

AUG
2020



INSTITUTE FOR
PUBLIC RELATIONS

2020 IPR DISINFORMATION IN SOCIETY REPORT

*How Americans Perceive Intentionally
Misleading News or Information*

*Published by the Institute
for Public Relations*

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INTRODUCTION

The second annual Institute for Public Relations (IPR) “Disinformation in Society” study examines and tracks how disinformation — defined as deliberately misleading or biased information — is spread in U.S. society. The poll of 2,200 Americans, conducted March 25-27, 2020, by Morning Consult, explores the prevalence of disinformation in the U.S., the parties most responsible for sharing disinformation, the level of trust the American public has for different information sources, and whose job it is to combat disinformation. Additionally, the report focuses on major issues facing society. New in the 2020 report are questions about why people do or do not share certain content on social media, media consumption habits, and the perceived impact of disinformation on society.

While some refer to disinformation as “fake news,” this report does not use the label “fake news” since the term is employed inconsistently and has multiple interpretations. IPR differentiates between disinformation and misinformation: Disinformation is the **deliberate** spread of misleading or biased information while misinformation may be spread without the sender having harmful intentions. The report specifically uses disinformation for consistency and clarity in terminology.

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A LETTER TO THE READER: WHY RESEARCHING DISINFORMATION IS IMPORTANT

In 2018, the Institute for Public Relations Board of Trustees decided to investigate the impact of disinformation based on the rise of fake news and deep fake videos. In 2019, IPR published our first report focused on disinformation. We are thrilled to now publish the second annual “IPR Disinformation in Society Report.”

First, it’s essential to understand how disinformation influences society. In 2019, [a study by Oxford University](#) found evidence that organized social media manipulation campaigns have taken place in 70 countries, a 150% increase from when they started collecting data in 2017. Studies have also investigated the influence of disinformation on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Based on an analysis of Twitter, a [2018 Knight Foundation report](#) determined many of the accounts active in the 2016 election disinformation campaigns continue to operate, despite clear evidence of automated activity.

The 2020 U.S. presidential election will be no exception to the threat of disinformation, perpetuated by “foreign malicious actors” who want to “undermine our democratic institutions,” according to the [U.S. Department of Justice](#). Disinformation will increase dramatically in intensity and frequency as the 2020 election in November draws near.

Research demonstrates that disinformation erodes trust in society and democratic institutions. Published in [Harvard’s Misinformation Review](#), researchers found that fake news exposure lowers trust in the media, but may also increase trust in government when one’s side is in power. However, trust in government is still low. The [2020 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) found that none of the four societal institutions—government, business, NGOs, and media—are trusted. This erosion of trust compromises the ability of leaders to make decisions.

In 2018, the Rand Corporation published a report, [Truth Decay](#), identifying four interrelated trends that increasingly have had an impact on national political and civil discourse over the past 20 years. **These include:**

-  Increasing disagreement about facts and data
-  A blurring of the line between opinion and fact
-  The increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact
-  Declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information. The researchers then identified the four effects of truth decay at the personal, community, national, and international levels:
 -  Erosion of civil discourse
 -  Political paralysis
 -  Alienation and disengagement from political institutions
 -  Uncertainty over national policy

Increases in technological sophistication and the connectedness of networks have led to frequent blending of facts, opinions, and misinformation, according to [Dr. Michael Dimock, President of Pew Research Center](#).

Disinformation sows the seeds of doubt, creating what [Dr. Kevin Young](#) of The Schomburg Center refers to as the “colonization of doubt.” Dr. Young says disinformation creates mistrust in truths, which deteriorates trust overall in institutions to the detriment of society.

We anticipate this problem will grow as technology costs decrease, sophistication increases, and the successes of disinformation campaigns continue. IPR plans to continue studying the impact of disinformation on society as we believe it has critical implications not just for our profession but for society and our democratic processes as well. As communicators, we need to be more vigilant than ever to define what is, or is not, true.

Tina McCorkindale, Ph.D., APR
Report Author and President and CEO
Institute for Public Relations

Steve Cody
Chair of the IPR Board of Trustees
CEO and Founder, Peppercomm

12 key findings

1

While more than half of Americans see misinformation* and disinformation as “major problems” in the U.S., the public’s level of concern declined from 2019 to 2020.**

Sixty-one percent are concerned about misinformation (down from 65% in 2019) and 58% are concerned about disinformation (down from 63%). Nevertheless, misinformation and disinformation are deemed to be major problems more frequently than illegal drug use or abuse (55%), crime (55%), gun violence (54%), and political partisanship (53%).

