

Different lockdown rules in the four nations are confusing the public

*When lockdown was eased in England but not in other nations, the devolved administrations were at pains to stress that people living in England could not travel to Wales or Scotland to exercise. In the latest wave of their news diary research, **Stephen Cushion, Nikki Soo, Maria Kyriakidou and Marina Morani (Cardiff University)** find widespread confusion about the different rules, which is partly attributable to national newspaper coverage.*

Since the UK went into lockdown, the four nations have managed the pandemic differently. This was brought into sharper focus on 10 May after the Prime Minister announced plans to allow people in England to exercise more freely, to consider opening schools from 1 June and to change health guidance from 'staying home' to 'staying alert'.



A solitary picnic: banned in Wales and Scotland, permitted in England. Photo: [nvainio](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Since many people across the four nations, especially Wales, continue to [rely](#) on either [UK-wide](#) or [English](#)-produced media for their news, the devolved governments have attempted to clarify their health guidance compared to England.

In Wales, Welsh law applies.

No one should travel to Wales to exercise.

I'll be doing all I can to ensure that this message is communicated, to keep us all safe.
pic.twitter.com/i9LiAX0Gxc

— Mark Drakeford (@fmwales) [May 11, 2020](#)

Yet our research shows many people remain confused by what social distancing measures they should be following in different parts of the UK. While we found TV news bulletins accurately communicated the distinction between England and the other nations, many newspapers prominently made reference to the UK or England-only, or did not specify the geographical relevance of the lockdown measures.

Confusing health guidance

As part of our ongoing qualitative study of just under 200 participants during the pandemic, we asked them between 7-10 May whether the UK government, or the UK government and devolved administrations, were in charge of the UK's lockdown measures. We found half of all respondents incorrectly said the UK government.

A few days later – after the PM's announcement – we then explored their understanding of the lockdown measures across the UK. Participants were primarily from England, but also Scotland and Wales. We found that most respondents – eight in ten – realised schools could open from 1 June in England. And that three in four knew participants knew they could meet one other friend in a park or public place in England.

However, we found many people confused about where they could exercise. Although the new measures in England allow people to use their car to exercise, six in ten participants did not know that in Scotland and Wales they had to remain in their local environment. Nearly a quarter of respondents thought rules about exercising were UK-wide.

We also showed participants the UK government's new guidance to "stay alert" rather than "stay home" for people in England. In the other nations, the message to stay home remained unchanged, as a Welsh politician pointed out.

The Government in England have decided to change their message on Coronavirus from 'Stay home' to 'Stay alert'.

This is NOT THE POSITION IN WALES

We don't agree with the change of message. It risks sending the wrong signal. We are not out of the woods.

In Wales Stay at home pic.twitter.com/CMhvVxZ8YA

— Lee Waters MS (@Amanwy) [May 10, 2020](#)

And yet, we found only 11 in 20 respondents correctly identified the advert as being relevant to England-only. Almost a third thought it was UK-wide government guidance.

Confusion about devolution

More generally, we asked participants if they felt confident that the media was giving them the correct information about decisions that affect their life and community during the pandemic. While many acknowledged journalists tried to be informative, most said they felt the media could do more to reflect their local environments.

However, some suggested it was unclear government messaging – not media reporting – that was responsible for their confusion. As one respondent put it: "The government have been very vague which has led to a lot of confusion but the media are only reporting on the information they have been given by the government."

Many respondents admitted they struggled to understand the UK's devolved powers. One said: "I am finding it confusing with there being different rules for different areas of the UK so I am not sure if the news I am receiving is totally correct". Another observed: "Distinguishing between rules for different parts of the UK has been difficult, with reporters sometimes omitting which rules apply where. These rules should be stated explicitly as to who they apply to." Several participants outside of England referred to the importance of local news.

"Don't we control Wales as well?"

Police clamp down on visitors from England as confusion continues over Wales' different lockdown restrictions | report by [@hannahthomasitv](#) <https://t.co/M13Pu5GEEf> pic.twitter.com/0f790JQsqj

— ITV Wales News (@ITWales) [May 18, 2020](#)

Our study also examined how the UK evening bulletins reported the different lockdown measures the day after the PM's announcement. All broadcasters carefully used the words "in England" in coverage of the lockdown measures, with most featuring packages and live two-ways that accurately compared the contrasting health guidance across the nations.

But the differences between the nations was sometimes subtly rather than explicitly communicated. For example, on ITV News at Ten: "The Prime Minister said his roadmap for lifting the lockdown will enable the country to control the disease, if people continue to follow the rules. They do understand what we are trying to do, he said, and he was relying on British, or should that be English, common sense".

By contrast, many English-produced newspapers – and their online and social media platforms – reported the lockdown measures by either not referencing a nation within the UK, or stating "Britain" or "the UK" without pointing out any differences across the devolved administrations in the headlines.

Monday's [@DailyMailUK](#) [#MailFrontPages](#) pic.twitter.com/92u9n32q1f

— Daily Mail U.K. (@DailyMailUK) [May 10, 2020](#)

Enhancing public understanding

Our previous [research](#) showed that when journalists make implicit references to devolved powers, such as "in England", news audiences do not necessarily realise there are differences across the other nations. They needed explicit references to devolved powers, where journalists spelt out differences across all four nations. This suggests the news media need to repeatedly and explicitly communicate how different governments across the UK are handling the health crisis in order to enhance public understanding.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.