

Written evidence submitted by the BBC

The DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation Covid-19 Inquiry

April 2020

Executive summary

- 1. The BBC is the leading public service broadcaster in the UK, with a mission to inform, educate and entertain. Our first public purpose is to provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them, and we deliver this across national, local and global news services.¹**
- 2. The Editorial Guidelines are the standards that underpin all our journalism, at all times, including during the Covid-19 pandemic.** They apply to all our content, wherever and however it is received. Producing and upholding these Editorial Guidelines is an obligation across the BBC and all output made in accordance with these Editorial Guidelines fulfills our public purposes and meets and goes beyond the requirements of our regulator, Ofcom.
- 3. Coverage of Covid-19 is dominating the UK news across all platforms. And with a plethora of cross platform content, people are most likely to turn to the BBC's TV, radio and online services for the latest news on the pandemic (82%)², significantly more than any other source.**
- 4. BBC News has attracted record audiences across platforms with our nations and regions, UK wide and international coverage highlighting the importance of impartial and accurate news at this time.**
- 5. The BBC remains the UK's primary source for news. In a world of fake news and disinformation online, audiences said they turn to the BBC for a reliable take on events and this reputation for accuracy and trust sends audiences to the BBC during breaking news and to verify facts.³** During the Covid-19 pandemic 83% of people trust coverage on BBC TV⁴; and audiences from the UK and around the world have come to BBC News in their millions to stay informed and seek trusted advice on how they can protect themselves and those most at risk.
- 6. Globally, BBC World Service provides trusted news to radio and digital audiences around the world in 43 languages including English.** The BBC's global news services reached 394m people weekly across all platforms in 2018-19,⁵ and we cover the topics that state sponsored news

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission>

² Ofcom weekly online survey, 9 April 2020 <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/half-of-uk-adults-exposed-to-false-claims-about-coronavirus>

³ Ofcom Review of BBC News and Current Affairs, 24 October 2019
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/173734/bbc-news-review.pdf

⁴ Ofcom weekly online survey, 9 April 2020 <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/half-of-uk-adults-exposed-to-false-claims-about-coronavirus>

organisations cannot or will not.⁶ Audiences have increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

7. **The BBC World News TV channel has seen increased demand from distributors, and viewers have rated its Coronavirus coverage with the highest scores of all international news platforms.**
8. **Disinformation is not a new phenomenon.** The BBC has been covering this since 1939 when BBC Monitoring was established to analyse the effects of Hitler's propaganda machine. However, the advent of digital platforms has provided new ways to manipulate audiences, and spread these messages faster and further. The impact of misinformation is particularly harmful on issues of democracy and health, including information regarding the current Covid-19 pandemic. This is a global problem, and especially felt in communities with poor levels of digital literacy.
9. **Alongside accuracy we have a role to challenge and respond to misinformation in our UK and international coverage.** Reality Check is the BBC's principal fact-checking service which runs on TV, radio, on the website and via social media. This service tackles fake news stories and challenges statements from public figures and institutions which may be false or misleading, and presents the verifiable facts instead.
10. **During the Covid-19 pandemic the BBC has created a dedicated team covering and debunking misinformation daily – bringing together Reality Check, BBC Monitoring and our expert correspondents in the UK and around the world.**
11. **We have been central in fighting the 'infodemic' caused by Coronavirus myths and rumours⁷** ranging from 5G mast causation to the protective properties of garlic and drinkable silver. We are also working in partnership with other content publishers and platforms to tackle the problem and promote trusted sources of news and public information including as part of The Trusted News Initiative.

News during coronavirus crisis

12. **Protecting our staff is of utmost importance and in line with Government advice on social distancing it has been necessary to change some ways we operate whilst maintaining core coverage. The BBC has put in place a comprehensive package of news coverage across platforms to ensure that all our audiences have accurate information during the Covid-19 pandemic.** This recognises the importance of our core news content; special Covid-19 programming; and the range of content from across the nations and regions of the UK and globally.
13. **People are relying heavily on broadcast television to keep up to date on the coronavirus⁸ and record audiences have been tuning into our UK-wide news bulletins.** Across the week

⁵ GAM 2019, BBC's global news services include BBC World Service and BBC World News and BBC.com.