The two most significant problems facing Americans in 2020 are infectious disease outbreaks (74%) and healthcare costs (72%).

2

A growing number of people are not going to other sources to verify information.

Compared to 2019, the number of Americans who said they “often” or “always” go to other websites or media sources to check whether the news or information they are reading is true and accurate fell from 47% in 2019 to 40% in 2020. Thirty-four percent “sometimes” go to other sources, while 20% “rarely” or “never” check alternative sources.

3

A gap exists between who Americans think should be most responsible for combatting disinformation and the perceived performance of those individuals and groups.

Sixty-three percent said President Trump should be “very responsible” for combatting disinformation, but only 19% said he was doing “very well” in combatting it. Similar gaps were found with those entities who scored the highest in responsibility for combatting disinformation including the U.S. government (62% vs. 10%), Congress (61% vs. 7%), journalists (61% vs. 11%), and federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (61% vs. 17%).

*Misinformation is defined as “false information that is spread, regardless whether there is an intent to mislead” and **Disinformation as “deliberately misleading or biased information.”

4

Republicans and Democrats differ widely about the trustworthiness of news sources and various groups.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to trust mainstream media sources such as *The New York Times* (+34 percentage points), *The Washington Post* (+27 percentage points), and MSNBC (+24 percentage points). Republicans are more likely than Democrats to trust Fox News (+33 percentage points).

Democrats are also more likely than Republicans to trust journalists (+36 percentage points) and colleges and universities (+27 percentage points). Republicans are more likely than Democrats to trust business CEOs (+15 percentage points) and the U.S. government (+25 percentage points).

5

Both Democrats and Republicans agree that local news outlets are one of the most trustworthy media sources.

Political affiliation does not play a role in the perceived trustworthiness of local news sources. Overall, 70% say they have at least “some trust” in local broadcast TV news and 60% trust local newspapers. Unfortunately, over the past 15 years, according to a [2020 report](#) by Dr. Penelope Muse Abernathy of the University of North Carolina, the U.S. has lost 2,100 newspapers, leaving at least 1,800 communities that had a local news outlet in 2004 without any in 2020 (this is referred to as a “news desert”).

6

Facebook and politicians are considered the top two sources that spread disinformation to the public.

Seventy percent believe Facebook and politicians are at least “somewhat” responsible for spreading disinformation to the public, more so than fake social media accounts (65%). Along with Facebook, Twitter (57%), and YouTube (50%) are the other social media platforms deemed at least “somewhat” responsible by half or more of the respondents.

7

More than 25% of Americans deem every information source to be “very responsible” for combatting disinformation.

Of the 32 sources available for respondents to evaluate, all of them are identified as being “very responsible” for combatting disinformation by at least 25% of respondents. The source considered least responsible for spreading disinformation is “my employer.”

8

Nearly three-out-of-four (74%) respondents report seeing news or information that misrepresents reality at least once a week. And nearly half (49%) see it every day or almost every day.

Also, nearly four-in-five Americans (77%) feel at least “somewhat” confident in their ability to recognize news or information that misrepresents reality or is false, while 12% are “not very confident.”

9

More than two-thirds of Americans say disinformation is a threat to democracy and undermines the election process.

Seventy-two percent believe disinformation is a threat to democracy, and 69% say it undermines the election process. Only six percent or fewer disagree with these statements.

10

Three-in-10 Americans say they avoid the news because of the amount of disinformation.

A surprising 31% claim they avoid watching or listening to the news because of the amount of disinformation. Additionally, 24% say they are more likely to read sources outside the U.S. because of the amount of disinformation in the U.S.

11

Americans who say they “rarely or never” share news on social media note the primary reason is they don’t use social networks very often.

Thirty-eight percent say the reason they don’t share news with others in their social network is they rarely log in to those networks. Other reasons why, noted by at least one-fourth of respondents, include that they believe it’s no one’s business what news they consume (29%), they are unsure of the accuracy (27%), and they don’t want to start an argument with friends/followers (27%).

12

For the second year in a row, Americans view their family as the most trustworthy source for accurate news or information.

- Other top sources include local broadcast TV news, “people like me,” and federal agencies such as the CDC.
- Regarding professions, respondents have at least “some” trust in journalists (45%), followed by public relations professionals (26%), CEOs (21%), and marketers and advertisers (13%). Colleges and universities are viewed as trustworthy by 39%, while 29% consider major companies trustworthy.
- The least-trusted sources of information that respondents say they do “not trust at all” include the Russian government (55%), the Chinese government (53%), TikTok (40%), and celebrities (40%).

