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Perceptions of Disinformation, Media Coverage and Government Policy related to the Coronavirus – Survey Findings from Six Western Countries

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Key Findings

How do citizens evaluate the role of the press and governments during this unseen crisis and how concerned are they about false information? In this report we discuss perceptions of governments' dealing, media coverage and concern about disinformation across six Western democracies. Furthermore, we present current findings on the willingness of individuals to spread disinformation on social media concerning COVID-19. To investigate this, we conducted a large scale survey with active social media users in Belgium, Germany, France, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States over a period of three weeks (April 16 to May 6 2020, *N* = 7.014[1]). During these three weeks, almost all six countries were still under strict country-specific containment measures ("lockdowns") to prevent the rapid spread of the coronavirus (European Commission 2020; Matrajt & Leung 2020). In this report we present some first findings.

We find that:

- Over two thirds of the citizens of all six countries are highly concerned about disinformation in general and half of them suspect to be exposed to it rather often.
- There is large variation among the citizens of the six countries on how their political leaders and decision-makers handled the COVID-19 outbreak. A large majority of citizens from Switzerland and Germany think that their governments were able to sufficiently control the crisis, while a majority of citizens in the US and France were discontent with their government. Belgian and the UK take a middle position.
- A majority of respondents across all six Western democracies think that the Chinese authorities are partly responsible for the worldwide spread of the coronavirus due to their late reactions.
- On average a majority of citizens in all countries are satisfied with how the media informs the public about issues related to the corona outbreak.
- Respondents from the US were most likely to engage with a social media post containing misleading information about COVID-19 and thus spread disinformation. Citizens in Switzerland were the least willing to engage with the post compared to citizens of all other countries.

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[1] Total number of respondents per country: BE: n = 1040; DE: n = 1019; FR: n = 1255; CH: n = 1253; UK: n = 1382; US: n = 1040

Global "Infodemic" on Social Media

The corona crisis has posed serious threats to many countries around the globe. One central aspect of this global pandemic is the vast amount of false and misleading information circulating on social media.

The WHO coined the term 'infodemic' to describe the current situation: "an over-abundance of information –some accurate and some not –that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it" (WHO 2020). The virus outbreak seems to provide a fertile ground for the spread of disinformation, which can be understood as deliberately manipulated false content with the intention to harm (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017).

Messages ranging from (unharmful) false medical advice to claims that the coronavirus is a bioweapon have been spread by millions of people. Unfortunately, the dissemination of this content has a wide range of real life consequences such as vandalism, public health issues and harassment against journalists (EUvsDisinfo 2020; BBC 2020).

High Personal Concern about Disinformation and Exposure to it

In response to the amount of harmful information, people in all six Western democracies are highly concerned about disinformation and indicated that they think they are rather often exposed to it (Figure 1). In the US, 77% of the participants are concerned about disinforming messages, followed by the UK with 75%. People from Belgium and Germany are slightly less worried about the massive spread of disinformation (BE = 68%; DE = 69%). These differences are also reflected in the responses on perceived exposure. Respondents from the US most frequently stated that they were exposed to disinformation, while respondents from Germany felt the least exposed.