⁶ For example, the investigations programme Africa Eye has had huge impact across society, media and politics. Their recent Sex for Grades investigation into sexual harassment at Nigerian and Ghanaian universities led to the suspension of lecturers and a new bill by the Nigerian government to criminalise sexual harassment by professors on campuses. The leader of the Nigerian House of Representatives Femi Gbajabamila commented that "we owe a debt of gratitude to the BBC Africa journalists whose efforts have exposed this scourge. Their efforts are a reminder of what can be achieved when good people say 'enough is enough' and act to make it so." [<https://twitter.com/femigbaja/status/1181469027413221376>]

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-51497800>

⁸ Ofcom weekly online survey, 9 April 2020 <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/half-of-uk->

beginning the 23 March over 44 million people in the UK tuned into BBC TV Network News – the highest figure since the 2003 Iraq War⁹. Audiences to the TV bulletins have been consistently above average since the Prime Minister’s announcement on 16 March. Between 16 March and 10 April, the BBC One o’clock news has had an average audience of 4.2m, up by almost 2m on the 2019 average (2.3m). The BBC Six o’clock news has had an average audience of 7.3m (peaking at 8.8m on 18 March), and significantly up on the 4.2m average for 2019. The BBC Ten o’clock news has had an average audience of 5.1m over the same four-week period (peaking on 6.7m on 23 March), up from 3.4m in 2019. In the week of 16 March, the BBC News channel reached just under 16m people across the week, making it the channel’s second biggest week ever.

14. **Audiences have also been coming to BBC News Online.** In the week commencing 16 March, the BBC News website and app attracted 84 million UK unique browsers to the news pages, a new record for the site, coming significantly ahead of the then-record figure in the week of the 2019 General Election (52m UK browsers). Traffic has remained at unprecedented levels since then¹⁰.
15. **The BBC has restructured news teams to respond to audience needs and prioritise the Covid-19 and core news coverage, whilst minimising the risk to staff.** The specialist health and medical unit has doubled in size and specific teams, mostly based outside London, have been assigned to cover volunteering, care homes, mental health and education amongst other areas.
16. **BBC specialists across subjects have been tasked with providing up to date and accurate information for audiences** including those in business, technology, home affairs, rural communities, sport, BAME communities etc. Recognising the importance of explaining statistics and the validity of extrapolations, there is weekly on air analysis by the BBC Head of Statistics.
17. **Ensuring accurate information on the international situation is also a key part of BBC output** and, working with quarantine rules in each area, journalists have been assigned to cover the Covid-19 pandemic and response in countries such as Italy, Spain, and Sweden. This is in addition to significant coverage from BBC resident correspondents in areas from China to South Korea, USA and India, Russia and Africa.
18. **The BBC has also launched specific programming to help audiences understand the issues** including Covid-19 specials with an average audience around 5m per programme and Your Questions Answered on the News Channel and Online.
19. **Podcasts, accessed online through BBC Sounds, contain information about specific aspects of the pandemic and collate news for listeners.** The Coronavirus Newscast, a daily podcast with Adam Fleming, Laura Kuenssberg, Fergus Walsh and Chris Mason focuses on the latest information on the pandemic in the UK and discusses the most up to date public health information and how it is affecting our lives. The Ouch podcast, which looks at issues in relation to disabled people, is now twice weekly and focussed on the issues around Covid-19. The BBC is also the only broadcaster to set up specialist coverage of Covid-19 for disabled people on the Ouch team’s dedicated webpage¹¹

[adults-exposed-to-false-claims-about-coronavirus](#)

