2019 IPR
DISINFORMATION
IN SOCIETY REPORT

*How Americans Perceive Deliberately
Misleading News or Information*

By the Institute for Public Relations

Introduction:

The inaugural 2019 Institute for Public Relations (IPR) "Disinformation in Society" study examines how disinformation — news that is deliberately misleading — is spread in U.S. society. The poll of 2,200 Americans, conducted March 19-24, 2019 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 in different information sources, and the parties that are responsible for combating disinformation. The focus of this research is on disinformation or the spread of deliberately misleading or biased information. While some may call this "fake news," "false news" or even use it interchangeably with "misinformation," this report uses disinformation as the term for consistency and clarity in terminology.

KEY
FINDINGS

1

Nearly two out of three Americans think the spread of "misinformation"* and "disinformation"** — is a major problem in the country.

The severity with which people regard misinformation (65%) and disinformation (63%) as major problems places this issue on par with gun violence (63%) and terrorism (66%). Respondents did not seem to care about the primary difference between misinformation and disinformation in the intent to mislead. The only major problems rated more acute are crime (69%), illegal drug use or abuse (70%), and health care costs (78%). Other issues that typically grab the headlines are still regarded as serious, but less so. These include illegal immigration (57%), economic inequality (52%), border security (51%), and climate change (48%).

2

Regardless of their political affiliation, Americans consider President Trump as the person or institution most responsible for combatting disinformation.

However, Republicans and Democrats differ on whether President Trump is responsible for spreading disinformation and how well he is combatting disinformation. Forty-five percent of Republicans and 72% of Democrats hold President Trump at least "somewhat" responsible for spreading disinformation. In terms of how well he is doing to combat disinformation, only 18% of Democrats think President Trump is doing at least "somewhat well," compared to 64% of Republicans.

3

More than three out of four (78%) respondents report seeing news or information that misrepresents reality at least once a week. And more than half (51%) see it every day or almost every day.

Also, four in five Americans (80%) feel at least "somewhat" confident in their ability to recognize news or information that mispresents reality or is false.

*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."

The biggest culprits identified as "very responsible" for the spread of disinformation are fake social media accounts (55%), politicians (45%), and President Trump (40%).

Other groups and organizations considered "very responsible" for the problem are the Russian government (34%), political activist groups (33%), the U.S. government (32%), and Facebook (32%).

4

5

Republicans and Democrats have different views about the trustworthiness of sources.

Democrats are more likely to trust mainstream media sources than Republicans, showcasing a wide gap between the two political parties. Compared to Republicans, Democrats were more likely to trust *The New York Times* (+38 percentage points), *The Washington Post* (+38 percentage points) and *MSNBC* (+36 percentage points). The exception is *Fox News* as Republicans were more likely to trust that source than Democrats (+32 percentage points.)

Among social media platforms, Facebook has the highest percentage of people (64%) who think it is at least "somewhat" responsible for the spread of disinformation.

Facebook is followed by Twitter (55%), YouTube (48%), Instagram (46%), and Snapchat (39%). LinkedIn is the site considered least to blame (28%). In terms of trustworthiness as an information source, YouTube has the highest score (42%), followed by Facebook (29%), LinkedIn (22%), and Twitter (22%).

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Among groups and individuals trying to combat disinformation that appears in the news media, Americans give the most credit to "people like me" (55%), the Supreme Court (51%), and fact-checking websites (49%).

Other groups and individuals considered to be doing at least "somewhat well" in their efforts are local newspapers (48%), TV stations (48%), and radio news (46%). The lowest scores for combating disinformation in the news media go to CEOs (23%) and celebrities (23%). The survey also shows that Americans believe every group and individual has a responsibility for combatting disinformation in the media.

8

Nearly half of Americans (47%) often or always go to other sources to see if news and information are true and accurate. Only 6% never try to verify what they read.

Younger Americans (18-34) (55%), high-income adults ($100k+) (52%), and men (51%) are most likely to regularly check news against other sources in the media or online.

