigns and media reports. This is tied to a broader public understanding of how the state and its institutions – distinct from the executive government – function, and where responsibility, accountability and decision-making lie. Finally, the relationship – whether amenable or hostile – between media and government is at the core of the political communications analysis under discussion here. Looking ahead, researchers should pay close attention to any shifts in media coverage if, and when, new parties come to power in Ireland, which may challenge the established links that have developed over decades between officials and mainstream media organisations.

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