Contextualising Risk: The unfolding information work and practices of people during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Title: Contextualising Risk: The unfolding information work and practices of people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abstract:

- **Purpose**: The aim of this study is to investigate people’s information practices as the SARS-CoV-2 virus took hold in the UK. Of particular interest is how people transition into newly created pandemic information environments and the ways information literacy practices come into view.

- **Design/methodology/approach**: The qualitative research design comprised one to one in-depth interviews conducted virtually towards the end of the UK’s first lockdown phase in May-July 2020. Data were coded and analysed by the researchers using constant comparative and situated analysis techniques.

- **Findings**: Transition into new pandemic information environments was shaped by an unfolding phase, an intensification phase, and a stable phase. Information literacy emerged as a form of safeguarding as participants engaged in information activities designed to mitigate health, legal, financial and well-being risks produced by the pandemic.

- **Originality**: This is one of the first studies to explore information practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Research limitations/implications**: Time constraints meant that the sample from the first phase of this study skewed female.

- **Social implications**: This paper contributes to our understandings of the role that information and information literacy play within global and long-term crises.

- **Practical implications**: Findings establish foundational knowledge for public health and information professionals tasked with shaping public communication during times of crisis.

**Keywords**: information literacy, COVID-19, risk, transition, practice theory, qualitative

1. Introduction

In their 2020 paper that positions global health crises as information crises, Xie *et al.* state that one of the major challenges for information scientists is to establish how COVID-19 information environments are characterised, and what information science theories and methods might be used to examine and interpret human activity during a pandemic, including in lockdown situations. These challenges are underscored by Lupton (2020, n.p.) who argues that the scope of the pandemic means that social research documenting “people’s everyday experiences of living in this moment” is urgently needed. The research reported in this study, which represents the first in several papers that will report on information practices in the United Kingdom (UK) during the COVID-19 crisis, forms an attempt to respond to these calls. The overall aim of this two-phase study is to investigate people’s information practices as the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which is responsible for the current respiratory syndrome commonly referred to as Covid-19, took hold.

In the UK, the Covid-19 pandemic initially unfolded during January-February 2020 and led to a government instigated countrywide lockdown for a period of 13 weeks from March-June 2020. During this period, schools and non-essential businesses closed, exercise and face-to-face social interaction was severely curtailed, and workers were encouraged to work from home, or were furloughed under a government scheme. Certain groups designated as vulnerable were further encouraged to ‘shield’ or to take additional precautions. These radical redefinitions of everyday life were intensified through the UK’s relative lack of
experience with pandemic situations; while the world has grappled with SARS (2003), MERS (2012) and H1N1 (2009) in recent years, COVID-19 represents one of the most serious diseases to hit the UK since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1919. COVID-19 is also very different from other epidemics that have affected the UK because it is not associated with stigmatised social practices, as in the case of HIV/AIDS.

As information researchers, we are interested in how people transitioned into newly created pandemic information environments including how people’s information literacy practices emerged in the context of the risks and uncertainties that were produced through the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the community. Within this framing, we are particularly interested in how participants construct their understandings of risk (socially, temporally, physically and materially) as well as the ways in which these uncertainties create the context and the condition through which participants operationalise their information practices. To examine these ideas, we take the following question as our starting point:

- What has informed the UK public’s understanding about the COVID-19 pandemic and what information practices and literacies of information came into view during the early days of the pandemic and the subsequent countrywide lockdown?

In this study we conceptualise risk from a socio-cultural perspective (Douglas, 1992) as a construction that is brought about by the coupling of social, material and corporeal dimensions. These dimensions create conditions and arrangements that, in turn, structure the lived everyday experience of people. From this perspective, knowledge about risk is mediated through social and cultural frameworks that shape understanding about what information and knowledges are valued and what type of information work and practice may be operationalised to achieve specific ends (Douglas, 1992; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Lloyd, 2010; Schatzki, 2002). Central to this understanding of risk is a focus on the interactions that the participants in this study take to mitigate risk.

We also understand information literacy as a social practice that is enacted in social settings and composed of a suite of activities and skills that reference structured and embodied knowledges and ways of knowing relevant to the context (Lloyd 2010; 2017). This definition moves beyond the positioning of information literacy as a set of measurable skills, which would narrow our understanding of the forms of information and the ways of knowing that contribute to the construction of information landscapes. Information literacy is a complex practice, and in modern and fluid information environments, it has become a critical literacy with relational, situational, recursive, material and embodied dimensions (Lloyd, 2017). To investigate information literacy practice consequently means that we attempt to understand:

- The ways the practice is constructed and then enacted in relation to the social setting through which the participant is situated
- how participants break down information challenges related to understanding risk
- the non-human actors that support their practice and performance
- how the practice draws from expertise, knowledge and local/nuanced ways of knowing and is thus expressed and articulated.

In the unique and unexpected contexts created by the COVID-19 pandemic, critical thinking about risk and the actions that might mitigate the risks presented is predicated on the capacity to employ information literacy practice.
2. Literature Review

This work is contextualised by a brief overview of literature related to risk, including in relation to health crises and information, as well as prior work related to crisis situations.

2.1 Risk

Risk is a complex concept that is understood in a number of different ways. These various understandings, which impact whether risk is positioned as an objective event or as socially mediated and constructed, are loosely categorised as taking either a techno-scientific perspective, where risk is understood in terms of measurement and probability, a cognitive psychological approach, where risk is studied in terms of rational human response to danger, and a sociocultural perspective, which emphasises the social and cultural contexts that shape understandings of hazard (Lupton, 1999; Zinn, 2009).