⁹ Barb, 3min+ weekly reach among audiences aged 4+m, January 2002-April 2020

¹⁰ AT Internet, our web analytics tool

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability>

20. **Radio 4 has added specialist sections to regular news programmes** including the Covid Chronicles on PM and Listeners' Lives, mini tales of how listeners are spending their lockdown time, on World at One. The Today programme is updating audiences on what is happening around the nations and regions, using BBC local reporters.
21. **Across the BBC, news teams recognise the different responsibilities of the devolved governments and ensure decisions made by politicians from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland receive proper scrutiny and attention.**
22. **During this time, journalists and members of the public continue to hold politicians to account.** Flagship programmes remain vital to our audiences for example Question Time is still live and in a prime time slot with questions pre-filmed from around the UK, and reaction taken from Twitter; and Newsnight has made it a core objective to continue giving space to otherwise hidden issues. Examples would be - shining a very early light on what's happening in care homes, to concerns about the impact of lockdown on vulnerable children, and to the impact of the crisis on the very particular environment of hospices. The News at Ten has been extended, there is an extra hour of news on BBC1 0900-1000 daily; and there was an extra edition of Marr on Easter Sunday.
23. **The BBC has shown the daily Government press conference with significant audiences tuning in on TV and via BBC iPlayer for the latest information.** From 16 March to 12 April, the special broadcasts that include the press conferences on BBC One have reached an average of just under 10m people a day, and a total of 39.2m people; almost two thirds of the population.¹² They are an opportunity for journalists to question Government ministers and experts. Since these briefings became daily, the BBC has also ensured that there is a signing service for their coverage on the News Channel.
24. **Online the BBC advice guides provide people with clear public health information in an easily digestible form.** These are clearly branded and have been kept on the front page of BBC News throughout the Covid-19 period. Examples include: *Coronavirus: What do all the terms mean?*¹³ and *Conoravirus: What it does to the Body*¹⁴.
25. **There is also a specific coronavirus section of the BBC News website, assisting audiences by collating all the relevant stories in one area.** This page includes Reality Check and in-depth features, video explainers and the rolling news latest updates, amongst other content.
26. **Audiences are also very high for regional BBC news at this time.** The 18:30 regional news bulletin is the most watched programme of the day. Between 16 March and 10 April, the 18:30 regional bulletin has had an average audience of 7.7m, up by +3m on the 2019 average, an increase of 67%. Its audience peaked at 9.0m on 23 March, the highest figure seen since 2010.
27. **BBC Local Radio also plays a vital role in explaining what is happening in specific regions with our local teams liaising directly with local first responders and experts.** BBC Local Radio has also launched Make a Difference which provides a number people can call to ask for help, support or advice and reassurance. This is a vital service helping audiences to gain access to accurate expert advice. It is also well appreciated with Local Radio receiving thousands of calls a day. The lines are open 7 days a week between 6am and 6pm with on air updates twice every hour. It has now received in excess of a quarter of a million contacts from the audience.

¹² Barb, average daily and total 3+min reach, audiences aged 4+ watching on BBC One, 16 Mar – 12 Apr 2020

