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## The lockdown tweet that launched a COVID-19 'supertracker'

**Lukas Lehner wanted to capture how different economies are addressing COVID-19 challenges. His Twitter call-out helped to create a global directory of policy resources based on swarm intelligence, and led to a research project.**

Lukas Lehner



The implementation of social-distancing rules and other coronavirus policies are being tracked in a tool developed by Lukas Lehner. Credit: Andy Buchanan/AFP/Getty

It was mid-March and the COVID-19 pandemic had just started to hit Europe. I spent my days socially isolating at home in Paris and catching up on news, trying to work out how this crisis would affect me and what the wider economic and social implications would be.

As part of my doctorate in the Department of Social Policy and Intervention at the University of Oxford, UK, I am monitoring various economic and social policy changes across countries to evaluate how they affect wages, with the aim of explaining why wages have risen so little across Europe in the past decade.

Before starting my doctorate, I worked as a junior economist at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, and in a similar role at the International Labour Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. Perhaps because of my professional background, I was among the first researchers to take note of the data sets that several organizations had started in parallel, summarizing policy changes across countries.

The first initiatives focused on border closures, social-distancing interventions, short-term work schemes and interventions to address financial-market turbulences. A few dozen researchers were busy documenting governments' coronavirus-related policy announcements in real time. This was important work: it allowed cross-country comparisons and provided evidence that policymakers needed to make sensible decisions in managing the crisis.

Some trackers encompass broad areas such as macroeconomic or social policy; others are narrower in scope but provide more detail on particular areas, for example elections postponed, school closures, or prison riots due to the lack of protection of inmates. The most comprehensive trackers include the collections from the OECD, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (with its summary of policy responses from 196 economies), and a global coronavirus survey compiled by researchers from 12 academic institutions. Some are specialized, focusing solely on tracking changes in the operations of tax administrations and patent offices in different countries, whereas others document general media reports on the pandemic and the actions of non-governmental organizations to safeguard civil rights. Several projects go beyond domestic concerns. One tracks food-export restrictions due to fears of shortages. Others track pan-European solidarity and diplomatic relations; wars and ceasefires; and World Bank or philanthropic funding listing private funders, amounts and recipients of donations made to address the pandemic.



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One morning in April, I tweeted four 'policy tracker' data sets. These included early stages of the OECD's and World Bank's social-policy collections, and the University of Oxford's Coronavirus Government Response Tracker, which creates a stringency index of government measures. Within days, I received suggestions on Twitter for dozens of other sources and listed them in my thread. Over the next couple of weeks, researchers continued to suggest more trackers. The collection grew to hundreds of sources. Once it became too long to be easily browsed on Twitter, I moved the content to a [dedicated webpage](#) on my GitHub account. I structured it by policy areas, such as macroeconomic policies, social policies, non-pharmaceutical interventions, politics and media. I felt I was helping fellow researchers by providing a single access point to COVID-19 trackers in almost all policy areas, a 'tracker of trackers'.

When the website went live in mid-April, the vast majority of people around the world were under lockdown and the infection was spreading rapidly around the globe. By then, more and more researchers were shifting their work to cover the COVID-19 crisis, and everyone was struggling to keep track of all the initiatives, to gather evidence on the wider implications of the pandemic. My website became the most comprehensive tracker of what was taking place in

social and economic research and policy: within weeks, several thousand researchers from more than 120 countries had visited the page. E-mails from every continent filled my inbox, with researchers suggesting more sources and policy analysts asking where to find specific data. Before long, editing the collection was taking up my whole working day.

When lockdown eased, I thought I would return to my usual research. I was wrong. Four professors in my department got in touch with me, and with financial support from Research England's Higher Education Innovation Fund and the Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account through the University of Oxford's COVID-19 urgent response fund, we started the Oxford Supertracker project, taking the tracking and analysis of resources to the next level. We structured the collection by multiple dimensions including country coverage, data type and authors, to allow users to combine filters and find specific resources. After weeks of hard work and coordination with policy-tracker providers such as the World Bank, the OECD and several others, we launched an enhanced 2.0 collection, called the [Oxford Supertracker: The Global Directory for COVID Policy Trackers and Surveys](#).

What started as a spontaneous endeavour had soon grown into a project involving more than 100 different organizations and several thousand researchers. At present, it is a global directory for COVID policy trackers. In future we hope to create one unified data set of social-policy measures. I also plan to make the project a substantial part of my doctoral dissertation by dedicating one of my papers to explaining the cross-country variation in economic and social-policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

The directory started with one tweet that went viral and eventually became a fully fledged, funded research project. When I tweeted about COVID-19 trackers back in March, I had no idea how successful it would be.

The experience has taught me the power of swarm intelligence. Activated through social media, the collaborative effort allowed us to build a public collection for the greater good. The interaction with other researchers was key to its rapid growth and dissemination. Including and recognizing contributors allowed us not only to gather a large collection of sources but also to reach so many people around the world simply by word of mouth.

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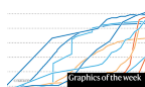
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