9

Americans view family as the most trustworthy source for accurate news or information, followed by "people like me," and friends.

- Internet search engines, local media, and network TV also score well for trustworthiness.
- Most respondents (51%) had at least "some" trust in President Obama to provide accurate news or information, compared to 38% for President Trump.
- Among newspapers, *USA Today* (47%) was noted most often as being a trusted source followed by *The New York Times* (46%), *The Wall Street Journal* (44%) and *The Washington Post* (42%). More Democrats trust mainstream media sources than do Republicans.
- In terms of professions that disseminate information, nearly half of the respondents (46%) said college and university professors provide accurate information or news, followed by journalists (45%), public relations professionals (26%), CEOs (22%), and marketers and advertisers (20%).

FULL
FINDINGS

PART ONE

ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN THE U.S.

What do Americans identify as major problems in the U.S.?

Americans identify misinformation and disinformation in the news as being more of a major problem than quality of education, racial discrimination, and the economy.
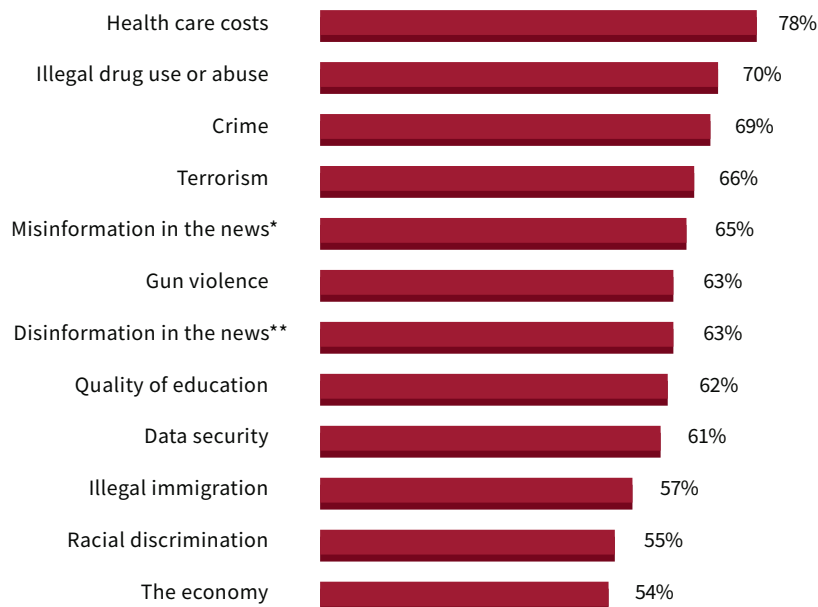
To set the tone for the 2019 Institute for Public Relations "Disinformation in Society" report, IPR presented respondents with 22 concerns in America. More than three-quarters of respondents ranked health care costs (78%) as a major problem. Other major challenges include illegal drug use/abuse (70%), crime (69%), terrorism (66%), and gun violence (63%).

Misinformation (65%)* and disinformation (63%)** in the news were two major problems, on par with terrorism and gun violence. Interestingly, Americans identify false information as a problem in society regardless of whether there is an intent to mislead.

Other issues still regarded as serious, but less so compared to misinformation and disinformation, include: illegal immigration (57%), economic inequality (52%), border security (51%), and climate change (48%). Issues that were least likely to be identified as "major problems" by Americans include age discrimination (32%), legal immigration (33%), and gender identity discrimination (34%).

Top 12 Major Problems in the U.S.
Percentage of Americans saying issue is a "major problem"