FULL FINDINGS

one

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN THE U.S.

Infectious disease outbreaks and health care costs were the most significant issues facing Americans in 2020.

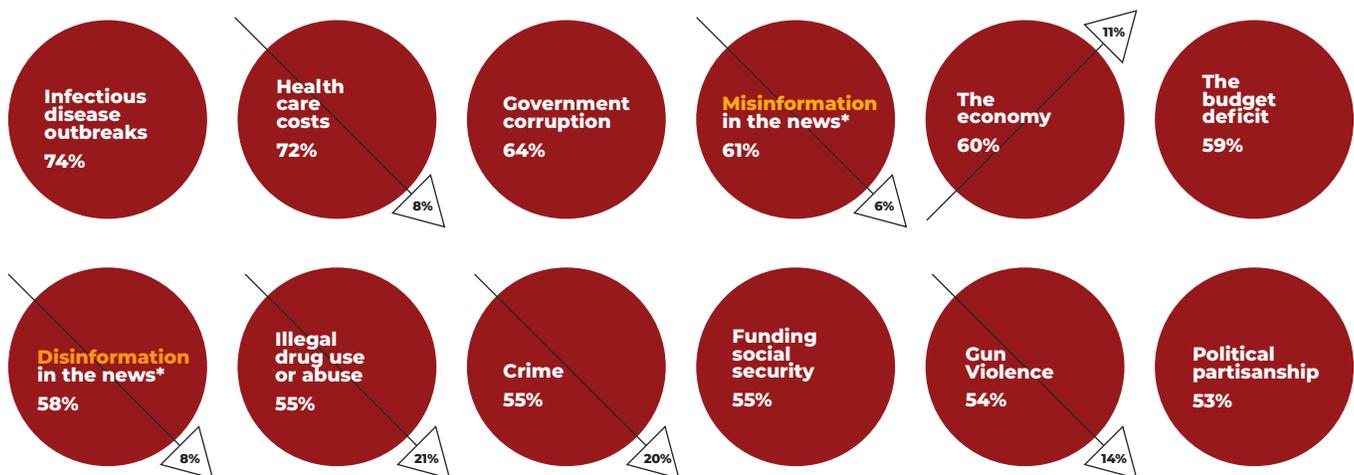
Compared to 2019, Americans were less than concerned about misinformation and disinformation in the news in 2020. However, both misinformation and disinformation were considered more serious problems than illegal drug use, crime, gun violence, and political partisanship.

The top two issues facing Americans, infectious disease outbreaks (74%) and health care costs (72%), were deemed “major problems” by nearly three-quarters of respondents.

Both misinformation (61%)* and disinformation (58%)** saw slight decreases in the number of people who said these were major problems compared to 2019. Misinformation was down four percentage points (from 65% in 2019 to 61% in 2020), and disinformation declined by five percentage points (from 63% in 2019 to 58% in 2020).

TOP 12 ISSUES FACING AMERICANS

% WHO SAY THIS ISSUE IS A MAJOR PROBLEMS



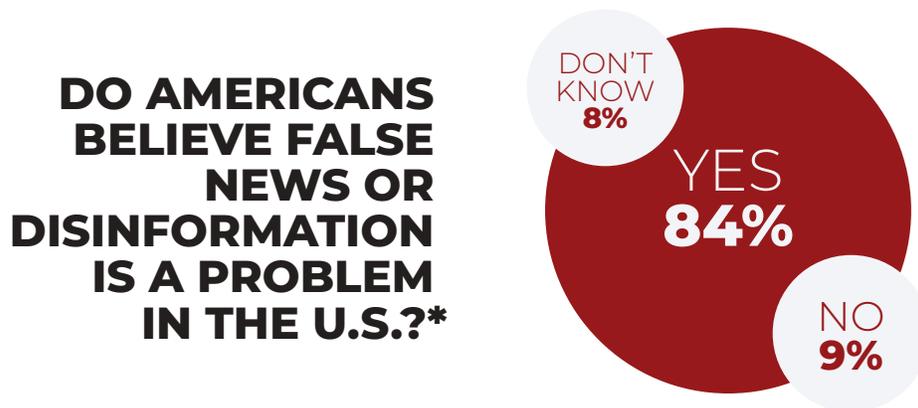
Note: Arrows represent a decrease/increase from 2019. No arrow indicates new in 2020.

*Misinformation was defined as “false information that is spread, regardless whether there is an intent to mislead,” while **disinformation was defined as “deliberately misleading or biased information.”