Within a sociocultural perspective, risk is divided into ‘weak’ or ‘strong’ constructionist positions (Lupton, 2013, p.41). In the ‘weak’ constructionist position, which is also known as a critical realist position (Zinn, 2009, p.7; Tulloch, 2009), risk is understood as real, yet as shaped and labelled through cultural processes (Lupton, 2013, p.42). This approach is most famously exemplified through the concept of the risk society, which argues that modernisation has led to the creation of societies that are characterised by increasingly prominent and pervasive conceptions of risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). In contrast, the ‘strong’ constructionist perspective positions risk as the product of discourse, or sociocultural ways of seeing. This approach to risk has been developed through reference to the work of Foucault (1991), which positions risk as a strategy of power that is employed by the government to regulate populations (Lupton, 2013, p.116).

The study reported here is framed theoretically by a cultural-symbolic perspective on risk, which emerges from the work of Mary Douglas (1985, 1992). Long overlooked in risk theory (Lupton, 1999, p.6), a cultural-symbolic approach positions risk as culturally specific, or as shaped in a specific context in relation to “culturally learned assumptions and weightings” (Douglas, 1992, p.58). These ideas emerge from Douglas’ earlier anthropological work into the ways in which purity and pollution are used to construct protective and stabilising boundaries between bodies, groups and communities (Lupton, 1999, p.3). Characterised as adopting a ‘weak’ constructionist position towards risk, due to her emphasis on the “reality of danger” (Douglas, 1992, p.29), Douglas’ work nonetheless positions risk as constructed through the social, corporeal and epistemic meaning making activities that shape lived experience rather than existing as an objective hazard. The emphasis on community boundaries further draws attention to how conceptions of risk must be understood as shared locally rather than individualistically or globally. The sociocultural perspective that is adopted in this study therefore focuses on how risk is understood and embedded within a community, as well as how these dangers are brought into view through “personal embodied experiences, observations and emotional responses, discussions with others and access to expert knowledges” (Lupton, 2013, p.45).

2.2 Risk and Health Crises

The literature that explores risk in relation to public health is extensive. Studies originally tended to take a probabilistic or techno-scientific approach, but researchers have since started to engage with constructionist understandings of risk in an attempt to move beyond early positivist framings (Heyman et al., 2012). Similar divisions can also be seen in literature that more specifically examine health crises such as pandemics, where risk is frequently understood in terms or risk calculation (Dryhurst, 2020; Wong and Jensen, 2020) or as situated in the discourses of a risk society, even though Beck (1992) himself does not classify disease as a risk (e.g., Abeyesinghe and White, 2011; Lohm et al., 2015). However, in an
editorial designed to extend interpretivist understandings of health risks, Brown uses Mary Douglas’ work to explore how risk is brought into being (Brown, 2020, p.6) in specific ways through news and media outlets as well as governments and international organisations. Importantly for this study, this includes how probabilistic understandings of risk have contributed to the positioning of specific community members, including “the relative safety of the mainstream ‘normals’, and the implicit othering of those who are older and more vulnerable” (Brown, 2020, p.5). The future time of herd immunity rather than more short-term realities was further seen to direct attention in a number of ways. Brown additionally uses Douglas’ work to illustrate the impact of affective responses on risk, including the ways in which imagery, which shapes emotional reactions, elevates or suppresses perceptions of risk (Slovic, 2012, p.409). However, while Brown implicitly acknowledges the role that public communication plays in shaping understandings of risk, his work stops short of examining the impact of information sources on the construction and mitigation of risk.

2.3 Risk and Information

The role that information plays within risky situations has not previously been widely explored. When information has formed the focal point of research, studies have tended to focus on the factors that impact risk information activity, a cognitive psychological perspective that centres on perceptions of human rationality. An example of this approach can be found in Griffin, Dunwoody and Neuwirth’s (1999) Model of Information Risk, Seeking and Processing, where perceptions of information sufficiency and information gathering capacity, amongst other factors, are seen to shape a person’s response to risk. More recently, Choo (2017) has developed this model to recognise the role that emotions and information avoidance plays within a risk society. Beyond these studies, there has been little work examining information interactions in more detail, beyond a recognition that people rely on a variety of resources, including magazines, social media, internet and knowledgeable others, rather than just official sources for risk information (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003).

Tulloch and Lupton (2003, p.5) note that these sources help to “ward off” danger (p.77) by making the invisibility of risk more visible. However, there has been little further sustained focus on the ways in which information is produced, accessed, used and documented within risk information environments. Similarly, although Catellier and Yang (2012, p.906) indicate that trust in “government agencies, doctors, scientists” and public health bodies plays a vital role in risk information seeking, research stops short of probing these ideas further.

The connections between risk and information literacy were first explored by Nara (2007), who suggests that people can individually counteract risk through understanding and engaging with a variety of information sources, including the senses, institutional or expert information and mass media (p.946). These ideas are explored more fully in Hicks’ examination of the information literacy practices of language-learners (2019, 2020, 2021), which led to the production of the grounded theory of mitigating risk. The grounded theory of mitigating risk states that the risks produced during language-learners’ sojourns overseas catalysed the enactment of information literacy practices that mediated transition within a new setting (Hicks, 2019). While the theory is localised, it nonetheless draws attention to the role that various information activities play in mitigating risk, including observing people and the environment, mediating information to less experienced people and documenting written and photographic information for the purposes of posterity. The study further acknowledges the important role that positioning plays in the construction of risk, as well as the close connections between information and social support.