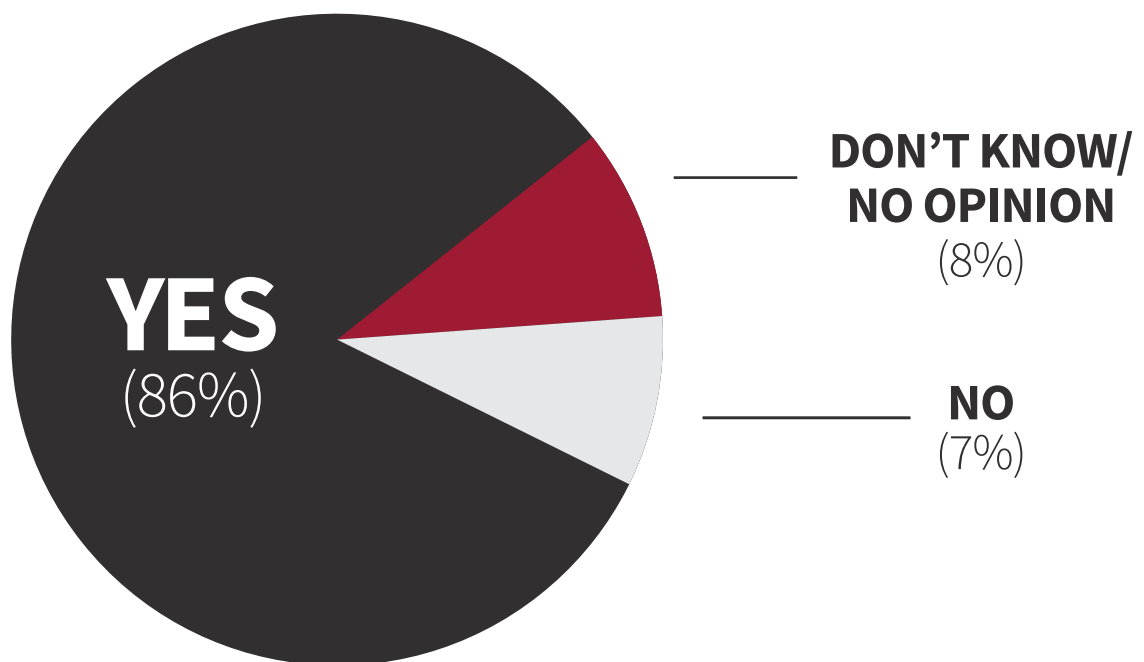| Issue	Percentage
Health care costs	78%
Illegal drug use or abuse	70%
Crime	69%
Terrorism	66%
Misinformation in the news*	65%
Gun violence	63%
Disinformation in the news**	63%
Quality of education	62%
Data security	61%
Illegal immigration	57%
Racial discrimination	55%
The economy	54%

*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."

Do Americans believe false news or information is a problem in the U.S.?