Nearly every issue except the economy saw a decline in the percentage of respondents who said it was a “major problem.” New items added to the list in 2020 that were identified as “major problems” by more than half of the respondents included infectious disease outbreaks/epidemics/pandemics (74%), government corruption (64%), the budget deficit (59%), funding social security (55%), and political partisanship (53%).

Several issues experienced major declines from 2019 to 2020 and fell out of the top 12. These included terrorism (declined from 66% in 2019 to 47% in 2020); quality of education (declined from 62% in 2019 to 49% in 2020); data security (declined from 61% in 2019 to 51% in 2020); illegal immigration (declined from 57% in 2019 to 44% in 2020); and racial discrimination ** (declined from 55% in 2019 to 43% in 2020).

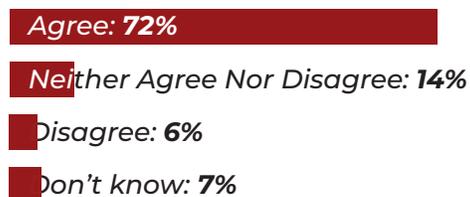
The issues surveyed that were least likely to be identified as major problems included border security (42%), gender discrimination (32%), and gender identity discrimination (28%).



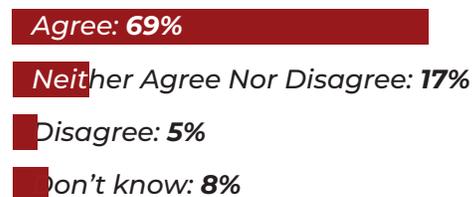
WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF DISINFORMATION ON SOCIETY?

Americans were asked the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements about how disinformation has an impact on society. Seventy-two percent said that disinformation is a threat to democracy, and 69% said it undermines the election process. Only 6% or fewer disagreed with these statements.

DISINFORMATION IS A THREAT TO OUR DEMOCRACY *



DISINFORMATION IS UNDERMINING OUR ELECTION PROCESS *



** The survey was conducted before the protests following the murder of George Floyd.

* Due to rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100%

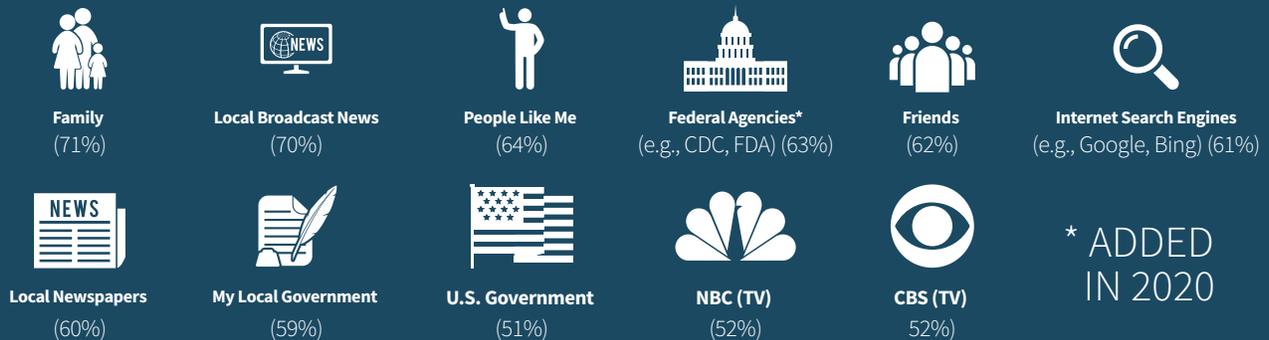


MOST TRUSTWORTHY SOURCES FOR ACCURATE NEWS AND INFORMATION

Americans don't place a lot of trust in sources.

Of the information sources that Americans say they trust “a lot,” the highest-ranking source is families (28%), followed by local broadcast TV news (23%), federal agencies (22%), “people like me” (20%), and President Donald Trump (20%). This finding indicates a major trust deficit as families are the only source in which least one-quarter of Americans have a “lot of trust.” Overall, respondents were more likely to have “some” trust rather than “a lot of” trust in each of these information sources.

Information Sources with the Highest Trust Scores



The least-trusted sources of information that respondents said they did “not trust at all” included the Russian government (55%), the Chinese government (53%), TikTok (40%), and celebrities (40%).

Several categories were added to the analysis in 2020. Sixty-three percent had at least “some” trust in federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “My employer” as a source of accurate news and information was trusted by 33%; however, 43% had no opinion on the trustworthiness of their employer.