2.4 Crisis Information Studies
Work that explores the role that information plays within crisis or disaster situations can be traced back to the work of Hagar (2006), who coined and established the Crisis Informatics field of study. Defined as the “interconnectedness of people, organizations, information and technology during crises,” (Hagar, 2010, p.10), crisis informatics has since grown to examine the role of social media and technology within a variety of natural disasters (e.g., Shklovski et al., 2008) and other crisis situations (e.g., Huang et al., 2015). A related field is Disaster Informatics, which focuses more specifically upon sudden and unpredictable natural disasters rather than human-inflicted problems (Ogie and Verstaevel, 2019). More recently, researchers have started to examine crises and disasters from a Library and Information Science (LIS) perspective, including through the lens of information behaviour and, less commonly, information literacy. Focusing for the most part on natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and fires (e.g., Lopatovska and Smiley, 2013; Pang et al., 2019; Rahmi et al., 2019), literature has also examined other human tragedies, such as 9/11 (Fu, 2011) and the South Korean Sewol Ferry disaster (Lee and Kang, 2018). While this literature explores disasters and crises that are more localised and short-term than in the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to unfurl on a global stage, research offers interesting points of comparison.

The importance of community and collective action forms one of the most prominent themes within existing disaster literature, particularly in crisis informatics research which traces how the growth of social media facilitates the construction of altruistic support networks (e.g., Huang et al., 2015; Shklovski et al., 2008). Noting that local communities help to “reduce ambiguity” (Muhren and Walle, 2010), studies demonstrate that these technologies provide social support as well as facilitating information-sharing (Hagar, 2011; Lopatovska and Smiley, 2013; Shklovski et al., 2008). These affordances are particularly valued when information is scarce, or when official strategies and measures are continually being adjusted, as Hagar found in her study of the UK’s drawn-out foot and mouth crisis (Hagar, 2010; 2011, also see Cole and Watkins, 2015). Another interesting theme is trust, with studies exploring how trustworthy sources of information are established (Cole and Watkins, 2015; Hagar, 2010; 2011; Taylor et al., 2009) as well as, more recently, the impact of misinformation (e.g., Pang et al., 2019; Starbird et al., 2020). Interestingly, rumours, which are often seen to be problematic within crisis situations, are recognised as a “collective problem-solving technique” (Starbird et al., 2020) or “social coping mechanism” with a cathartic purpose (Huang et al., 2015), rather than as uniquely contributing to the crisis. Running throughout these themes is the idea of uncertainty, which is seen to inhibit the verification of information (Starbird et al., 2020) and promote anxiety and other intense emotions (Lopatovska and Smiley, 2013; Griffin et al., 2008).

Studies of crisis and disaster have also typically been temporally marked as occurring in a series of stages or phases. Drawing upon Dynes’ early work exploring disaster (1970), Lopatovska and Smiley (2015) establish a six-stage temporal model of crisis behaviour comprising Pre-disaster, Warning/threat, Impact, Inventory, Survival and Recovery (also see Rahmi et al., 2019). In contrast, there are only three stages in Bunce, Partridge and Davis’ (2011) examination of floods in Queensland; Pre-flooding, Flooding, Receding, which mirror the emphasis on Preparing, Responding and Recovering found in Pang et al. (2019). These stages were seen to impact on information sought as well as information behaviour. Other authors have focused more specifically on information activities, with a number of authors highlighting the importance of monitoring or keeping up to date with new information at a specific point in time (Bunce et al., 2011; Lopatovska and Smiley, 2015; Yates and Partridge, 2014). Images (Ryan, 2018), and observing or noticing environmental (Muhren and Walle, 2010; Ryan, 2013, 2018), social, governmental and business cues, such as the closing of shops (Demuth et al., 2018), are also seen to help people apprehend the severity of the
situation as well as to take preparatory action. Underscoring these ideas is the need to build new routines, particularly when changing material circumstances such as limited connectivity and electric power (Lopatovska and Smiley, 2013) have ruptured habitual activities. These issues were seen to be especially challenging for farmers (Hagar, 2010, 2011) who were denied access to their usual ecology of information sources when they were forced to physically and socially isolate during the UK’s foot and mouth disease.

These studies shed light on the role that information plays during a time of crisis or disaster. However, research has tended to focus, for the most part, on short-term, sudden and localised crises that typically involve physical displacement rather than crises that are global in scope, as well as longer-term. To date, there have been few studies exploring information during the COVID-19 pandemic, although researchers have warned of the impact of social isolation and digital connectivity upon an ability to mediate risk (Robinson et al., 2020). Diary studies that were carried out in the UK between April and May 2020 offer further intriguing insights into unfolding concerns related to misinformation, including trust and the role that the UK government has played in creating and spreading confusing messages (Cushion et al., 2020). These findings are supplemented by work from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, who surveyed people in the UK about their attitudes to the media and government from April- August 2020 (Nielsen et al., 2020). Noting that people in the UK generally had a high degree of confidence in news outlets such as the BBC at the beginning of April, researchers traced how trust in government information declined throughout May 2020 due to perceived mismanagement and incompetence. Interesting, this study also noticed age-related differences related to news consumption as well as a degree of news avoidance in early May as people grappled with anxiety and other mood changes. The current qualitative research project will facilitate an examination of these issues in more detail.