Figure 1: Exposure to and concern about disinformation regarding COVID-19
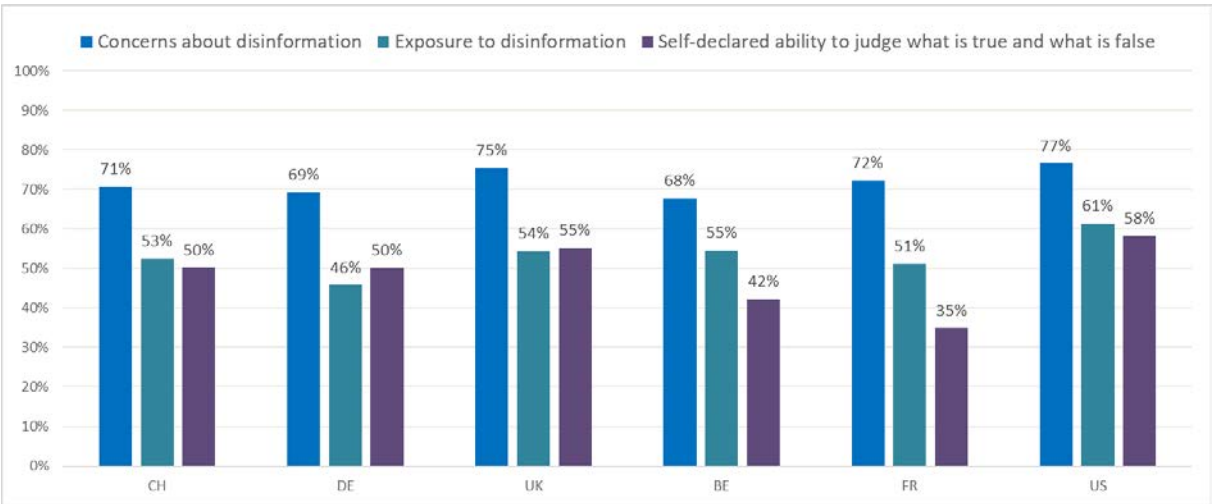
Note: *N* = 7014. Survey question regarding concerns: "Some people believe that this false information, which is intended to manipulate and deceive others, is a serious problem and harms our society. Others think that there is no reason for concern. Do you personally think that this kind of information is a problem?" (scale: 1 = no problem; 7 = serious problem) / survey question regarding exposure: "Nowadays we often come across words like "disinformation" or "fake news". People understand these terms differently. If you now think of false political information that aims to deceive and manipulate others: How often do you come across such news or information?" (scale: 1 = never; 7 = very often) / survey question regarding ability to judge: "Do you personally find it easy to distinguish between what is true and what is false when you're following the news?" (scale: 1 = I find it very hard to judge; 7 = I find it very easy to judge). Indices were built, where values between 5 and 7 were coded as a "sign of agreement".

Furthermore, only about half of the citizens of all countries feel confident to judge whether a message is true or false. In France this number is even lower, meaning French citizens found it the most difficult to judge a message regarding its correctness.

Generally, we observe that US citizens are most concerned about and most exposed to disinformation. However, the differences with the other Western-European countries are lower than reported in previous surveys on disinformation (Digital News Report 2018). This is in line with the idea that the 'infodemic' in this case was truly global.

Large Country Differences in Perceptions of Politicians' Handling of the Crisis

The coronavirus hit countries to a different degree and also not all governments reacted in the same way. This variation is also reflected in how people judge the politicians in charge. Our results show that respondents from several countries are unsatisfied with how their political leaders and decision-makers handled the corona crisis (BE, FR, UK, US) (Figure 2). Participants from Belgium, France, United Kingdom and the US mostly agree that their politicians failed in adequality handling the consequences of the coronavirus (BE = 50%; UK = 59%; US = 63%; FR = 71%). Especially French citizens were not satisfied with their political leaders. In Germany and Switzerland the level of dissatisfaction with politicians dealing of the crisis is much lower (CH=34%; DE=42%).

In a second statement, we focus more on the current situation by questioning whether people believe their government can control the crisis. Here the perception of people is less pessimistic. In Belgium 48% agreed with the statement, while 29% (completely) disagreed, meaning that the number of citizens that is confident that government can control the corona crisis is somewhat larger than those who are sceptical (+19 point difference in percentages). In the UK the positive group is also slightly larger (+4), while in the US (-9) and again France (-23) the negative perception towards the government's ability to control the crisis is much more outspoken (Figure 3). In steep contrast, citizens from Switzerland and Germany are mainly confident about the government's ability to control the spread and handle the consequences of the virus (CH = 76%; DE = 69%).

Further research is needed to better understand and explain this large variation in people's perception of the political response to the crisis. At least partly, these differences can be attributed to the actual spread of the virus and people's concern of becoming COVID-19 infected. Not surprisingly, German, and especially Swiss respondents were less concerned that they or their family would get infected.

Consensus: The Worldwide Pandemic was the Chinese Government's Fault

When it comes to whom to blame for the global pandemic, the majority of respondents (about 7 out of 10) across all countries agree that the Chinese authorities are partly responsible for the scale the pandemic took on. Surprisingly, respondents from the UK (74%), Belgium and France (72%) were slightly more likely to agree with this statement than citizens from the US (68%), of which the president clearly blamed the Chinese government.

