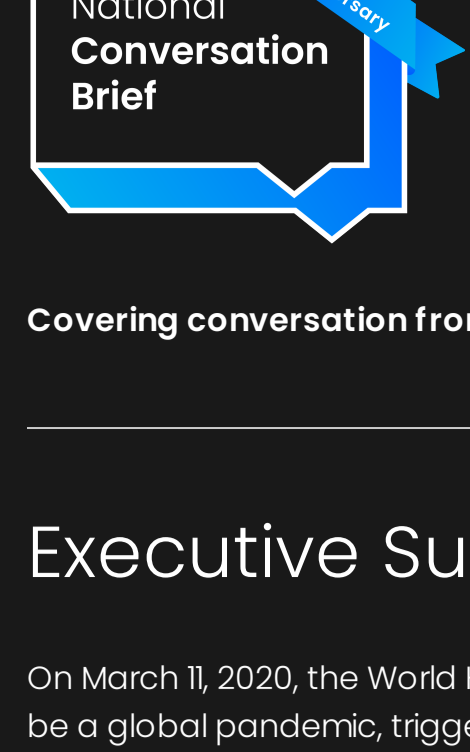


03.10.21



This analysis provides insight into major developments around top news stories and the response in the United States, with an emphasis on topics related to COVID-19. We are not only tracking the rapidly changing news cycle, but also taking a deeper look at how people across the United States are consuming news and information.

Covering conversation from March 11, 2020 – March 10, 2021

Executive Summary

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, triggering a worldwide series of lockdowns. Forty-eight hours later, MSL launched its first Conversation Brief. Intended as a resource for both our co-workers and our clients, the Conversation Brief used MSL's social listening tools to identify those voices and topics that were influencing the online conversation about the pandemic. To commemorate the one-year anniversary of the WHO declaration, this week's Conversation Brief is devoted to the social, emotional, and political impact of this unprecedented public health crisis, as documented on social media over the last 12 months.

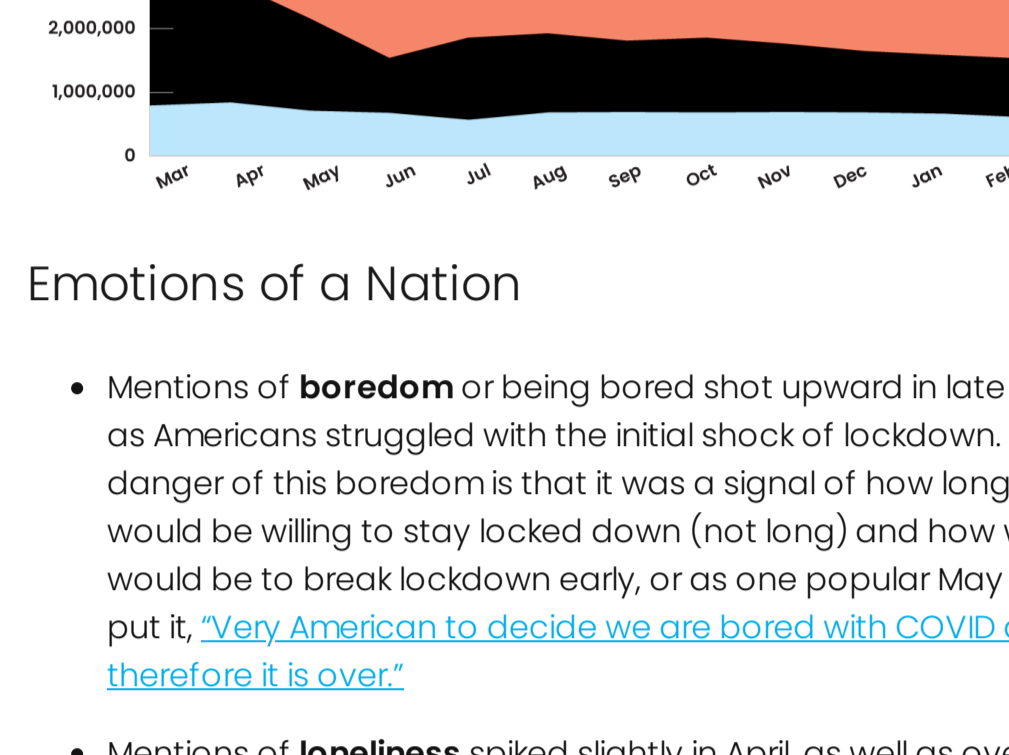
- Mentions of COVID-19 on social media peaked at 8.9 percent on March 16, 2020. On that date, the first Monday of lockdown, approximately one out of every 11 mentions on social media dealt with the pandemic.
- COVID-19's share of the social conversation was permanently eclipsed as the protests in response to the killing of George Floyd grew in size and frequency. By June 1, 2020, at the height of the protests, content related to Black Lives Matter was more than three times more prevalent on social platforms than COVID content (7 percent vs 2 percent).
- Reviewing 12 months of searches related to political leaders Donald Trump and Joe Biden has demonstrates that search engine results are a poor proxy for election results. In every month of the past year, Donald Trump generated more search engine queries than Joe Biden, even months into a new administration.