3. Methodology

The study’s focus on participants’ constructions of risk and their developing information practices as they responded to the lockdown edict of the UK government was suited to the richer reflective approaches offered by qualitative research. The qualitative research design comprised one to one in-depth interviews conducted virtually in May-July, towards the end of the UK’s first lockdown phase. Interview questions were open-ended to generate an understanding of lived experience, risk and the conditions that contributed to the creation of information practices but initially focused on; 1) Transition to new working, furlough or unemployment conditions and/or caring roles, including use of technology, altered social connections and physical mobility; 2) Changing health, social, workplace and family information needs, including finding and locating reliable information; 3) Evaluating information sources, including experience of rumours, misinformation and fake news during the pandemic.

Interviews took place online using an end-to-end encrypted video conferencing tool and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The decision was made not to send the transcriptions back to participants who were often dealing with work and family-related challenges, in addition to online fatigue. To ensure accuracy, the transcriptions were independently checked between the two researchers. In some instances, the researchers followed up with further questions, which were emailed to participants. Interviews lasted between 35 and 50 minutes.

Participants were recruited via researcher and institutional social media accounts as well as through a snowball sampling method. Seventeen participants were included in phase one, including twelve females and five males. Participants included people who were working from home or adapting to work under social distancing rules, people who had been
furloughed/made redundant, people who had undertaken new volunteer, caring or home-schooling roles and retirees. Participants were aged between 18 and 70 and were located throughout the UK (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>COVID-status</th>
<th>Date Interviewed</th>
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<td>Key worker</td>
<td>May 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Nurse</td>
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<td>May 2020</td>
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<td>May 2020</td>
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<td>May 2020</td>
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Table 1: Study Participants
Data were coded and analysed by the researchers using constant comparative techniques employed in constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014). These techniques focus on identifying similarities and differences in participants’ lived experience to map sources of information and to recognise the range of information strategies as well as significant themes and perspectives. Recordings and transcriptions of interviews were reviewed independently by both researchers and then coding was compared and discussed over several online sessions.

In addition to the interviews, a situated analysis (Clarke, 2003) was undertaken to develop an understanding of how information literacy plays outs discursively as a practice and the literacies of information that became central to supporting people in times of risk. The creation of situational maps as part of the analysis work helped the researchers to visualise the social worlds of participants as the pandemic context unfolded, intensified and then stabilised. Mapping further enabled the researchers to think systematically about the messy and complex interactions participants had with information and information sources as they learned to navigate and map their new pandemic-shaped contexts. The mapping also provided a cartography of relations and sites of actions, allowing us to visualise (at a collective level) how participants’ information landscapes were being formed.

Limitations of the first phase of the study include the characteristics of the initial sample; while attempts were made to recruit a broad sample, time constraints meant that the sample skewed female and older. This limitation will be addressed in the second phase of data collection for this study.

4. Findings: Transition into the COVID-19 pandemic theatre
In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, transition into new and suddenly unfamiliar information environments was shaped by the ways in which the pandemic was brought into view, the information work undertaken to construct an understanding of risk and the information literacy practices that evolved to mitigate risk. Shaped through participants’ growing awareness of information dissemination, which occurred over time, and created spatial changes to everyday life, transition is characterised as a complex and iterative process of reconstruction. More specifically, transition is conceptualised as taking place within three phases. Each of these stages or periods represent an enmeshed, iterative and evolving set of arrangements, actions and activities that allowed information and knowledge to intensify and stabilise as governmental, medical, economic and social conditions continued to evolve. These phases, and the core information activities that mediate this transition are represented in Figure 1, alongside the information landscape of safeguarding, which forms the major outcome of information literacy practice during lockdown. Safeguarding emerges as the agentic information focused work that participants undertook (i.e., their information literacy practice) to understand and then to mitigate the instrumental risk established via government discourse. In this respect, agency can be seen performatively as the doings and sayings of practice (Schatzki, 2002). The three phases are now detailed.
Phase 1: Unfolding

In phase one, the COVID-19 information environment begins to unfold. During this time, participants’ awareness and understanding of the spread of the SARS CoV-2 virus is characterised by exploratory engagement with authoritative information sources, including governmental advice, which is reported via a range of media channels, as well as physical cues. Tinged by a general sense of disbelief, this early stage of transition is represented as a liminal zone, described as a state of interstitiality - as between time and space, located betwixt and between (Turner, 1967).

The unfolding of the forthcoming crisis represents a key preliminary engagement with the pandemic theatre, which we use to describe the politics, science and community of COVID-19, where audience and actors alike start to become aware of the imminent upheaval upon their everyday life. In the UK, participants reported a growing consciousness of what would become the COVID-19 pandemic from December 2019 to February 2020. However, they remained, for the most part, unconcerned until professional media sources as well as accounts from European acquaintances reported the arrival of the COVID-19 virus in Italy and other nearby countries. Notwithstanding, growing awareness was tempered by a sense of general (but short-lasted) disbelief in the seriousness of the pandemic:

“plagues don’t happen in the 2020, do they?” (P10)
“being up in North Yorkshire, you feel rather removed from everything and almost untouchable” (P17)
Incredulity meant that participants swiftly started to focus on authoritative professional resources that would invoke confidence and direction. Government sources, in particular, were seen to legitimise the pandemic while establishing the conditions and arrangements that would impact everyday life (i.e., policy, restrictions and limitations). Scientific and medical sources played a similar role (government and scientific information was often seen as indistinguishable in this early stage), establishing the health discourses that would frame the lock down period. Accessed through professional media sources such as TV, radio and the newspaper, this information shaped the conditions and the arrangements for an individual, subjective construction of risk, including how the virus might affect a person in terms of health and well-being as well as employment, relationships and the legal requirements associated with lock down life. Formal and authoritative sources played an important role in the workplace, too, with participants indicating that they turned to emails and directives from governing bodies, professional associations and local government to direct and reconstruct employment practices.

