COMMUNICATION ABOUT CORONA

Media reporting and trust during the Covid-19 pandemic

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English Summary

Vetenskap & Allmänhet
VA – PUBLIC & SCIENCE

SUMMARY

The corona pandemic has been a dominant topic in public discourse since the winter of 2020. In collaboration with researchers at Södertörn University and Karolinska Institutet, the Swedish non-profit association VA (Public & Science) has conducted a study to investigate how people in Sweden are receiving and interpreting information about the pandemic, and how the pandemic is being reported by the media. The objective was to investigate what influences people's perceptions in a crisis situation where research and researchers play a central role amidst a constantly changing flow of information.

The study consisted of two parts, in which we:

1. monitored the Swedish public's perceptions of the media reporting on the coronavirus and people's confidence in various professions that comment on the virus in the Swedish news media. The collected data consist of 16 online surveys conducted during the period March 2020 – April 2021. A minimum of 1,000 people participated in each survey.

2. analysed the content of online news articles on the coronavirus and research on Swedish Television (SVT), in the morning daily newspaper Dagens Nyheter (DN) and in the tabloid Aftonbladet at five different time periods between April 2020 – May 2021. The time periods coincided with three peaks and two falls in the infection rate and hospital admissions in Sweden.
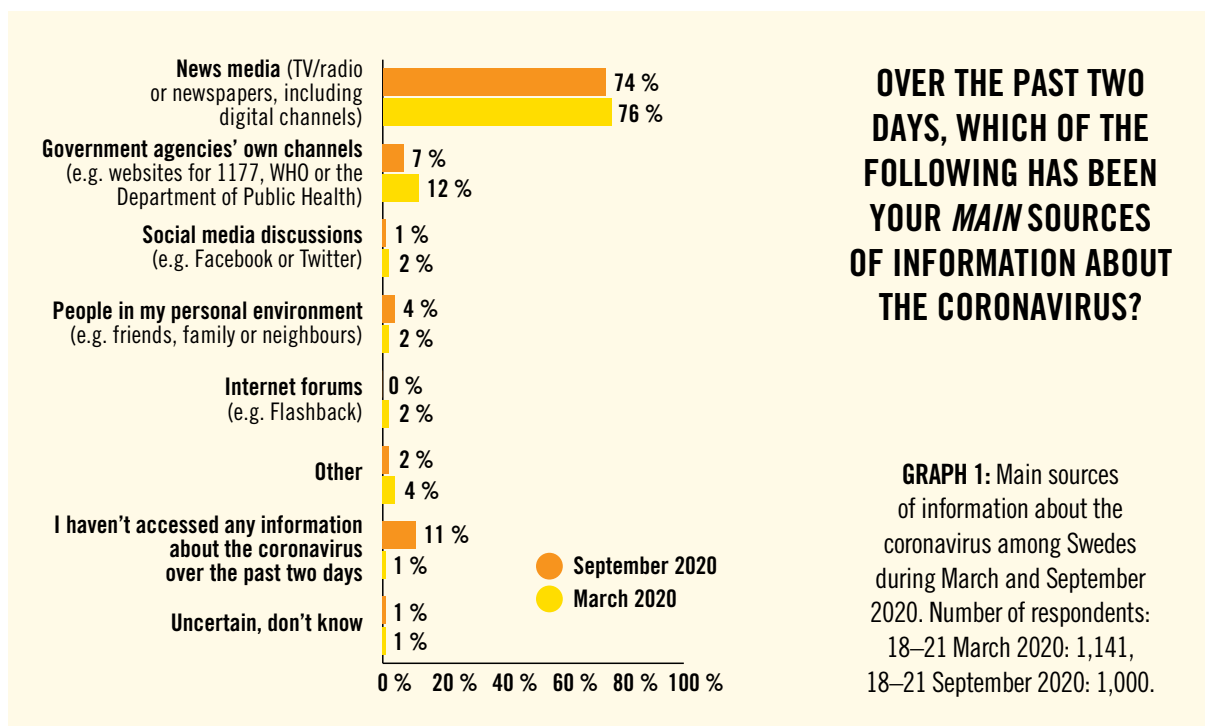
Results from the surveys show, among other things, that:

➡ Traditional news media such as TV, newspapers and radio are the Swedish public's main sources of information about the coronavirus.

➡ People aged 65 years or older get information from local morning newspapers, SVT, Swedish Radio and TV4 to a greater extent than other respondents.