On a positive note regarding the information environment, we could not find widespread dissatisfaction with the national media and their reporting. In almost all six countries less than a third agreed with the statement that the media are not informing the public sufficiently (except for the US = 35%). About one third until half of the participants in all countries think that the national media is overreacting. People from France and Switzerland agreed the most with that statement (FR = 49%; CH = 46%).

Figure 2: Attitudes towards COVID-19
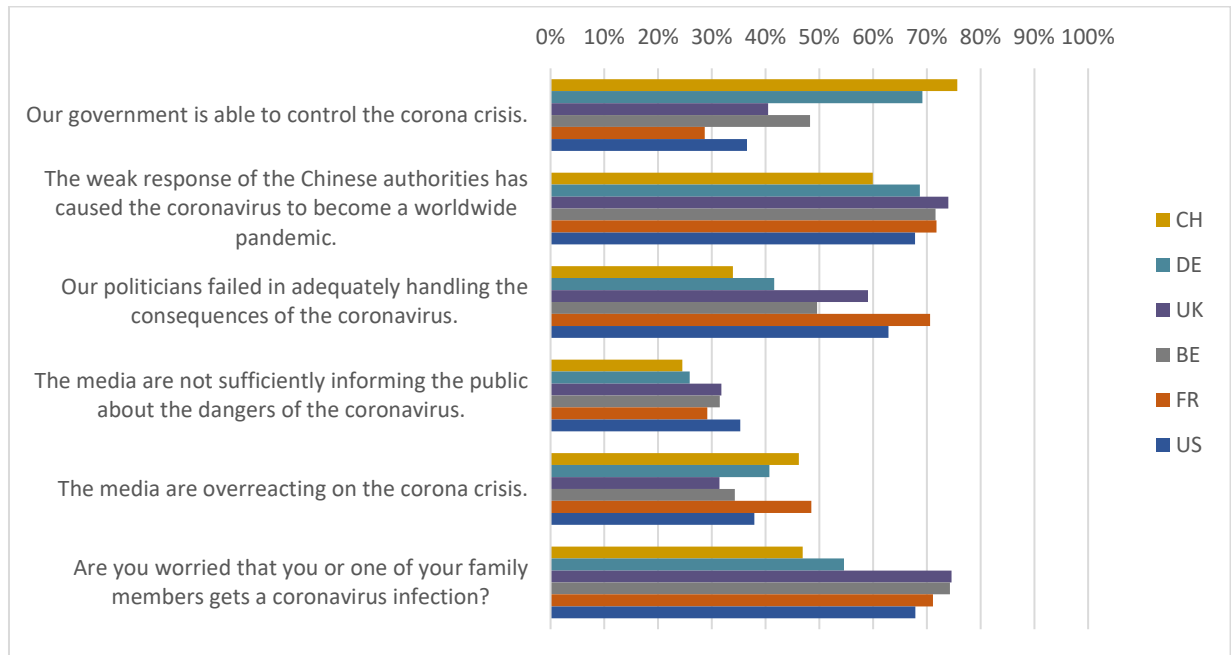
Note: *N* = 7014. Survey question: "Now we would like to know more about your opinion on the coronavirus. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements." (scale: 1 = completely disagree; 7 = completely agree). For the question about the worry regarding family members a different scale was used: 1 = not worried at all; 7 = very worried. Indices were built, where values between 5 and 7 were coded as a "sign of agreement".