The important role that professional media sources played in transmitting governmental and health advice meant that the unfolding pandemic information environment was shaped materially with home technology playing a central role in the creation and co-construction of knowledge. In the early stage of the pandemic, at least, many participants relied on first generation technologies (such as TV and radio), which were seen to provide reliable access to key information, including the 5pm briefings that were presented by the UK Prime Minister and senior health officials. However, the complexity and uncertainty of the situation meant that daily updates soon proved to be insufficient, and participants noted that they supplemented traditional media with information from on-demand news sites, including news apps or alerts on their smartphone as well as news reports posted on YouTube and social media channels. For some participants, this approach helped to “build a picture” [P8] of the changing pandemic information environment. For others, however, the technological affordances of on-demand news sites swiftly meant that keeping up with the news became all-consuming:

“what we were all doing at the beginning in the office, which was constantly having the BBC News thing on your computer and reading it every five minutes and worrying yourself sick” (P14)
“I listened to the news avidly… 8am, 1pm, 6pm and 10pm” (P10)

Demonstrating the anxiety of this time as participants sought to enforce a sense of control within an unfamiliar setting, being informed could also be seen as creating a form of risk ritual (Moore, 2020), where repeated news checking formed the means through which people felt that they were dealing responsibly with uncertainty or doing everything possible to allay the potential dangers of the virus.

**Observing**

*Observing* played a similarly vital role during the unfolding period with participants noting that they relied on physical and visual cues to recognise potential danger to themselves as well as to build an appropriate physical response to the pandemic. These cues referenced emerging political and expert discourses and acted to situate participants within the unfolding information environment. Participants most frequently reported observational practices to gauge and confirm regulations laid down epistemically through formal, governmental and scientific sources, including working out what to do in a newly unfamiliar setting. One participant, for example, would “drive around… to see how it was working” (P7) before she went food shopping, while another reported observing the arrangements put in place to
accommodate distancing rules at their local supermarket from her first-floor apartment window (P8). Seeing how arrangements operated helped to alleviate uncertainty about everyday activities that, until the pandemic, were taken as granted (an activity that has also been noted within research that examines information practices within culturally unfamiliar settings (Hicks, 2019; Lloyd, 2014)). Observing also helped to alert people to potential dangers, both to themselves and to government institutions, as the increased presence of government warning signs (on the daily briefing podium as well as on the radio and in the street) drew attention to the risk of over-stretching the capacity of the National Health Service (NHS). At the same time, observing also added to confusion and uncertainty with one participant suggesting that seeing a 5G mast reinforced her belief in a widely shared conspiracy theory (P5). Other participants commented that a lack of masks amongst pedestrians confirmed their own decision not to wear one at a time when masks were not obligatory: “nobody else is wearing them, so I’d feel like an idiot” (P8). Observing also contributed to the general sense of disbelief as participants noted hearing birdsong (P9) and an unusual lack of traffic (P13).

**Zeroing in**

Participants also engaged in more targeted forms of information seeking during the unfolding stage, including zeroing in on familiar or tried and tested information providers. Referring to the ways in which people went straight to the sources that they thought would be most likely to help them, zeroing in forms a limited but highly focused approach to dealing with new and suddenly complex practical challenges:

> “In the beginning it wasn’t obvious, I emailed my accountant… ‘what do you think?’” (P8)
> “I… went on to East Midlands Railway on Twitter and asked them to clarify” (P16)

Often centring on resources that had previously been useful to participants, zeroing in demonstrates how familiar sources may provide a comforting marker of normalcy during a time of precarity, as well as confirming and legitimising the general sense of confusion. The emphasis on trusted professionals further illustrates the important role that cognitive authorities (Wilson, 1983) play in the establishment of new information landscapes within a time of transition (Hicks, 2019).

**Phase 2: Intensifying**

Phase two formed a period of intensification that was marked by increasing anxiety and stress as people actively tried to ‘grasp’ the pandemic and understand the potential short- and long-term implications in social, medical, economic and material terms.

As participants started to draw down from the unfolding information environment, they entered a more intense and concentrated phase of activity. Centring on increased engagement, this period of intensification reflected the growth of new rules and procedures as essential businesses started to adjust to pandemic arrangements. It also refers to the creation of more complex processes of production and co-production as participants disrupted and recast their everyday practices to form new information landscapes. As a consequence of these powerful changes, the intensification period is characterised by anxiety and precarity. It is also marked by increased greater social engagement or ambient copresence (Madianou, 2016) as participants drew from strong and weak social ties to build a more complex awareness of how the pandemic manifests as new sets of arrangements, activity and practice. In this period, information literacy practice is represented by:
**Hoovering up information**

A significant activity during the intensification phase was the concept of hoovering up information. We define *hoovering* as an intermittent but indiscriminate approach to dealing with information, where people would engage across media platforms to ‘suck up’ all available scraps of news:

“It’s obviously coming here… we were hoovering up all the information” (P6)

Hoovered news and information might then be pooled (Lloyd, 2014) among households at mealtimes, where family members would share updates gleaned from different sources. Constituting a more intense monitoring and scanning of information environments, hoovering suggests that people were actively working to establish an information landscape that would help them to mediate challenges. However, hoovering could also be understood as emerging from a wish to supplement UK government sources, with participants noting that they turned to social media sources as well as news reports from other countries to meet their thirst for knowledge. Hoovering could consequently also reflect the frustration with or distrust of government performance that is noted by Nielsen et al. (2020) as well as providing further evidence of the high levels of anxiety that structure this period.