Most Americans (86%) agree that news or information that misrepresents reality or is false is a problem in the US.
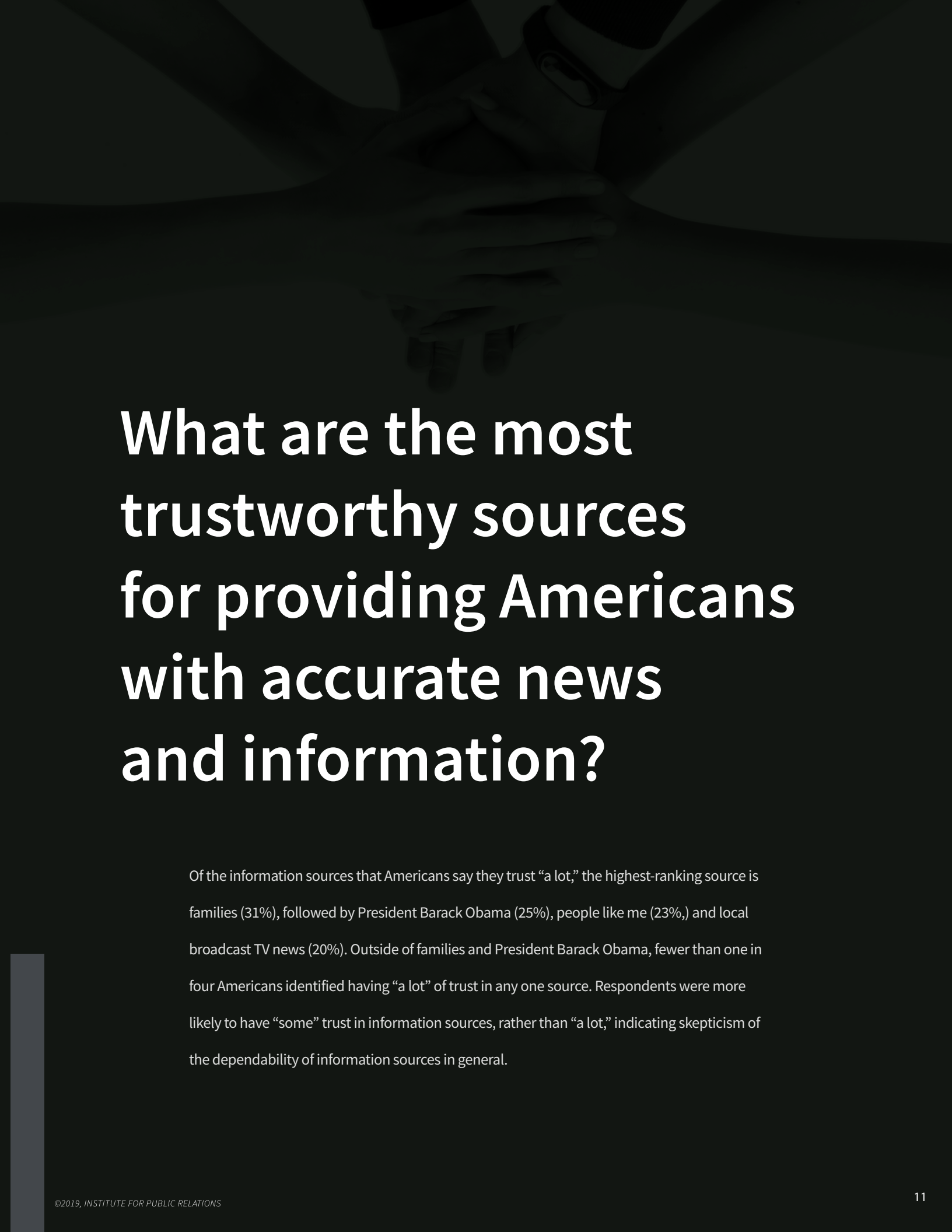
YES
(86%)

_____ **DON'T KNOW/ NO OPINION**
(8%)

_____ **NO**
(7%)

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

Seniors (ages 65+), Republicans, and middle-income adults ($50k-100k) tend to agree more strongly that news that misrepresents reality is a problem in the U.S. Sixty-three percent of seniors said "yes, definitely" that it is a problem, similarly to individuals in a middle-income range (64%), and Republicans (63%). Fewer Democrats (52%) and younger respondents, ages 18-34 (48%), said that false news or information is definitely a problem.

PART
TWO *MOST TRUSTWORTHY SOURCES*

What are the most trustworthy sources for providing Americans with accurate news and information?

Of the information sources that Americans say they trust "a lot," the highest-ranking source is families (31%), followed by President Barack Obama (25%), people like me (23%,) and local broadcast TV news (20%). Outside of families and President Barack Obama, fewer than one in four Americans identified having "a lot" of trust in any one source. Respondents were more likely to have "some" trust in information sources, rather than "a lot," indicating skepticism of the dependability of information sources in general.

Information Sources with the Highest Trust Scores*

Family
(74%)

People Like Me
(72%)

Friends
(70%)

Internet Search Engines
(e.g., Google, Bing) (64%)

Local Newspapers
(62%)

Local Broadcast News
(62%)

ABC (TV)
(56%)

CBS (TV)
54%)

President Barack Obama
(51%)

NBC
(51%)

My Local Government
(49%)

USA Today
(47%)

Fox News
(47%)

*Percentages indicate respondents have at least "some" trust in the source

The least-trusted sources of information that respondents said they did "not trust at all" included fake social media accounts (70%), the Russian government (63%), the Chinese government (52%), and President Donald Trump (42%). Celebrities (40%) were also not considered trustworthy sources for providing accurate information.

