Masks signs were everywhere during the pandemic, and so was the discussion around them. Our team explored the changes in mask-related news coverage in different states during different times of the pandemic. When did the discussion start? When did we see a radical increase in mask-related news? Were there geographical variations? What was the role played by political ideology? To answer these questions, we analyzed the news titles of all covid-related news articles from January 2019 to July 2022. We identified news that had the word “mask” in the title and computed its weekly intensity in each state. The intensity was calculated as the number of occurrences of the word “mask” in the title in a state within a week divided by the total number of COVID-related news articles in the state within that week. We then compared the trend to COVID cases trend in the U.S. We defined an “major outbreak week” as a week with greater than 5000 cumulated cases per million capita overall.

We first observed that states suffered from COVID more severely had more mask-related news a few weeks before reaching the peak week, compared to states that were less severely impacted. The news coverage trend also seemed to move in similar directions. When there was a spike in coverage in states with more COVID cases per capita, we observed similar spikes in states less affected. This suggested a diffusion of mask-related discussions. Ideology also affected the trends. We focused on California and Texas as they represented opposite ends of the political spectrum. California had high level of mask-related news before the outbreak and maintained this coverage after the outbreak. Texas had almost no mask-related news before the outbreak but the coverage soon caught up with that of California after the outbreak.