➡ Swedes have the greatest confidence in the news reporting of the public service channels. They have the least confidence in reporting by foreign/international media, and the tabloids Aftonbladet and Expressen.

➡ Supporters of the Sweden Democrats, to a greater extent than others, have low confidence in reporting on the coronavirus.

➡ Public confidence in reporting on the coronavirus in the Swedish evening newspapers is lower than in the morning newspapers. However, a larger proportion of Swedes access news about the coronavirus in the evening newspapers.

➡ During the course of the pandemic, a substantially larger proportion of Swedes perceived the tone of reporting as predominantly hyped/alarmist at the beginning, than later on.

➡ Throughout the entire period of the study, nearly nine out of ten Swedes have had high confidence in doctors and other healthcare professionals as well as researchers when they comment on the coronavirus in the media. Confidence in government officials, politicians and journalists rose at the beginning of the pandemic and then returned to levels at the start of the survey.

Looking at the content of media coverage on the coronavirus and research on Swedish Television (SVT), and in Dagens Nyheter and Aftonbladet, we see that:
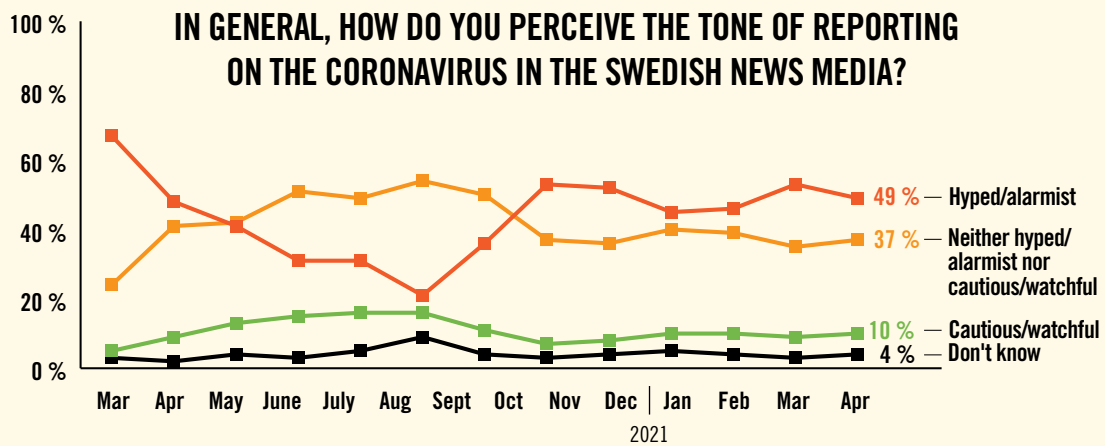
→ The majority of the media coverage takes the form of reporting articles (such as news stories), while a smaller proportion consists of commentary articles (such as analyses), or argumentative articles (such as editorials or debate articles).

→ At the start of the pandemic, a significantly larger proportion of articles focused on the Stockholm area than during subsequent periods of the study.

→ The most common subjects are restrictions/guidelines, the spread of infection and vaccines. Other common subjects are the situation in hospitals, politics, new research and economics.

→ The tone of the reporting is predominantly neutral. One in five articles contains alarming elements and one in ten has a calming tone. News articles have a neutral tone to a greater extent compared with, for example, debate articles and opinion pieces.

→ One in five articles addresses new research findings. These are most often found in news articles or editorials.

→ Uncertainty in the research is addressed more often in the first period of the study than in the subsequent periods of the study.

→ Researchers (especially those from the medical field) are the professional group most often mentioned in the media coverage, followed by government representatives and journalists. Starting from the second time period, the proportion of researchers from social science subjects increases.

The full report in Swedish can be found at:
https://v-a.se/2021/11/varapport2021_4/

SELECTED GRAPHS AND TABLES

News media (TV/radio or newspapers, including digital channels) — 74 % / 76 %

Government agencies' own channels (e.g. websites for 1177, WHO or the Department of Public Health) — 7 % / 12 %

Social media discussions (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) — 1 % / 2 %

People in my personal environment (e.g. friends, family or neighbours) — 4 % / 2 %

Internet forums (e.g. Flashback) — 0 % / 2 %

Other — 2 % / 4 %

I haven't accessed any information about the coronavirus over the past two days — 11 % / 1 %

Uncertain, don't know — 1 % / 1 %

0 % 20 % 40 % 60 % 80 % 100 %

● September 2020
● March 2020

OVER THE PAST TWO DAYS, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING HAS BEEN YOUR *MAIN* SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS?