Mainstream media sources were deemed to be more trustworthy than most social media sites for providing accurate news or information. Social media platforms that significant percentages of Americans said were "not at all" trustworthy included Snapchat (41%), Twitter (34%), Instagram (33%), and Facebook (31%). Only one in five respondents said YouTube (21%) and LinkedIn (23%) were not trustworthy sources for accurate information.
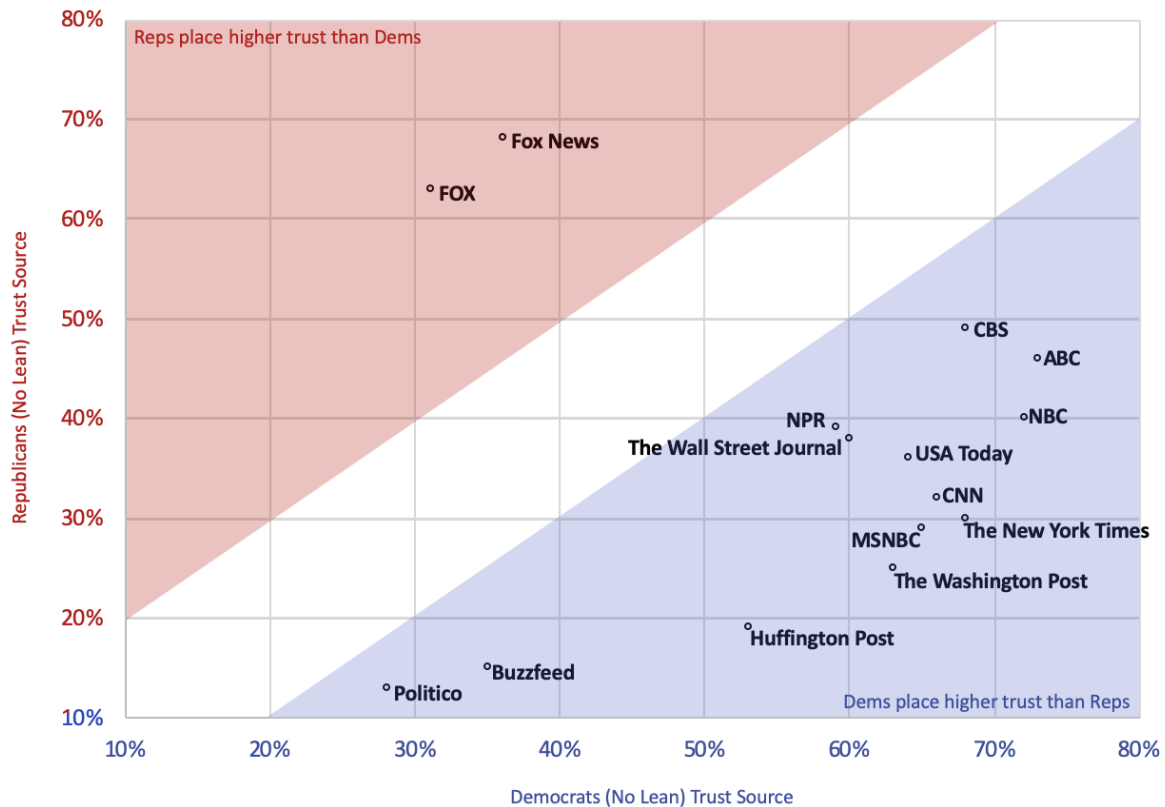
Political parties divided the respondents on their level of trust in information sources. The largest gap was between the perceived trustworthiness of the current and most recent former president of the U.S. Only 22% of Republicans said President Obama was trustworthy, compared to 80% of Democrats. Conversely, only 13% of Democrats said President Trump was trustworthy, in contrast to 78% of Republicans who said they have at least "some" trust in the current president to provide accurate news and information.