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52182658>

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51214864>

28. **As a worldwide pandemic, coronavirus is the most consumed storyline ever for the BBC globally.** World Service Languages reached 164 million people on digital platforms alone in the last week of March for a second consecutive week, a huge increase up from an average of 51m at around the same time last year; additionally World Service Languages recorded its highest ever traffic on website (73m weekly people), YouTube (100m weekly engaged people) and Facebook (65m engaged people) in March; World Service podcasts have achieved an all-time record audience with audiences up to 1.9m people each week on average during March, a 32% increase compared to the average in December; and BBC.com - the BBC's commercially funded English language digital news platform - has reached 179m unique browsers in March. Updates on the Coronavirus outbreak have driven ¾ of a billion page views since the start of the outbreak.
29. **For some services which operate in markets with media restrictions, we've seen extraordinary figures of audience growth for BBC digital outlets** including services in Russian, Serbian and Arabic. For a significant period some authorities, for example Russia, were ignoring Covid-19 and others were suppressing coverage for example Egypt, who expelled one journalist for 'undermining public order'¹⁵. Between 12 February 2020 and 11 March 2020 BBC Arabic had 2 million direct visitors via search, looking for the answer to the question "What are the symptoms of Coronavirus?"
30. **Elsewhere, Coronavirus coverage is attracting unprecedented levels of weekly reach for the digital offer from almost all the BBC's language services with Hindi up to 42m people, Mundo at 24m, and Brasil at 16m in the last week of March. The new language services for India are also attracting huge audiences with Telugu up by 166% compared to the December weekly average.**
31. **BBC global news has introduced special programming across platforms and languages to help counter the proliferation of poor quality and inaccurate information circulating in many parts of the world online and on social and chat apps.** BBC World Service has a new daily podcast - *Coronavirus Global Update* which features the latest on the spread of the virus with medical reports and information about the global impact on health, business, sport and travel; *BBC My World*, the World Service series supported by Angelina Jolie and Microsoft Education aimed at a young teenage audience, has been extended with new digital content on the virus and how to spot misinformation; extensive coverage and live updates feature on all of the BBC World Service's 42 language services – most recently the West African services launched a daily 60 second video available in five languages to educate audiences about Covid-19; BBC World News TV has been producing special programming including *Coronavirus Explained*, an essential guide to the Covid-19 virus; and BBC.com is offering a wide range of in-depth coverage including: [Coronavirus v Influenza: How Do The Two Viruses Compare?](#) and [Coronavirus Symptoms: What Are They And How To Protect Yourself?](#)

“Government Information”

32. **Broadcast ministerial statements by the government are rare and used only for the most serious moments in national life. Over 17m people tuned in to BBC TV to see the Prime Minister's first statement on 23 March 2020¹⁶.** On BBC News online, the live pages *Boris*

¹⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/egypt-expels-british-journalist-over-coronavirus-coverage/a-52942136>

¹⁶ Barb, average audiences aged 4+ watching on BBC One, BBC News Channel and BBC Scotland, 23rd March 2020

Johnson: You must stay at home and *Coronavirus: Boris Johnson to address nation on new measures* saw high volumes of traffic, with 19.7m and 9.7m UK page views respectively¹⁷.

33. **The system for broadcasting Public Information Films (PIFs) on television had generally fallen into disuse; however, the process was revived early in the Covid-19 crisis, so that the BBC could give airtime to direct public health messaging for which the UK government was separately commissioning advertising slots on commercial (ie non-BBC) channels.** This has allowed the BBC to establish a mechanism to give the scientists/medical officers from the various governments across the UK a vehicle for giving direct information to the public. Since the first broadcast on 19 March, immediately before *The One Show* on BBC One, up until Easter Monday, 67 PIFs by the UK government have been broadcast across BBC One and Two at varying times of the day, reaching 59.6% (30.5m) adults in the UK, on average 4 times each. There have also been tailored PIFs on BBC One in Scotland (34) and on BBC One in Wales (27).

Queen's broadcast

34. **The BBC broadcast The Queen's message to the nation on Covid-19 on 5 April. It was broadcast on TV, radio and social media channels and was only the fifth time the Monarch has given such a speech in her 68-year reign.** 24.1m people watched The Queen's message across all channels in the UK, with 14.9m on BBC channels.

Younger audiences

35. **The BBC is committed to targeted content that gives access to impartial, accurate and age appropriate news and information to our younger audiences.** Our children's news programme, *BBC Newsround*, is at the forefront of this coverage aimed at primary age children through the *Newsround* website, which has a dedicated Coronavirus section, and new TV bulletin slots during school closures. For preschool children the *CBeebies* website has been encouraging children to stay at home through a *Hey Duggee* chart highlighting nine different activities to complete at home.
36. **BBC Newsround is conscious of the vital role they play in providing accurate information for young audiences** and their factual information content has included items on "do masks work?", "social distancing explained in dominos" and the handwashing demonstration video, the first BBC content on this, which had 158,000 views.
37. **The BBC is fully aware that young audiences are not immune to fake news and misinformation around Covid-19 and have questions about some of the things they have seen and read.** *BBC Newsround* presenters, Dr Chris (a qualified virologist) and Dr Xand from *Operation Ouch* (a popular CBBC programme) answered children's question on the virus, informing and reassuring the audience in a way they could easily identify with¹⁸. This session had 300,000 views online, and more than half a million on social media. And debunking myths around children's pets and the virus was tackled in a Q&A with CBBC *Pets Factor* vet Dr James¹⁹.
38. **The BBC is committed to helping young people identify fake news and recognises the even greater importance of this role in the Covid-19 pandemic.** *BBC Newsround's* has run pieces *How to spot fake Coronavirus news?*²⁰ and *'Coronavirus: Can you separate myth from fact'*²¹ which have had 250,000 unique browsers.