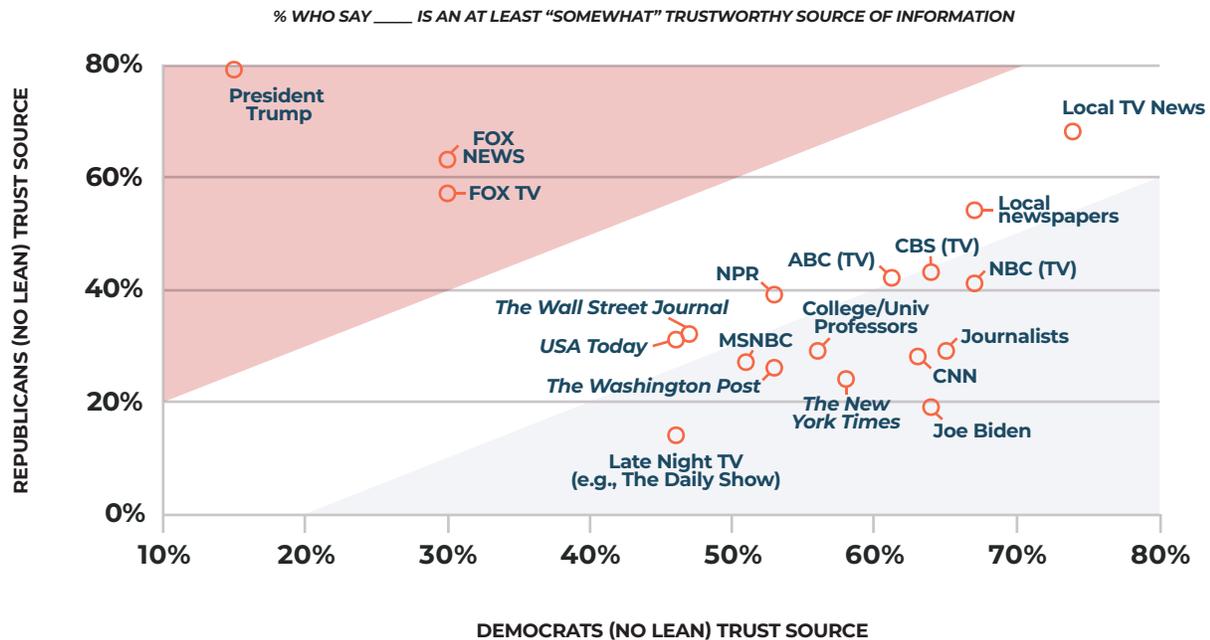
Mainstream media sources were considered more trustworthy than most social media sites for providing accurate news or information. Social media platforms that many Americans said were “not at all” trustworthy included TikTok (40%), Snapchat (34%), Twitter (32%), Instagram (30%), Facebook (30%), LinkedIn (23%), and YouTube (18%).

Overall, 37% said President Donald Trump was trusted “not at all” to provide accurate news or information compared to 31% for Joe Biden. Political parties divided Americans on the level of trust in their information sources. The largest gap was between the perceived trustworthiness of the current U.S. president and the democratic candidate for president. Only 19% of Republicans said they had at least “some trust” in Biden to provide accurate news and information, compared to 64% of Democrats. Conversely, only 15% of Democrats had at least “some trust” in President Trump, compared to 79% of Republicans.

Sources considered more liberal were rated more trustworthy by Democrats, and more conservative sources were rated higher by Republicans. Democrats were more likely than Republicans to trust mainstream media sources, showcasing a wide gap between the two parties. Democrats were more likely to trust *The New York Times* (+34 percentage points), *The Washington Post* (+27 percentage points), and MSNBC (+24 percentage points). Democrats were also more likely than Republicans to trust journalists (+36 percentage points) and colleges/universities (+27 percentage points). Republicans were more likely than Democrats to trust Fox News (+33 percentage points). Republicans were also more likely than Democrats to trust business CEOs (+15 percentage points) and the U.S. government (+25 percentage points).

One area of agreement between Democrats and Republicans concerned the trustworthiness of local newspapers and broadcast TV news. More than half of both parties said they had “some” trust in local newspapers. Similarly, at least two-thirds trust local broadcast news.

THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL AFFILIATION ON TRUST



three

SOURCES RESPONSIBLE FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION

Facebook and politicians were considered most responsible for spreading disinformation.

Facebook (70%), politicians (70%), and fake social media accounts (65%) were the top three sources respondents charged as being at least “somewhat” responsible for spreading disinformation to the public.