GRAPH 1: Main sources of information about the coronavirus among Swedes during March and September 2020. Number of respondents: 18–21 March 2020: 1,141, 18–21 September 2020: 1,000.

GRAPH 2: Perception of the tone of reporting on the coronavirus in the Swedish news media. The graph shows the combined proportions for respondents who answered fairly or very hyped/alarmist or fairly or very cautious/watchful. The number of respondents in each survey varied between 1,000– 1,002.

IN GENERAL, HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE THE TONE OF REPORTING ON THE CORONAVIRUS IN THE SWEDISH NEWS MEDIA?

49 % — Hyped/alarmist
37 % — Neither hyped/ alarmist nor cautious/watchful
10 % — Cautious/watchful
4 % — Don't know

Mar Apr May June July Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec | Jan Feb Mar Apr
2021

GRAPH 3: Confidence in different professional groups when they comment on the coronavirus in the Swedish news media. The graph shows the proportions that have fairly or very high confidence (Five-point scale: Very high, Fairly high, Neither high nor low, Fairly low, Very low). The number of respondents in each survey varied between 1,000–1,002.
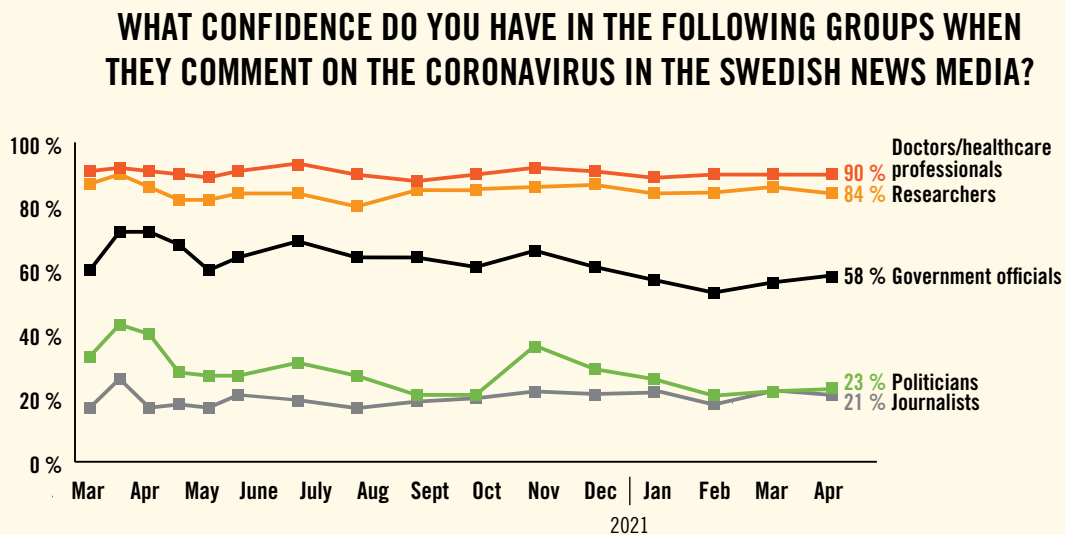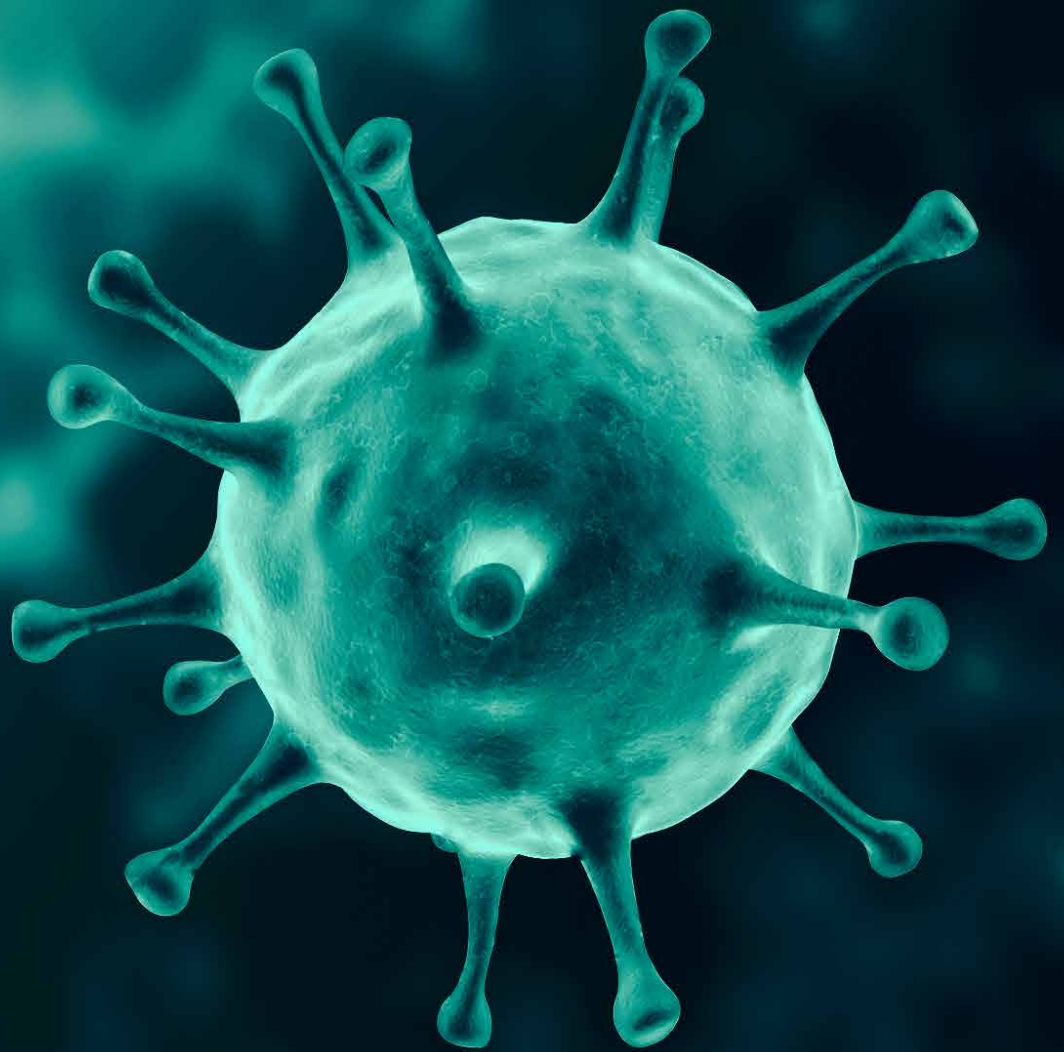
WHAT CONFIDENCE DO YOU HAVE IN THE FOLLOWING GROUPS WHEN THEY COMMENT ON THE CORONAVIRUS IN THE SWEDISH NEWS MEDIA?