**Mediating**

As lockdown continued, participants started to reach out to family, friends and other social networks. The social space, which was created by familial and broader social networks and facilitated through a range of new and older forms of technology, acted as a place in which information was mediated or interpreted by and with others (Hicks, 2019; Lloyd *et al.*, 2014). Helping to allay fears and reconcile understandings, mediating scaffolded understanding of the pandemic by forming a space in which participants could share their unique and first-hand experiences of the pandemic, including those who had recovered from COVID-19 (P17) or who had returned to work early (P5). Mediating further helped to shape participants’ understandings of what was relevant within the new information environment with one participant describing her concern about the implications of isolation on very young children after receiving a photo of her grandchild peering through a hole in the fence (P3). A similar focusing of attention was noted by participants who reported becoming hyper alert to and monitoring information related to industries in which their adult children were employed (P3, P15).

At the same time, concerns about the wellbeing of family and friends meant that many participants reported deciding to withhold or refrain from sharing information that was perceived to be upsetting, including visual images related to death or hospital care of COVID-19 patients during the peak crisis period (P5). Others decided to only share “happy news” (P8) with friends and family, considering they had a duty of care to protect their own as well as others’ wellbeing. The desire to restrict the amount of potentially overwhelming information, which highlights the affective impact of imagery (Brown, 2020), illustrates that the intensification phase is referenced affectively as well as socially.

**Documenting: Being present**

Affective dimensions of the pandemic were also referenced through the ways in which participants documented their pandemic experiences. Forming a creative and reflexive response to lockdown life, documenting centred on either reflective text (e.g., diaries) or visual images (e.g., photography, video) and further situated participants in relation to the discourses and actors of the pandemic information environment. For some participants, documenting aspects of their new life helped to situate themselves temporally, with various
people reporting taking photos of seasonal changes in their garden and other measures of passing time (P5, P6, P15). These photos were then often shared via Facebook or WhatsApp networks to situate family and friends within participants’ new realities. More commonly, however, participants reported taking photos or writing diary entries to record lockdown events for future posterity, including desolate streets and empty supermarket shelves. As one participant put it: “when are [the streets] ever going to be like that again?” (P8). Forming a way to mark the zeitgeist, documenting helped to establish and confirm a person’s presence within the pandemic information environment, which mirrors Hicks’ findings (2019) about the role that souvenirs played within language-learner transitions. Participants’ record of the pandemic also connected then to broader shared experiences when these posts were shared on social media or in family and friendship groups.

**Phase Three: Maintaining**

Phase three emerged as a more stable yet increasingly desensitised stage that was represented by a mapped understanding of the information sources, practices and activities that were required to maintain a consistent and informed view of the pandemic, its progress and its implications. During this phase, which represents a more established period, participants were more in control of the pandemic information environment. However, the continued high volume of information means that this period led to desensitisation or an increasingly selective reliance on a small number of information sources as participants become saturated by virus information. In this period, information literacy practice is represented by:

**Compartmentalising**

As the lockdown continued, some participants identified that the intensive hoovering up of information resulted in ‘noise’ that left them feeling saturated and overwhelmed. The increased volume of unfamiliar information, the wider range of information resources, and the need to engage with a variety of new scientific, medical and legal terms meant that participants started to compartmentalise their engagement within the pandemic information environment. Referring to the ways in which people started to shut down or avoid information, compartmentalising forms an active strategy to reduce the sense of being overwhelmed or overloaded with information. For some participants, compartmentalising was a form of self-care or a wellbeing strategy, as they struggled to deal with the 360-degree pandemic coverage:

“I have actually stopped watching the news because I just find it a bit too anxiety creating, but also I just don’t know how much of it is accurate….and also social media stuff, I look on social media quite a lot whether it’s Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and obviously people do quite a lot of talking on there and sharing of things so yeah, it was coming in all directions” (P5)

For others, compartmentalising emerged as a strategy to ensure that they were able to maintain access to the information that they needed, even as the volume of information continued to increase:

“I wouldn’t say I was really in a heightened state of anxiety but what I decided to do was just focus on the information that I needed to know. I just started to compartmentalise stuff so I was looking at stuff that was basically relevant to me-which essentially was how can I keep safe” (P16)
Compartmentalising was also shaped materially by unfolding pragmatic challenges; participants who were suddenly facing increased caring responsibilities cut down on social media because it did not feel like the best use of their limited time (P17), a strategy that may be linked to care-taking gender gaps (e.g., Toff & Palmer, 2018). Participants who were newly working from home also noted a reluctance to engage with certain information sources due to increasing screen fatigue (P11), a bodily reaction that is rarely acknowledged when people are blamed for avoiding information (e.g., Nielsen et al., 2020).

**Tapering off**

Conversely, as participants became more engaged within the COVID-19 landscape, they also began to feel a more increased sense of stability. This led to a gradual tapering off, which is described here as a gradual narrowing down or targeting of information sources, as participants felt more confident that they would not miss anything new:

“I have stopped watching the briefings… because it’s always kind of similar and you don’t need to watch all of it to get the distilled bits out later…” (P8)

Along the same lines, people reported replacing the broad range of information sources upon which they had been relying with proxies or shortcuts that would tell them all they needed to know. P3, for example, reported gauging the pandemic’s progress through glancing at death rate statistics rather than news reports and briefings. Compartmentalising is consequently marked by a more reflexive and critical engagement with the pandemic information environment as participants started to limit and distinguish between the information sources that they perceived to be useful or not (including trusted informants):

“everybody was putting their tuppence worth in- to the point that it was becoming seriously annoying because some of the information that they were giving was wrong and there were a couple of serial Facebook virus experts that I actually unfollowed” (P16)

Participants also started to narrow down the information sources on which they relied as they became more critical of the perceived politicisation of lockdown, particularly as Scottish and English approaches to the pandemic began to diverge, and media outlets started to take a more critical approach to government policy. Judging that information was being massaged for political gain, participants reported avoiding information or using the affordances of technology to reduce their engagement with perceived partisan or biased perspectives:

“I don’t watch the news anymore because it annoys me… [but on a phone] you can be a bit more selective as to which information you can choose to look at” (P15)

These comments also indicate how the sense of feeling overwhelmed is replaced by frustration as participants become more attuned to the changing pandemic environment.