¹⁷ AT Internet, our web analytics tool

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51481330>

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51711366>

39. **For older children the Fact or Fake campaign is being used to challenge misinformation.** The campaign is a collaboration between BBC News and BBC Bitesize and helps 11-16 year olds navigate the confusing world of fake news. The resources, available via the BBC Bitesize website, have recently been updated to reflect the Covid-19 situation, including a quiz to help users debunk Coronavirus myths.
40. **The BBC has also used BBC talent and archive footage to get across key factual messages to all audiences, including young adults who are high consumers of social media content.** A series of films on TV and social media encouraged people to stay in their homes, making use of appropriately themed footage from *Miranda*, *The Thick of it*, *The Mighty Boosh* and *I'm Alan Partridge*.
41. **The BBC has been offering media education, working to inform all audiences about the dangers of misinformation and how to detect it for themselves.** As well as the initiatives for younger people in the UK and worldwide, outlined above, it has created specific materials for older people. These include a short film by Zeinab Badawi which has run prominently on the News Channel and on the BBC Live page News online for UK audiences as well as on World News and has been translated for global audiences.

Fake news initiatives

42. **The BBC also recognises the importance of working with other content providers to establish best practice.** The Trusted News Initiative (TNI) was set up last year to protect audiences and users from disinformation, particularly around moments of jeopardy, such as elections. It has now been extended to identify false and potentially harmful Covid-19 disinformation by putting in place a shared alert system so that content can be reviewed promptly by platforms. This is a major industry collaboration of news and tech organisations, working together to tackle fake news at this time. The partners within the TNI are: BBC, Facebook, Google/YouTube, Twitter, Microsoft, AFP, Reuters, European Broadcasting Union (EBU), Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Hindu, CBC/Radio-Canada, First Draft, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
43. **The BBC recognises that having the skills to spot fake news will enable audiences to gravitate towards accurate and impartial content and also help defeat the unintentional spreading of misinformation, which has been seen during the Covid-19 pandemic.** The long term project, BBC Young Reporter offers media literacy resources to secondary school children in the UK, and their schools, colleges and youth organisations. This is also being piloted globally, focusing on areas with particular challenges with endemic misinformation; India, Kenya, Brazil, Nigeria, Serbia and Myanmar.
44. **Elsewhere international audiences can also access My World - a global news show for young audiences to help them understand the key stories on the issues that are shaping our world; and the BBC's Beyond Fake News team have also produced a new website for staff, audiences and journalists to help improve media literacy.**²² This team also conducts original research into what makes people share false stories often in partnership with other news and tech organisations for example Twitter and Google. Such relationships further open communication channels between the BBC and social media content and news providers.