Engagement Insights

What's making headlines in mainstream media does not always translate to what people are truly engaging with. This is our summary of what people are **actually** reading, talking about on social and searching for.

Talking

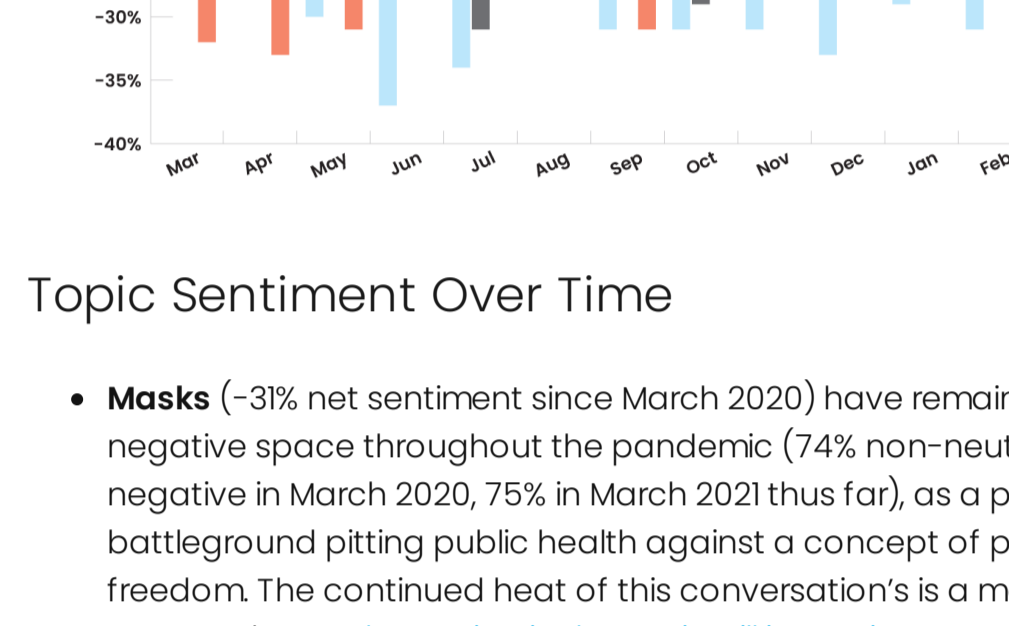
What conversation topics are generating the most volume and engagement, and influencing the most people