**Safeguarding**

Transition into the novel and complex pandemic information environment is subsequently characterised in terms of safeguarding, which forms the overarching category of this study. As participants started to become more involved with lockdown life, the precarity of this time coupled with the lack of a foreseeable pandemic end date created a number of risks for health, employment and social life. Health risk forms one of the most obvious dangers. Centring on personal health and, for one participant, the risk of dying, risk was also
understood in terms of the health of others as awareness of the infectiousness of COVID-19 continued to grow. However, as lockdown continued, health risks were supplemented by a number of other everyday challenges, including the risk of not being able to access basic provisions and supplies, legal risks of breaking new laws, and more affective risks, including losing access to support networks. The disruption to the workplace meant that the pandemic also produced financial risks, as people were forced into furlough or unemployment situations, as well as employment risks, including the risk of failing dependent colleagues, pupils and patients, amongst others. The concept of risk is fluid, iterative, complex and multidimensional and is dependent on affordances that influence how people understand risk in relation to social conditions and arrangements.

Participants consequently attempted to mitigate the risks that were produced within their new contexts by enacting information literacy practices that facilitate the agentic work of safeguarding as they transition into this novel context. Through drawing upon information sources, participants safeguarded against risk by reconciling individual understanding about the potential impact of the pandemic on health, employment and social life and situating themselves intersubjectively in relation to collective knowledge about the lockdown. At the same time, becoming informed also enabled participants to safeguard the National Health Service (NHS), which was frequently positioned as being at risk of being overwhelmed by hospital admissions. From this perspective, the practice of safeguarding emerged as participants became informed about the changed conditions and arrangements that influence agency. Shaped by the overarching contextualisation of each of the transitional phases that characterise the pandemic information experience, safeguarding is consequently catalysed by risks produced during lockdown and centred upon protecting self, others and institutions.

5. Discussion: What comes into view?
Themes of positioning, agency and transition emerged as participants mitigated risks via the agentic performance of safeguarding, as seen in Figure 2. These themes help to bring information literacy practice into view by drawing attention to the sociological and dialogical aspects of information experiences and planting the ‘social’ as the central point around which constructions of risk spiral.

Context is central to understanding how information literacy, as represented by the practice of safeguarding, is brought into view and becomes interpretable within the pandemic situation. Context is shaped by the evolving conditions and arrangements that structure social life yet often creates difficulties for researchers because of its layered and sticky complexity. As Linton (1936) points out, “the last thing a fish would notice is water.” A similar sentiment is echoed by Dervin (1997) who suggested that “context is something you swim in like a fish. You are in it, it is in you.” While this may appear axiomatic, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to observe a specific information context as it is constructed. This is particularly important for the study of information literacy, which has traditionally been understood as a preestablished set of activities and skills.

In defining context, Schatzki (2002, p.xiv) takes an ontological view, describing it as a “setting or backdrop which envelops and determines phenomena” to “help… determine their existence and being” (Schatzki, 2002, p.20). Upon this understanding, context predetermines practices which, in turn, prefigure agency and activity. Foucault (1986, p.23) also notes that “we live inside a set of relations…” or that contextual space has a history and is always bound with experiences and time. These ideas led Schatzki (2002) to state that context:

- Embraces the phenomenon (e.g., the COVID-19 virus)
shapes the phenomenon and entities within it (through privileging forms of discourse over others); and

has compositions and character that will vary with entities or phenomenon that exist in context.

The unfolding context of the pandemic can therefore be viewed as three intra-connected dimensions that shape the information landscape and through which a construction of risk emerges:

- Government briefings and official messaging create the cultural discursive dimension of the information environment, which shapes the discourses and narratives related to the pandemic and its theatre. This dimension references the sanctioned narratives that drive political, scientific, medical and public health discourses and through which risk becomes epistemically instrumentalised. Information in this modality emerges in formal expressions that are explicit, objective and reproducible (Lloyd, 2012) and information literacy emerges as normative and as reflective of the legitimised discourses of the setting.

- Corporeal or physical information (accessed through activities such as observing) references the material-economic dimension of the information environment. This dimension establishes preconditions that enable or constrain agency and performance e.g., practising social distancing, wearing a mask and/or gloves, working and socialising from home, etc. Information in this modality is actioned and reflective and information literacy emerges as centred on sensory interaction.

- The sharing of information through social media and family/friend networks represents the communal dimension of the information environment, which creates the collective space through which the disruption created by the pandemic is mediated. This dimension references the development of life world processes, shared meanings and practical arrangements (Habermas, 1987) and forms the means through which risk is negotiated. Information in this modality is nuanced and often difficult to express in written form and information literacy emerges as processes of participation and membership (Lloyd; 2011; Lloyd 2012).