Sources typically considered more liberal were rated more trustworthy by Democrats and more conservative sources were rated higher by Republicans. Democrats are more likely to trust mainstream media sources than Republicans, showcasing a wide gap between the two parties. Compared to Republicans, Democrats were more likely to trust *The New York Times* (+38 percentage points), *The Washington Post* (+38 percentage points,) and *MSNBC* (+36 percentage points). The exception is *Fox News* as Republicans were more likely to trust this source than Democrats (+32 percentage points).

Who Do Democrats and Republicans Trust?

Democrats and Republicans Differ Over their Trust in Media Sources

% who say ___ is an at least "somewhat" trustworthy source of information

Reps place higher trust than Dems

Republicans (No Lean) Trust Source

° Fox News
° FOX
° CBS
° ABC
NPR °
The Wall Street Journal °
° NBC
° USA Today
° CNN
MSNBC °
° The New York Times
° The Washington Post
° Huffington Post
° Buzzfeed
° Politico

Dems place higher trust than Reps

Democrats (No Lean) Trust Source

PART
THREE

RESPONSIBILITY FOR SPREADING
AND COMBATTING DISINFORMATION

Who is most responsible for spreading disinformation*?

The biggest culprits for spreading disinformation are fake social media accounts, politicians, and President Donald Trump.

Fake social media accounts — defined as bots and people impersonating others — were deemed "very responsible" (55%) for spreading disinformation by the highest number of respondents. Politicians (45%) and President Trump (40%) were the other two sources considered most blameworthy.
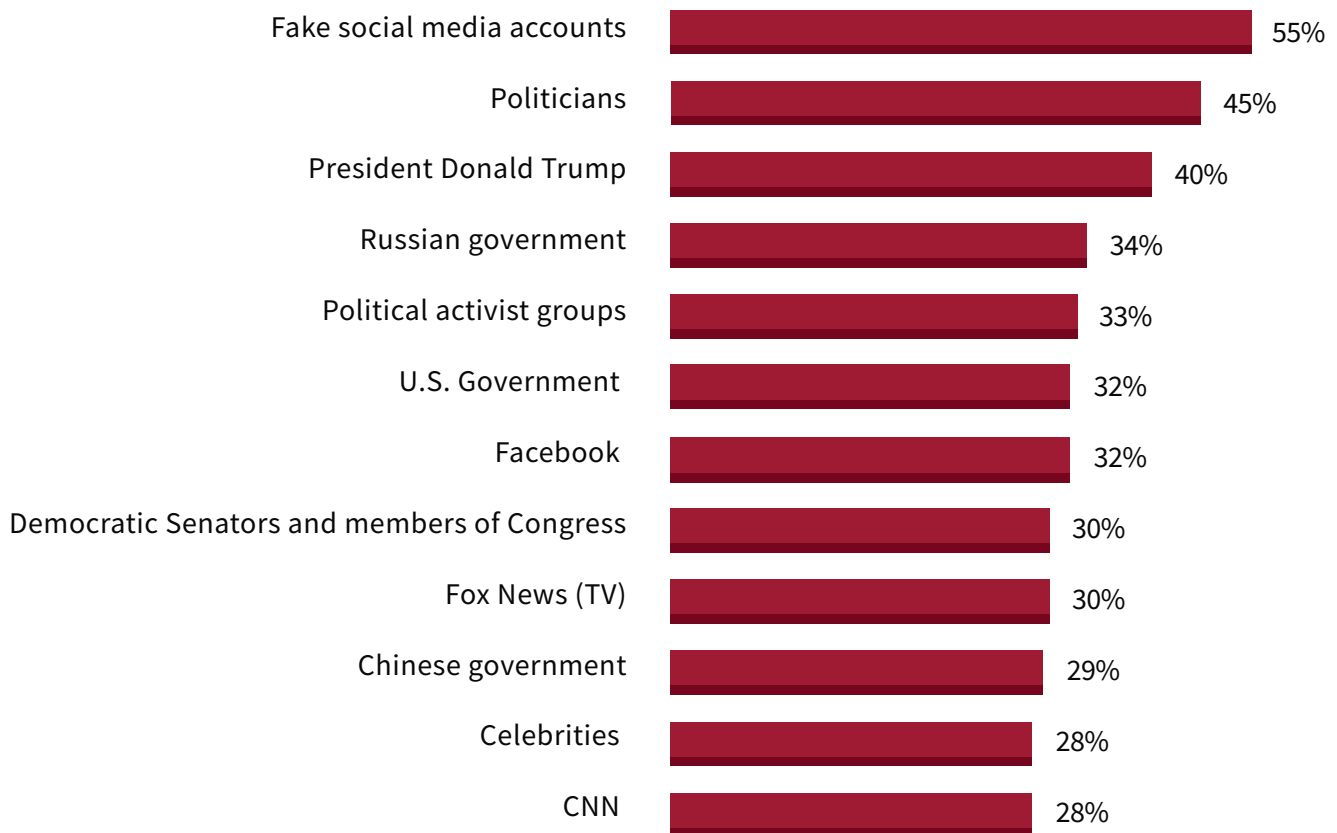
Political party lines divided the list of culpable sources. Only 20% of Republicans said President Trump was "very responsible" for spreading disinformation, compared to 60% of Democrats.