COVID-19 Conversation: Week-by-Week

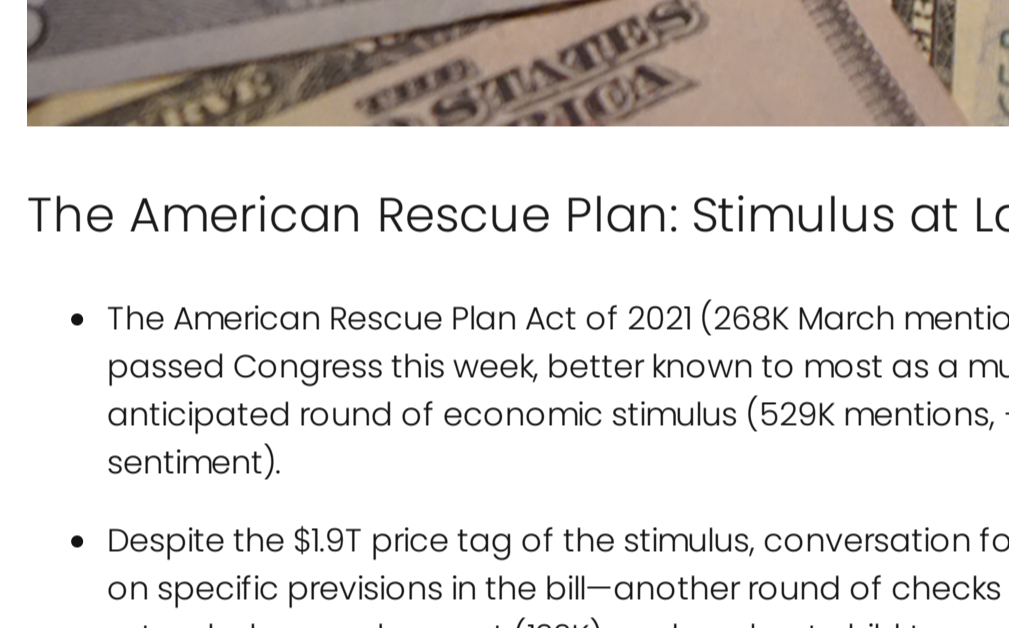
- As a percentage of total conversation, COVID-19 peaked the week of March 16 (8.9% of all social mentions) and cratered the week of January 4 (1.2%), when the Capitol Attack grabbed national attention. A massive 7% of social mentions throughout the month of March included explicit mention of COVID-19 or the coronavirus; since then, monthly mentions have hovered between 1.5 and 3%.
- Overall COVID-19 mentions this week (2%) are near the levels of early June, when protests around the nation overtook COVID-19 as the major national story. Vaccination and the passage of another round of COVID-19 economic stimulus are major topics, but have not sparked a return to July levels of COVID-19 conversation, let alone those of March and April.
- Overall social mentions peaked the week of June 1, not due to pandemic conversation, but in the wake of George Floyd's death as protests sparked and controversy swirled around the tactics used to clear the area immediately surrounding the White House, capped by remarks in front of St. John's Church by President Trump ("I am your president of law and order").

Emotions of a Nation



- Mentions of **boredom** or being bored shot upward in late March, as Americans struggled with the initial shock of lockdown. The danger of this boredom is that it was a signal of how long America would be willing to stay locked down (not long) and how willing it would be to break lockdown early, or as one popular May tweet put it, ["Very American to decide we are bored with COVID and therefore it is over."](#)
- Mentions of **loneliness** spiked slightly in April, as well as overall in the last 12 months (+30%). Seniors (932K mentions in loneliness conversation) were a particular point of concern, with so many nursing home residents unable to receive visitors for much of the year.
- Social mentions of **fear** spiked on a different timeline than other emotions, with spikes in:
 - March, at the start of the pandemic;
 - June (as the George Floyd protests unleashed conversation around Donald Trump's speech at St. John's Church and people admitting their [fears of the situation](#), and [police brutality](#)); and
 - October (after Trump's statement of "Don't be afraid of COVID" after his own COVID-19 scare); interestingly, while fear only spiked slightly after the Capitol Attacks, **anger** did, as Americans were ultimately more disgusted with the situation than afraid.

Pandemic Topic Net Sentiment Over Time



- **Masks** (-31% net sentiment since March 2020) have remained a negative space throughout the pandemic (74% non-neutral negative in March 2020, 75% in March 2021 thus far), as a political battleground pitting public health against a concept of personal freedom. The continued heat of this conversation's a major reason why [mask-wearing in the U.S. is still inconsistent](#).
- **Social distancing** (-24%) saw a large piece of its mentions within March and April (8.3M mentions, 43% of all social distancing mentions). Since then, sentiment has varied wildly month to month, but a majority of the conversation is around people who fail to maintain social distance and spaces where it is difficult to socially distance, including some vaccine sites.
- **Vaccine** sentiment (-25%) was at its height with Pfizer's announcement in November (32% positive), but saw dips since due to a combination of anti-vaxer sentiment and issues with vaccinations. As vaccine availability expands over 2021, sentiment should increase, particularly [as the White House works with Facebook and Twitter to take on anti-vaxer misinformation](#).