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/52096366>

²¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51393288>

²² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/collections/fake-news>

BBC's role in debunking Covid-19 myths and fake news

45. **Almost half of UK online adults came across false or misleading information about the coronavirus (Covid-19) in the last week²³ and the BBC is committed to challenging these fake news stories, which often promote inaccurate and sometimes dangerous health "advice".**
46. **The BBC has taken this frontline role in debunking Covid-19 myths. Our well established, expert BBC teams including the BBC Trending, Reality Check, User Generated Content and BBC Monitoring's Disinformation Team have been brought together to provide a dedicated service covering and debunking misinformation daily.**
47. **The BBC alerts audiences to this misinformation across all its coverage and uses the information and myths uncovered by the expert teams to help inform news packages, and interviews.** There is also a dedicated Reality Check page²⁴ and Reality Check correspondent Chris Morris has made several short packages which have run cross-platform, including social media where they can and have been shared, to highlight some of the popular myths to ignore.²⁵
48. **The BBC Monitoring's Disinformation Team produces reports on Covid-19 for the BBC and external stakeholders.** The team is responsible for misinformation daily updates, providing crucial lines and updates across the BBC. It also produces a fortnightly disinformation newsletter (the [latest version](#) is from early April 2020), which is shared with BBC journalists and editors, BBC Monitoring's government users and commercial customers.
49. **This monitoring has proved instrumental in identifying fake news, and its reach.** For example, the team played a major role in spotting an imposter BBC Breaking Twitter account, which was spreading an untrue story about the health of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. It was taken down quickly by Twitter, but BBC Monitoring's team in Delhi spotted that the fake post had been picked up by Pakistan's prominent Dawn TV channel which it aired for a short while as a news flash.
50. **The team has also explored how conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus have been promoted by officials and media in a number of countries as part of a war of words on who is most to blame for the pandemic.**

Examples of fake news stories tackled by the BBC include:

5G

51. Conspiracy theories claiming 5G technology helps transmit Covid-19 have been condemned by the scientific community. Videos have been shared on social media showing mobile phone masts on fire in Birmingham and Merseyside - along with the claims. The posts have been shared on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram - including by verified accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers. But scientists say the idea of a connection between Covid-19 and 5G is "complete rubbish" and biologically impossible. The conspiracy theories have been branded "the worst kind of fake news" by NHS England Medical Director Stephen Powis.²⁶

²³ Ofcom weekly online survey, 9 April 2020 <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/half-of-uk-adults-exposed-to-false-claims-about-coronavirus>

²⁴ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/reality_check

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/51952535/coronavirus-health-myths-you-should-ignore>

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/52168096>

Garlic will prevent infection

52. There have been numerous posts recommending people eat garlic to prevent infection and these are being shared on Facebook. The South China Morning Post reported a story of a woman who had to receive hospital treatment for a severely inflamed throat after consuming 1.5kg of raw garlic. The WHO (World Health Organization) says that while it is "a healthy food that may have some antimicrobial properties", there's no evidence that eating garlic can protect people from the new coronavirus.

'Miracle minerals'

53. YouTuber Jordan Sather, who has many thousands of followers across different platforms, has been claiming that a "miracle mineral supplement", called MMS, can "wipe out" coronavirus. It contains chlorine dioxide - a bleaching agent. Last year, the [US Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\) warned about the dangers to health of drinking MMS](#). Health authorities in other countries have also issued alerts about it saying it can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and symptoms of severe dehydration.

Home-made hand sanitiser

54. As reports of the shortages emerged in Italy, so did recipes for home-made gel on social media. But these recipes were for a disinfectant better suited for cleaning surfaces and, as scientists pointed out, not suitable for use on skin. Alcohol-based hand gels usually also contain emollients, which make them gentler on skin, on top of their 60-70% alcohol content. Professor Sally Bloomfield, at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, says she does not believe you could make an effective product for sanitising hands at home - [even vodka only contains 40% alcohol](#).

Drinkable silver

55. The use of colloidal silver was promoted on US televangelist Jim Bakker's show. Colloidal silver is tiny particles of the metal suspended in liquid. A guest on the show claimed the solution kills some strains of coronavirus within 12 hours (while admitting it hadn't yet been tested on Covid-19). The idea that it could be an effective treatment for coronavirus has been widely shared on Facebook, particularly by "medical freedom" groups which are deeply suspicious of mainstream medical advice. The US health authorities say there's no evidence this type of silver solution is effective for any health condition, and could cause including kidney damage, seizures and argyria - a condition that makes your skin turn blue.

Drinking water every 15 minutes

56. One post, copied and pasted by multiple Facebook accounts, quotes a "Japanese doctor" who recommends drinking water every 15 minutes to flush out any virus that might have entered the mouth. A version in Arabic has been shared more than 250,000 times. Professor Trudie Lang at the University of Oxford says there is "no biological mechanism" that would support the idea that you can just wash a respiratory virus down into your stomach and kill it. Infections like coronaviruses enter the body via the respiratory tract when you breathe in. Some of them might go into your mouth, but even constantly drinking water isn't going to prevent you from catching the virus.