TOP 20 SOURCES RESPONSIBLE FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION TO THE PUBLIC

INFORMATION SOURCE	PERCENTAGE SAYING SOURCE SHOULD BE “SOMEWHAT” RESPONSIBLE FOR COMBATTING DISINFORMATION
Facebook	70%
Politicians	70%
Fake social media accounts	65%
U.S. Government	63%
Republican senators and members of Congress	62%
Political activist groups	61%
Journalists	61%
Democratic senators and members of Congress	60%
President Donald Trump	57%
Twitter	57%
Marketers and Advertisers	57%
Fox News (TV)	55%
Chinese government	55%
Public relations professionals	54%
Major companies/corporations	53%
Internet search engines	51%
Celebrities	51%
CNN	51%
Russian government	51%
YouTube	50%
FOX (TV)	50%

*Disinformation was defined as “deliberately misleading or biased information.”

Political party lines divided the list of culpable sources. Only 19% of Republicans said President Trump was “very responsible” for spreading disinformation, compared to 56% of Democrats. On the other hand, 40% of Republicans said Joe Biden was “very responsible” for spreading disinformation, compared to 14% of Democrats. Republicans were also more likely than Democrats to say that journalists were “very responsible” for spreading disinformation (43% vs. 16%, respectively).

Among business sources, marketers and advertisers (57%), public relations professionals (54%), and companies/corporations (53%) were considered culpable for spreading disinformation. Along with Facebook (70%), Twitter (57%), and YouTube (50%) were the other social media platforms deemed at least “somewhat” responsible by at least half the respondents. In the media, journalists (61%), Fox News (TV) (55%), CNN (51%), and FOX (TV) (50%) were all reported by at least half of the respondents to be at least somewhat responsible for spreading disinformation.

WHICH SOURCES ARE THE LEAST RESPONSIBLE FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION?

Personal networks are the least responsible for spreading disinformation.

Personal connections and networks were identified as being some of the least responsible sources for spreading disinformation. Only 9% held friends responsible for disinformation, 8% blamed their employer, and 9% found their LinkedIn network at fault. Americans said “people like me” (10%) and “people NOT like me” (10%) are not very culpable in spreading disinformation.

four

RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMBATTING DISINFORMATION

Americans said President Trump should be most responsible for combatting disinformation.

More than half of respondents pointed to 14 groups and individuals they consider to be “very responsible” for combatting disinformation. President Trump (63%) was deemed most often to be “very responsible” for combatting disinformation, followed by the U.S. government (62%), Congress (61%), federal agencies (61%), and journalists (61%).

Of the 32 sources available for respondents to evaluate, every single one was listed as being “very responsible” by at least 25% of respondents (“my employer” was deemed least often to be “very responsible” for combatting disinformation). Differences among political demographics were not significant regarding this responsibility.

WHO SHOULD COMBAT DISINFORMATION?

Information Source	Percentage Saying Source Should be “VERY” Responsible for Combatting Disinformation
President Donald Trump	63%
U.S. Government	62%
Congress	61%
Federal agencies (e.g., CDC, FDA)	61%
Journalists	61%
Cable news (e.g., Fox News, MSNBC)	57%
Newspapers (e.g., WSJ, NYT)	57%
Network TV news stations (e.g., ABC, CBS)	56%
The Supreme Court	54%
Local broadcast TV news	54%
Local newspapers	52%
Radio news (e.g., NPR)	52%
Joe Biden	51%
Fact-checking websites	50%

*Disinformation was defined as “deliberately misleading or biased information.”

five

HOW WELL SOURCES ARE COMBATTING DISINFORMATION IN THE MEDIA

“People like me,” federal agencies, and local broadcast news are doing the best job at trying to combat disinformation.

For the second year in a row, more than half of Americans said, “people like me” (51%) are doing at least “somewhat well” in combatting disinformation. Federal agencies (47%), local broadcast news (47%), and fact-checking websites such as Snopes and PolitiFact (45%) were credited with helping as well.

WHO IS DOING A GOOD JOB AT COMBATTING DISINFORMATION?

Group or Individual	Percentage Saying Group/ Individual Combats Disinformation at Least “Somewhat Well”
People like me	51%
Federal agencies (e.g., CDC, FDA)	47%
Local broadcast TV news	47%
Fact-checking websites (e.g., Snopes, PolitiFact)	45%
Network TV news stations (e.g., ABC, CBS)	43%
Local newspapers	43%
The Supreme Court	40%
Radio news (e.g., NPR)	39%
Journalists	39%
Newspapers (e.g., WSJ, NYT)	38%
Internet search engines (e.g., Google, Bing)	38%

More than half of the respondents said the following were doing “not too well” or “not at all well” in combatting disinformation that appears in the media: social media sites (60%), marketers and advertisers (55%), celebrities (55%), Congress (53%), political activist groups (52%), and the general public (50%).