Among media outlets, *Fox News* (30%) and *CNN* (28%) were cited most often in the survey as being "very responsible" for spreading disinformation. Democrats (41%) were more likely than Republicans (21%) to say *Fox News* was "very responsible" for spreading information, while Republicans (46%) were more likely than Democrats (17%) to say *CNN* was largely to blame.

*The specific focus of this study is on disinformation, or deliberately misleading or biased information. This definition was given to the respondents at the beginning of the survey. This is different than misinformation, which is defined as false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is an intent to mislead. The difference between these two terms related to the source's intention. Disinformation focuses on a specific intent by the source to mislead.

Top 12 Sources Responsible
for Spreading Disinformation

Percentage of Americans saying source is VERY responsible for spreading disinformation

Source	Percentage
Fake social media accounts	55%
Politicians	45%
President Donald Trump	40%
Russian government	34%
Political activist groups	33%
U.S. Government	32%
Facebook	32%
Democratic Senators and members of Congress	30%
Fox News (TV)	30%
Chinese government	29%
Celebrities	28%
CNN	28%

Facebook is the only social media platform to show up in the top 12 disinformation list with 64% of respondents saying Facebook has at least "some" responsibility for the disinformation problem. Nearly one-third (32%) said the social media site was "very" responsible for spreading disinformation. Other social media platforms deemed to be at least partly responsible were Twitter (55%), YouTube (48%), Instagram (46%), Snapchat (39%), and LinkedIn (28%).

Who are the least responsible for spreading disinformation?

Friends, family, and "people like me" are the least responsible for spreading disinformation.

Personal networks were noted as being some of the sources that are the least responsible for spreading disinformation. Only a small percentage of respondents said individuals in their lives were "very responsible" for spreading disinformation, including people like me (11%), family (11%,) and friends (8%). Outside of personal networks, LinkedIn (11%) also made the list of the least responsible.

Who should be responsible for combatting disinformation?

Americans said President Trump, the U.S. government, and Congress are most responsible for combatting disinformation.