Ibuprofen is not safe to take

57. Bogus messages have been circulating on WhatsApp and other platforms including: "There are four young people in an intensive care unit in Cork who have no underlying illnesses - all were taking anti-inflammatories and there are concerns this has caused a more severe illness" (false); The University of Vienna has sent a memo warning people with coronavirus symptoms not to take ibuprofen, "because it has been discovered that it increases the speed of reproduction of the coronavirus Covid-19 in the body and this is the reason why people in Italy have reached the current bad stage and rapid spread" (false); "At the university hospital in Toulouse, France, there are four very critical cases of coronavirus in [young people] who do not have any health problems. Their problem is that when they all appeared to have symptoms, they all took painkillers like ibuprofen" (false). These claims are false, but is the advice wrong? We don't yet know whether ibuprofen has a particular effect on the severity or length of illnesses caused by coronavirus - either in healthy people or those with underlying conditions. Dr Charlotte Warren-Gash, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, says, especially for vulnerable patients, "it seems sensible to stick to paracetamol as first choice".

The vaccine you can buy online

58. A false claim surfaced in an Italian leaflet which was reportedly distributed to shops and homes in one particular area of the Venice region, saying a vaccine was available to buy online. It claimed that taking six doses of the vaccine would give protection from the virus for a year, and was available for 50 euros via an email address given in the leaflet. There is, however, no vaccine available anywhere in the world, and according to experts, realistically one won't be ready until at least the middle of next year.

Take as much Vitamin C as possible

59. An Italian news portal published an article purportedly from a researcher said to be from Zanjan University in China, encouraging people to take as much vitamin C as possible to protect themselves from the virus. Metric's for Viralmagazine.it show their article has been viewed over 576,000 times and shared more than 30,000 times. The post also quotes a "Professor Chen Horin CEO of the Beijing Military Hospital" as saying that a hot drink with lemon can curb the spread of the virus. However the Chinese name of the researcher looks fake as it translates into English as "what is your name"; Zanjan University does not exist in China; the Professor referred to has appeared before in misleading health advice about cancer. And to be clear - there's no evidence at all that lemon juice or large doses of vitamin C will stop the virus.

The friend from Gran Canaria

60. This story showed a reasonably new way of spreading disinformation: a voice note on WhatsApp. The person speaking in the note says she's translating advice from a "colleague who has a friend" working at a hospital on the Spanish island of Gran Canaria. It's a mix of tips; some helpful (drink lots of hot drinks and wash surfaces thoroughly), others misleading. The speaker says "sunlight ... neutralises the virus" and that coronavirus can be killed by taking "a sip of warm water every 20 minutes". There's no scientific basis for either of these claims.

The 'Uncle with the master's degree'

61. This post is a list of tips and advice - some true, some benign, and some possibly harmful – that is circulating on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and elsewhere. At first glance it seems legitimate

because the information is attributed to a trusted source: a doctor, an institution, or that well-educated "uncle". It's hopped from the Facebook profile of an 84-year-old British man to the Instagram account of a Ghanaian TV presenter, through Facebook groups for Indian Catholics to coronavirus-specific forums, WhatsApp groups, and Twitter accounts.

62. BBC Trending's Marianna Spring and BBC Monitoring's Olga Robinson traced the journey of the viral post from earliest discoverable incarnation, tracked how it mutated, and challenged one of the 'super spreaders' on his feelings on spreading misleading information.²⁷ And the BBC also shared how they conducted their investigation²⁸.
63. The BBC recognises the plethora of fake news stories on Covid-19 especially online and social media and through their fact checking teams invite audiences to get in touch with their own examples of misleading or false news so they can investigate further. By sharing that request on social media, for example twitter accounts, it receives a greater audience and also attracts people who are accessing their news from a range of sources and are more likely to be exposed to such misinformation.

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-51931394>

²⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/articles/art20200322100334527>