Figure 3. Change in percentages points across countries regarding the government's ability to control the crisis
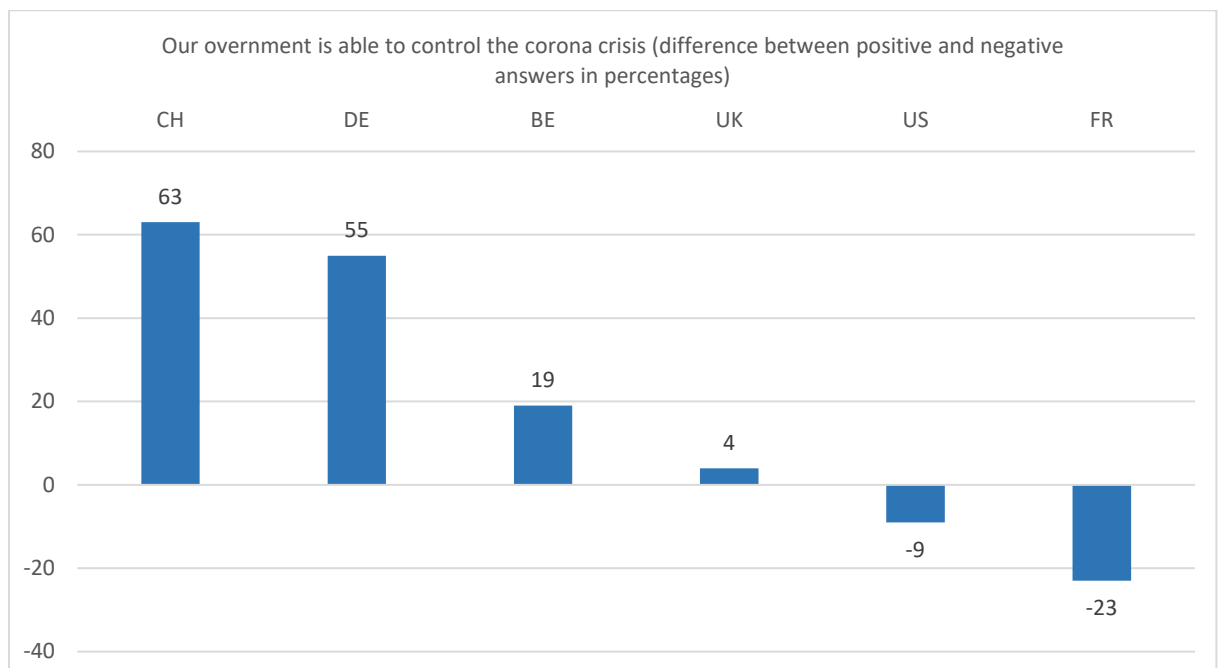

Note. *N* = 7014. Statement: "Our government is able to control the corona crisis" (scale: 1 = completely disagree; 7 = completely agree). E.g. for Switzerland there is a positive 63 point difference in percentages regarding this statement, meaning 75% of the participants agreed and 12% disagreed, hence a difference of 63. The 13% of people that opted for the middle category (4 on 7-point scale) are left out this calculation.

**Spreading Disinformation about COVID-19 on Social Media**

To measure the willingness to spread disinformation, each participant was shown a manipulated social media post regarding COVID-19 with a statement saying that the virus is a possible bioweapon from China (Figure 4). We then asked respondents how they would normally react to such a post.

Figure 4: Manipulated social media post
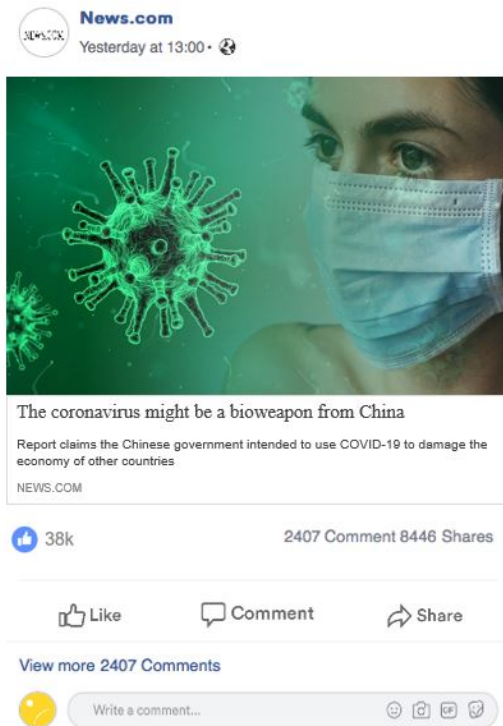
Our findings show that overall only a minority of individuals was willing to engage with the disinforming social media post (see Figure 5). However, one out of four respondents from the US was likely to like, share or comment on the post (25%, 27%, 25%) whereas citizens from Switzerland were the least willing to do so, with only one out of ten respondents likely to interact with the message (10%, 11%, 10%). The other countries are situated in between, with average engagement numbers around 15-20% of the respondents.