Doctors/healthcare professionals
90 %
Researchers
84 %
58 % Government officials
23 % Politicians
21 % Journalists

Mar Apr May June July Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec | Jan Feb Mar Apr
2021

TABLE 1: The proportion of different types of articles during the five time periods. Number of articles in each time period: 20 Apr–3 May 2020: 239, 14–27 Sep 2020: 247, 4–17 Jan 2021: 203, 22 Feb–7 Mar 2021: 242, 19 Apr–2 May 2021: 242.

	20 APR– 3 MAY 2020 (PEAK 1)	14–27 SEP 2020 (FALL 1)	4–17 JAN 2021 (PEAK 2)	22 FEB– 7 MAR 2021 (FALL 2)	19 APR– 2 MAY 2021 (PEAK 3)
Reporting	84 %	75 %	73 %	65 %	72 %
Commentary	8 %	13 %	11 %	18 %	17 %
Argumentative	6 %	7 %	11 %	9 %	7 %
Investigative	2 %	1 %	-	1 %	0 %
Other	-	4 %	4 %	7 %	4 %

TABLE 2: The six most common subjects of news articles during different time periods. The most prevalent subjects in each period are highlighted in orange. Number of articles in each time period: 20 Apr–3 May 2020: 239, 14–27 Sep 2020: 247, 4–17 Jan 2021: 203, 22 Feb–7 Mar 2021: 242, 19 Apr–2 May 2021: 242.

	20 APR– 3 MAY 2020 (PEAK 1)	14–27 SEP 2020 (FALL 1)	4–17 JAN 2021 (PEAK 2)	22 FEB– 7 MAR 2021 (FALL 2)	19 APR– 2 MAY 2021 (PEAK 3)
Restrictions and guidelines	11 %	11 %	10 %	9 %	7 %
Spread of infection	12 %	10 %	7 %	7 %	8 %
Vaccines	1 %	3 %	13 %	11 %	16 %
The situation in hospitals	9 %	7 %	8 %	4 %	10 %
Politics	3 %	9 %	5 %	7 %	7 %
New research	7 %	4 %	3 %	6 %	5 %