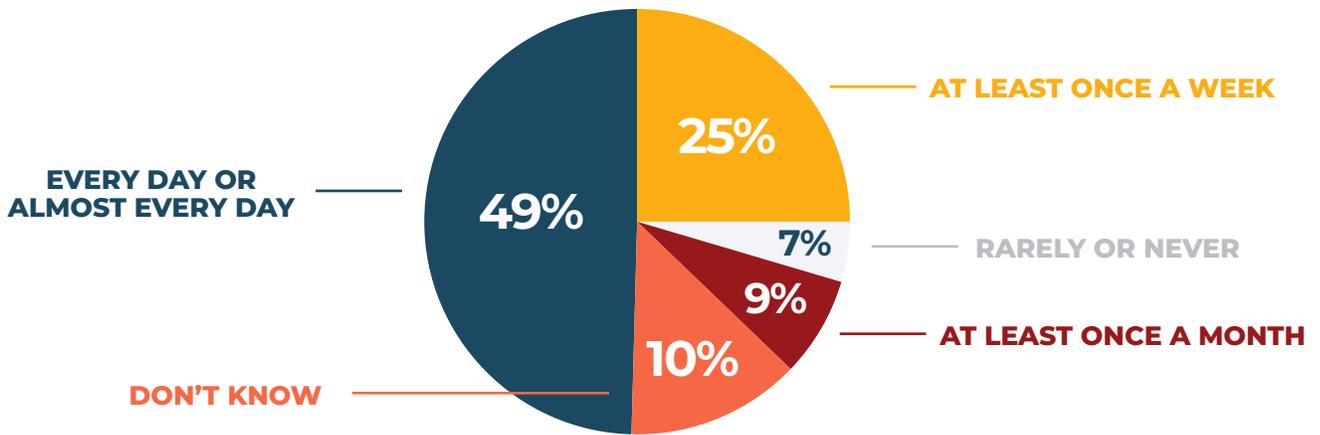
Political affiliation played a role as Democrats were more likely than Republicans to say Joe Biden was doing at least “somewhat well” in combatting disinformation (55% vs. 15%, respectively). On the other hand, 62% of Republicans thought President Trump was doing at least “somewhat well” compared to only 13% of Democrats who gave President Trump a high score.



EXPOSURE TO DISINFORMATION, NEWS, AND MEDIA

HOW OFTEN DO AMERICANS COME ACROSS NEWS OR INFORMATION THAT MISREPRESENTS REALITY OR IS FALSE?

Nearly half of Americans (49%) said they come across false news or information almost every day, and nearly three-quarters (74%) reported contact with it at least once a week.



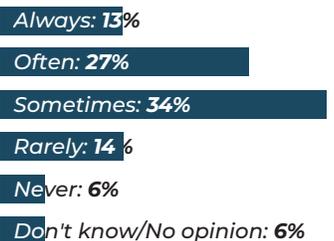
HOW WELL DO AMERICANS FEEL CONFIDENT IN THEIR ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE NEWS OR INFORMATION THAT MISREPRESENTS REALITY OR IS FALSE?

Overall, Americans continue to be confident in their ability to recognize news or information that misrepresents reality or is false. Four-in-five Americans said they are confident in their ability, 28% are “very confident,” and 49% are “somewhat confident.” Twelve percent said they are “not very confident,” while 3% said they are “not at all confident.” These are similar findings to 2019.