Figure 5: Engagement with disinformation about COVID-19 on social media
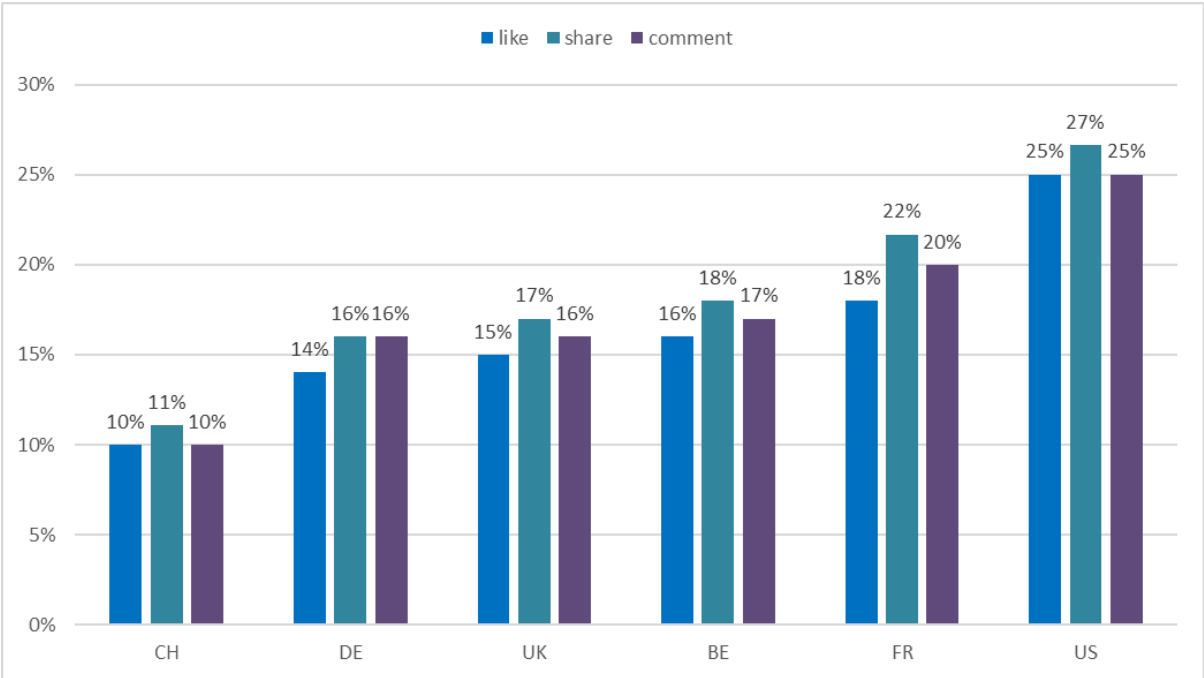
Note: *N* = 7014. Survey question: "How would you normally react to this social media post? Like the post / Share the post / Leave a (positive or negative) comment." (scale: 1 = very unlikely; 7 = very likely). Indices were built, where values between 5 and 7 were recoded as "having the intention to react to the post".

Finally, we identified individual characteristics that make people more willing to engage with disinformation. First analyses indicate that active social media users and user of alternative news media were more eager to like, share, or comment on false claims related to the corona pandemic. The same was true for people with low satisfaction with democracy and right-wing political orientation. In addition, a higher age, lower education, and male gender increased to likelihood of engagement with disinformation.

Conclusion

Our results indicate that people in the countries under study are concerned about disinformation in the context of the ongoing global pandemic. The countries were also united with regard to the perception that the weak response from the Chinese authorities contributed to the worldwide spread of the virus. Despite these similarities, we also found country differences, most importantly regarding the response of politicians and the will to engage with disinformation about the coronavirus. However, it is noteworthy to state that the current situation is exceptional and the motivations to spread disinformation are likely to be driven also by individual experiences and the scope of the pandemic in the respective countries. In the follow up of our research we will compare the engagement with false/doubtful information on corona-related news, with news on other topics.

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