-31%

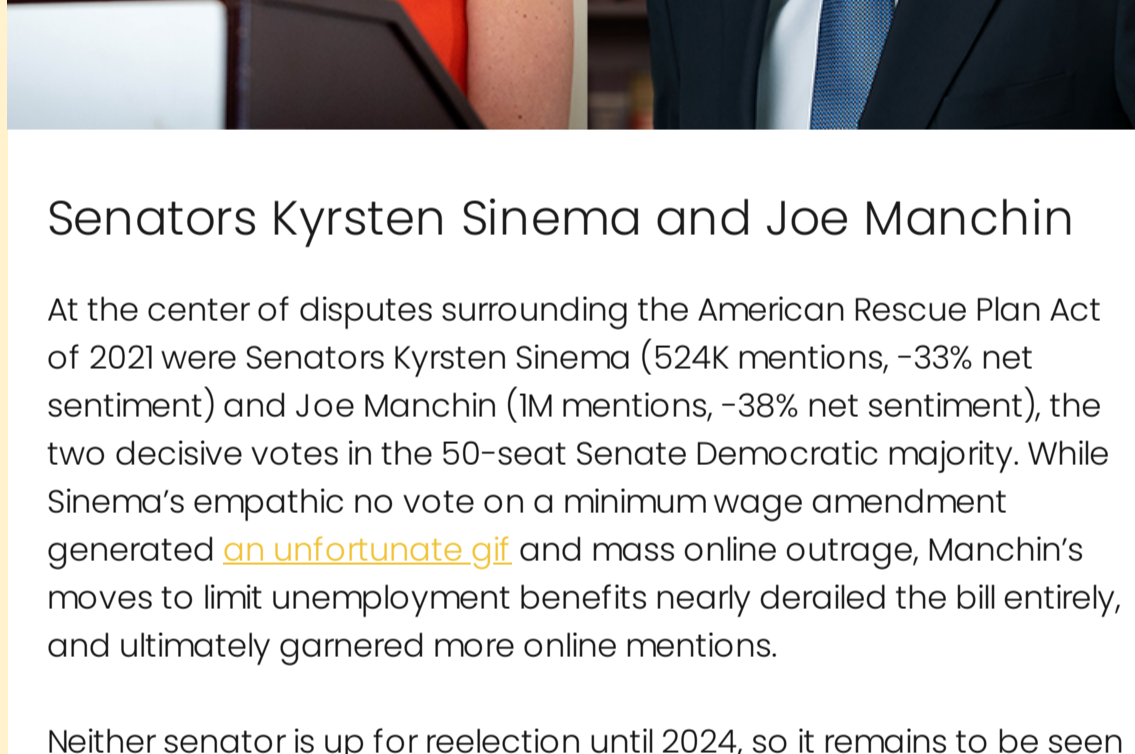
net sentiment of masks since March 2020

-24%

net sentiment of social distancing since March 2020

-25%

net sentiment of vaccines since March 2020



The American Rescue Plan: Stimulus at Last

- The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (268K March mentions) passed Congress this week, better known to most as a much-anticipated round of economic stimulus (529K mentions, +9% net sentiment).
- Despite the \$19T price tag of the stimulus, conversation focused on specific provisions in the bill—another round of checks (454K), extended unemployment (122K), and a robust child tax credit (87K).
- Battles between Democrats and Republicans, as well as the ruling Senate parliamentarian (88K, -47% net sentiment), cut unemployment benefit levels and duration from the House bill, while leaving a \$15 minimum wage hike out entirely. The benefit cuts explaining why unemployment mentions were strongly negative (-33% net sentiment), while minimum wage (796K, -33% net sentiment) saw more mentions than the stimulus itself. The failure to up the federal minimum wage (now \$7.25) also saw old Tweets resurface supporting a \$15 wage from Vice President Harris ([in 2020](#)) and centrist senator Krysten Sinema ([in 2014](#)).
- Smaller subjects within conversation around the act include state aid (2.9K), school aid (62K), and increased subsidies to the Affordable Care Act (5K), but it's fair to say that the Rescue Plan contains many aspects going under the radar.
- Unlike in previous stimulus bills in 2020, no Republicans (728K, -34% net sentiment) voted for the American Rescue Plan, suggesting that no matter how much Joe Biden might will it, bipartisanship isn't coming to Congress any time soon.
- The next question for Democrats seeking to act boldly and avoid midterm setbacks will be whether to reform the Senate filibuster (2M mentions, +3586%), allowing them to pass legislation in spaces like voting rights; Senators Sinema and Manchin are against ending the filibuster, but [Manchin is at least open to changes](#).

529K

mentions of economic stimulus

2M

mentions of Senate filibuster

796K

mentions of minimum wage

Featured Influencers



Senators Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin

At the center of disputes surrounding the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 were Senators Kyrsten Sinema (524K mentions, -33% net sentiment) and Joe Manchin (1M mentions, -38% net sentiment), the two decisive votes in the 50-seat Senate Democratic majority. While Sinema's empathic no vote on a minimum wage amendment generated [an unfortunate gif](#) and mass online outrage, Manchin's moves to limit unemployment benefits nearly derailed the bill entirely, and ultimately garnered more online mentions.