Interlinked and entwined, these three dimensions enmesh in the social site to shape how the practice of information literacy is constructed. They also establish preconditions for the ways in which people’s positioning and agency are shaped within the pandemic context. Positioning theory, which centres on the ways in which “people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others” (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010, p.2), demonstrates that the three dimensions of the pandemic context establish a discursive space that works to position members of the population and shape their information literacy practice. Risk is consequently brought into being through daily government briefings that position participants in relation to risk by categorising them as vulnerable (unable to leave their homes), furloughed (employed but not working), home-schooling, working remotely from home or simply at home, and thus subject to specific discourses. These categorisations subsequently position information literacy practice by situating a locked down identity within a specific discourse that, in turn, influences the construction of risk in the unfolding, intensifying and stabilising phases.

Positioning also impacts on people’s agency in relation to the ways in which they find and access information relevant to their positioning and use technology to maintain social connections. Agency is defined as a “temporally embedded process, that encompasses three different elements; iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation” (Embirbayer and Mische,
1998, p.962) and signifies a capacity to act. In the current study, agency comes into view through the practice of safeguarding as participants reconcile their previous subject positions with the new categorisations imposed upon them by the lockdown. From this perspective, agency is shaped by information activities that enable people to project future trajectories for the pandemic as well as to construct an understanding of risk and establish safeguarding activities. Agency is also referenced through the collaborative pooling of information with family, friends or colleagues.

The emerging COVID-19 context also brings transition into view as people begin to understand the unfolding conditions and social (re)arrangements that will shape their everyday and working lives. Transition refers to movement that is shaped and precipitated by the cultural, social, economic/political and historical conditions that disrupt and necessitate a change (Meleis et al., 2000). These understandings are informed by nursing and education transitions theory, which conceptualise transition as a complex and iterative “passage” (Chick & Meleis, 1986, p. 239) during which “people redefine their sense of self and redevelop self-agency in response to disruptive life events” (Kralik et al., 2006, p.321). From an information perspective, transition is positioned as emerging from significant disruption and as focused on the reconstruction of everyday information landscapes (Lloyd, 2014; Hicks, 2021). Mediated through information literacy, which facilitates the connection and situatedness needed to develop a collective understanding of the pandemic, transition is catalysed by information, which is defined here as “a difference that makes a difference [in some later event]” (Bateson, 1972; p.323, p.386).

Figure 2: Conceptual themes

An information perspective on COVID-19

Analysis of phase one data provides an emerging view of COVID-19 from an information perspective. This view highlights the social construction of risk relative to the making and
remaking of information landscapes and introduces themes of transition, positioning and agency. From phase one of the research, several statements are offered:

1. When risk is viewed from an information perspective, researchers should develop an understanding of how the pandemic information environment is constructed and how this acts to contextualise knowledge (medical, scientific, instrumental and expertise) to construct discourses that act to discursively position people in cultural and social frameworks.

2. The information literacy practice that underpins becoming informed about risks of COVID-19 and establishes people’s information landscapes emphasises communal and corporeal acts to situate people in relation to:
   a. Forms of power expressed through governmental and instrumental construction of the COVID-19 environments
   b. Societal interpretations and mediations, which enable, constrain and contest COVID-19 knowledge
   c. Physical constructions, which alter the performance of self (Charmaz, 1991)

3. The practice of information literacy in a pandemic context is broad and includes both visual, social, corporeal and epistemic literacies that are aimed at establishing a meaningful understanding of risk and how mitigation might occur.

4. The concept of transition enables us to make visible how the information landscape is entered, experienced and then stabilised as people participate in the construction of their pandemic landscapes.

5. Information literacy is inherent in the positioning and agentic work of safeguarding (which operates on the level of the self, of others, and of institutions). Emerging as participants encounter the uncertain pandemic theatre, safeguarding centres on information activities that will build an understanding of risk and facilitate transition from pre- to pandemic information environments. Information literacy emphasises social and visual ways of knowing, as people come to terms with the new conditions and arrangements of everyday life.

Conclusion
The COVID-19 pandemic has infiltrated and impacted on all aspects of people’s lives, creating a ‘new normal’ in which a first concern is to safeguard against the impact of health, economic and social risks. It is a terrible and terrifying disease that has produced anxiety and uncertainty while altering the arrangements and conditions in which people operate. For researchers who are interested in information literacy practice and its literacies it has also created a difficult but unique opportunity to explore how information practices emerge and evolve within an uncertain situation.

Within the context of this study, findings suggest that the UK’s public understanding about the COVID-19 pandemic was shaped through the production of risk that unfolded across three enmeshed dimensions to construct a practice of safeguarding, which illustrates information literacy practices within the pandemic context. In the discussion, we considered how safeguarding is enacted and shaped as practice by reflecting on what comes into view within the pandemic information environment. Enacting these three stages suggests that from an information perspective, risk is viewed as a temporal and spatial enactment that becomes meaningful as the pandemic progresses.

This study represents the first section of a two-phase study that is investigating people’s information practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phase two, which is already under way, will continue this research by examining the long-term impact of operating in ‘crisis mode’ as the UK returns to lockdown conditions in November 2020. Future research
should explore the desensitisation phase that emerged from phase one in more detail, including the ways in which the complexity of information environments causes people to cut themselves off from information as well as the impact of declining trust in government advice. Future studies could also examine how findings from this research could be used by public health and information professionals tasked with shaping public communication during times of crisis.

References


Charmaz, K. (1991), Good days, bad days: The self in chronic illness and time, Rutgers: Rutgers University Press.


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Disaster Science. doi:10.1016/j.pdisas.2020.100111


Figure 1: Information landscape of safeguarding (derived from Lloyd, 2017)
Figure 2: Conceptual themes
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Table 1: Study Participants