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Fluoridation on social media: nuisance, noise or necessary evil?

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Background:

Social media is for discussion and dissemination of views and information, and water fluoridation is not immune from this. Should fluoridation advocates shift resources onto social media away from traditional communication? In the UK resources are scarce, so information is needed to help make these decisions. The objective of this research was to gauge attention, behaviour and attitudes by tracking what people write about water fluoridation on social media.

Methods:

On 8 July 2018 a search for "water fluoridation" was performed in the top four popular search engines in the UK: Google, Bing, Yahoo and DuckDuckGo. A search of Google Trends (google.com/trends), which represents search data from around the globe back to 2004 was obtained. Google search trends for the term "water fluoridation" between the years 2004 and 2018 were analysed. Only data from the UK were considered. In June 2015 the terms "water fluoridation" and "fluoridation" were searched on Twitter, recording the number of daily tweets (posting on the platform). In March 2021 the two terms "water fluoridation" and "fluoridation" were searched on Twitter and Facebook, and the results recorded in a similar way.

Results:

The content on social media is primarily unstructured, textual, openly accessible information; this includes search or navigation data, postings on blogs or social media and browsing history data. The results showed that, for web searches, and where an opinion was expressed, most were pro-fluoridation. However, on social media, most accounts and comments on Twitter were anti-fluoridation.

Conclusion:

On social media, most accounts and comments on Twitter were anti-fluoridation. This is no surprise as the internet displays more factual evidence on fluoride. The results suggest that moving resources onto social media platforms is unlikely to counter misinformation or to provide reliable data on what the public does, knows or feels about water fluoridation.

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