Neither senator is up for reelection until 2024, so it remains to be seen whether this online spat will have long-term political implications. Furthermore, the depth of the online reaction may be evidence of the widespread popularity of the provisions threatened by the senators' actions, as one recent poll found [53% of Americans support a \\$15 minimum wage](#); a different poll even shows a [slight majority of Republicans support of the wage increase](#).

Reading

Which stories are being read the most, the longest and shared the most on social networks

- One of the stark differences between the start of the pandemic and now is that readership about COVID-19 has gone down dramatically. From 3/11 to 3/15, the top 200 articles around the pandemic combined for 162.5M reads; the last 31 days netted just 76.9M reads on the subject, even with stimulus articles included. The difference is clearly due to not just fatigue, but how quickly anything can become normal and no longer news.
- While a fatigue way have set in, it's important to note that we've come a long way through this slow-moving disaster. The first week of the pandemic saw many articles about closures (12.1M reads) and stockpiling (14.3M reads), one year, later the top topics of the week are about vaccines (21.8M reads) and federal stimulus for COVID-19 relief (19.7M, and half of the top 20 most-read stories).
- This week's most-read article was about four people in Oregon testing positive despite receiving the vaccine (3.3M), acting as an alert to this week's fourth-most read topic, COVID-19 Variants (6.3M). Coincidentally, this week's fourth-most read article (1.7) was about scientists finding a virus variant with a troubling mutation in Oregon, a reminder that we aren't out of the woods just yet as the novel coronavirus finds new, awful forms.

COVID-19: Most-Read Stories, Last 30 Days

1. [Four people in Oregon who received both doses of vaccine test positive for coronavirus](#)
02.13.21 | [NBC News](#)
2. [PSA: Don't post your coronavirus vaccination card selfie on social media](#)
02.06.21 | [The Verge](#)
3. [Senate passes \\$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill, including \\$1,400 stimulus checks, with no Republican support](#)
03.06.21 | [NBC News](#)
4. [In Oregon, scientists find a virus variant with a worrying mutation](#)
03.05.21 | [New York Times](#)
5. [New mammogram guidelines for women recently vaccinated for COVID-19](#)
02.09.21 | [Fox 13 Now](#)
6. [Brazil's COVID crisis is a warning to the whole world, scientists say](#)
03.03.21 | [New York Times](#)
7. [A third stimulus check is in the COVID relief bill. Here's how to get your full payment.](#)
03.05.21 | [NBC News](#)
8. [Democrats to unveil \\$3,000 child benefit as part of Biden relief package](#)
02.07.21 | [CNN](#)
9. [Analysis: The story keeps getting worse for Andrew Cuomo on COVID-19](#)
02.12.21 | [CNN](#)
10. [Trump was sicker than acknowledged with COVID-19](#)
02.11.21 | [New York Times](#)

Searching

What people are searching for and what stories they clicking on in their information journey

Google Searches | Pandemic Topics

Hydroxychloroquine vs. Remdesivir

Search interest in hydroxychloroquine (never proven to effectively treat COVID-19) has generally stayed much higher than that in remdesivir (the only FDA-approved drug to treat COVID-19 as of now). The Trump administration interest in hydroxychloroquine spurred this interest, [leading some states to make regrettable decisions](#).

Masks vs. Vaccine

Though masks and social distancing have largely wiped COVID-19 out in nations like New Zealand and Taiwan, U.S. search interest in the silver bullet of a vaccine was level with masks (a surprisingly politically contentious topic in America) long before Pfizer and BioNTech's November announcement of their vaccine candidate.

Biden vs. Trump

Months after the election, Biden's restrained social media presence has reduced the volume of searches and social conversation, while Trump continues command a larger share of attention online. Donald Trump continues to generate more search engine queries than Joe Biden, even months into a new administration. Except for a brief period around the Presidential Inauguration when they shared equally in queries, Trump has consistently led Biden over the last 12 months.

Joe Exotic vs. Carolee Baskin

The Netflix documentary *Tiger King* made pandemic celebrities out of large cat rivals Carolee Baskin and Joe Exotic. Surprisingly, Carolee Baskin outranks Joe in searches in 49 of 50 states (the exception being Joe's home of Oklahoma). Searches spiking during the initial run of the documentary, Carolee's appearance on *Dancing With the Stars*, Halloween, and January speculation that Donald Trump would grant Joe Exotic a presidential pardon before the end of his term.

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Methodology

Social listening across all open platforms, news impressions, social engagements and search data were used for 3/11/20 to 3/10/21 with a focus on recently trending content.

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