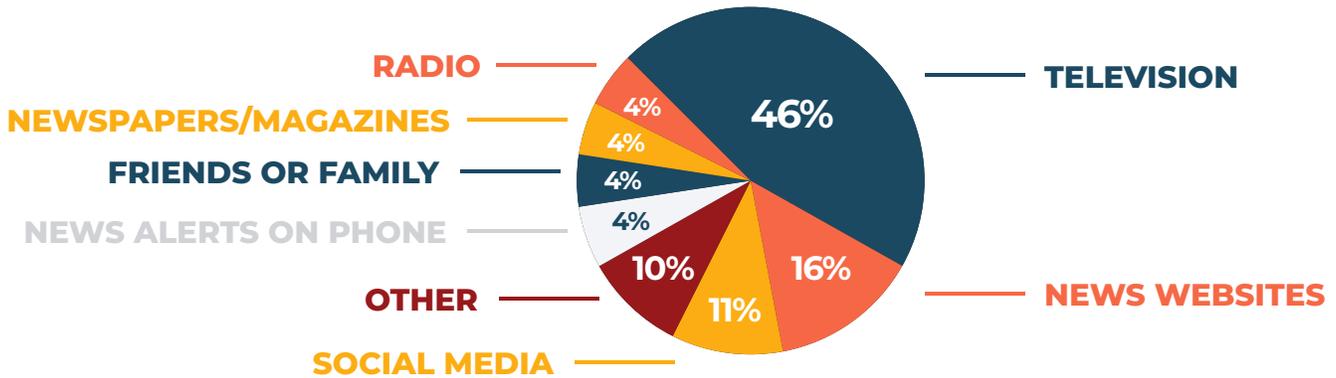


HOW OFTEN DO PEOPLE GO TO OTHER WEBSITES OR MEDIA SOURCES TO VERIFY INFORMATION?

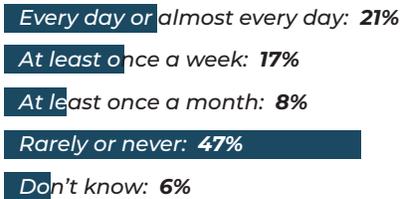
Compared to 2019, the number of Americans who said they “often” or “always” go to other websites or media sources to check whether the news or information they are reading is true and accurate fell from 47% in 2019 to 40% in 2020. Thirty-four percent “sometimes” go to other sources, while 20% “rarely” or “never” check alternative sources.



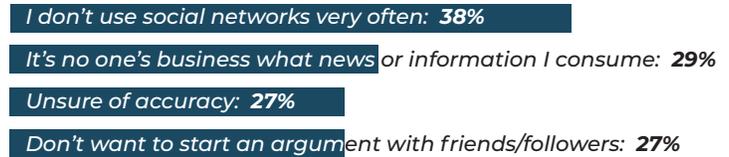
IN THE PAST WEEK, WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR PRIMARY SOURCE OF NEWS?



HOW OFTEN DO YOU SHARE NEWS & OTHER PUBLIC INFORMATION WITH OTHERS IN YOUR SOCIAL NETWORKS?

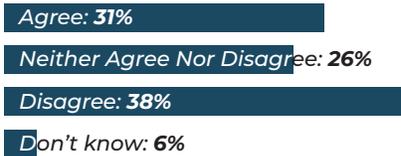


WHY DO RESPONDENTS "RARELY OR NEVER" SHARE NEWS WITH OTHERS IN THEIR SOCIAL NETWORK?

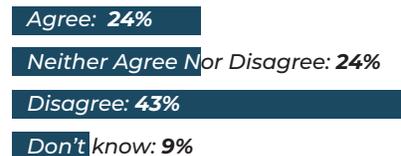


Twenty-one percent said they share news and public information every day or almost every day on their social channels; however, nearly half of Americans said they rarely or never (47%) share news on social media. The most often-cited reason (38%) is that they don't use social networks very often. Other reasons noted by at least one-fourth of respondents include the opinion that it's no one's business what news they consume (29%), they are unsure of the accuracy (27%), and they don't want to start an argument with friends/followers (27%).

I AVOID WATCHING OR LISTENING TO THE NEWS BECAUSE OF THE AMOUNT OF DISINFORMATION



I'M MORE LIKELY TO READ SOURCES OUTSIDE OF THE U.S. BECAUSE OF THE DISINFORMATION IN U.S. MEDIA



Disinformation also has an impact on behaviors of Americans and how they consume news. Thirty-one percent said they avoid watching or listening to the news because of the amount of disinformation. Additionally, 24% said they are more likely to read sources outside the U.S. because of the amount of disinformation in the U.S.

Methodology

Morning Consult conducted this survey online between March 25-27, 2020 among a national sample of 2,200 adults. The data were weighted to approximate a target sample of adults based on age, educational attainment, gender, race, and region. Results from the full survey have a margin of error of plus or minus two percentage points.

About IPR

Founded in 1956, the Institute for Public Relations is an independent, nonprofit foundation dedicated to *the science beneath the art of public relations*™. IPR creates, curates, and promotes research and initiatives that empower professionals with actionable insights and intelligence they can put to immediate use. IPR predicts and analyzes global factors transforming the profession, and amplifies and engages the professional globally through thought leadership and programming. All research is available free at www.instituteforpr.org and provides the basis for IPR's professional conferences and events.

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For the full report and charts, please visit the IPR website at <https://instituteforpr.org/2020-disinformation-report/>.

If you are an academic researcher who would like access to the data, please contact **Tina McCorkindale** at tina@instituteforpr.org.