More than half of the respondents pointed to 16 groups and individuals who should be "very" responsible for combatting disinformation. More than two-thirds of Americans cited President Trump (72%), the U.S. government (70%), and Congress (67%) as the most responsible. News organizations, both local and national, as well as journalists (64%) were considered "very responsible" by more than half of the population. It's worth noting that many Americans believe public relations professionals (56%) and college/university professors (52%) also should be a part of the solution to the disinformation problem.
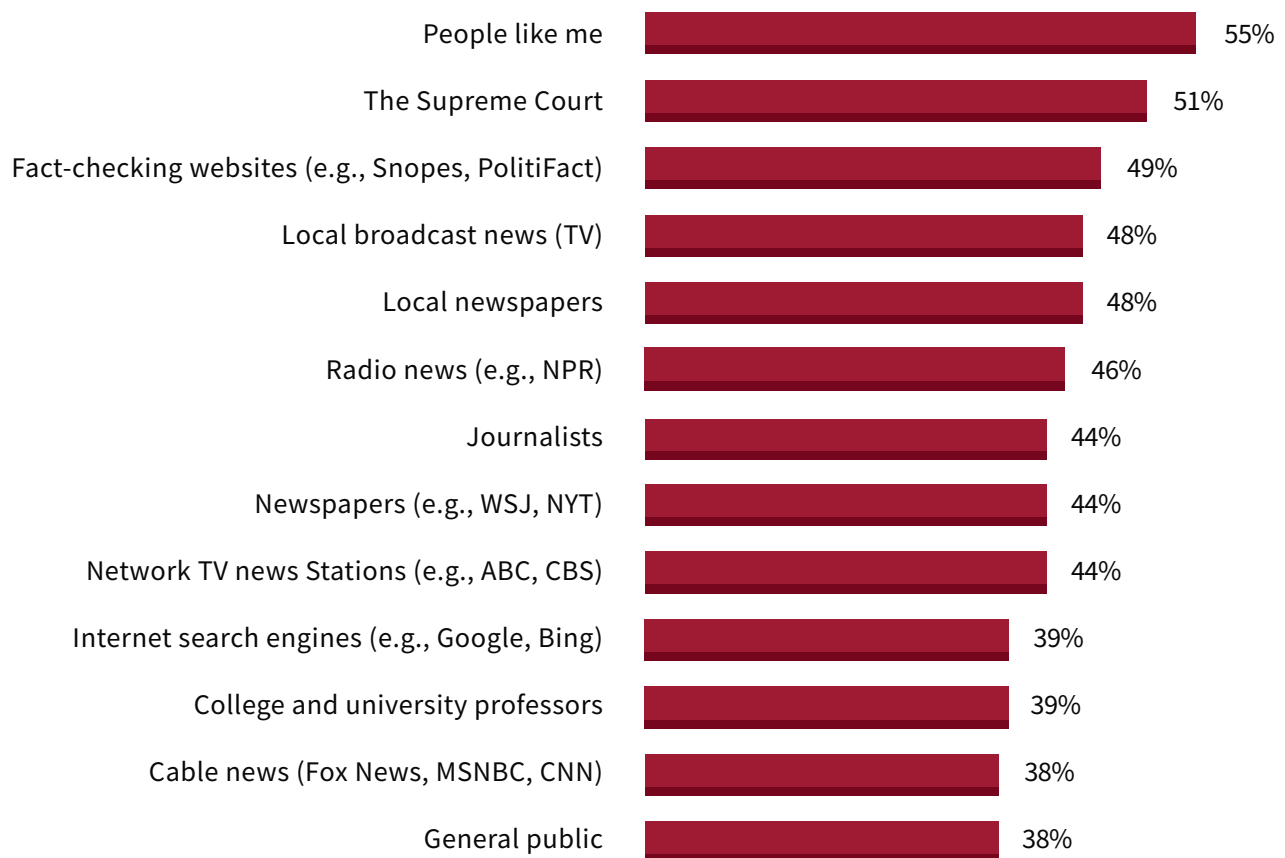
Nearly all the listed sources were determined by at least one-third of the respondents to be "very responsible" for combatting disinformation including CEOs (45%), marketers and advertisers (45%), the general public (43%), and even late-night TV shows (41%) such as *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Except in the case of celebrities, no more than 10% of the respondents said any of the sources were "not at all responsible." Overall, every source listed was determined by at least one-third of the respondents to be "very responsible."

Who Is Doing the Best Job at Trying to Combat Disinformation in the Media?

People like me, the Supreme Court, and fact-checking websites are doing the best job at trying to combat disinformation.

More than half of Americans said "people like me" (55%) are doing at least "somewhat well" in combatting disinformation and 17% said they are doing "very well." Fact-checking websites such as Snopes and PolitiFact (49%) were credited with helping, as were local sources such as newspapers (48%) and television (48%). Eight of the top 12 sources for combatting disinformation are media-related, representing a broad spectrum of media channels.

Percentage of Americans saying sources are doing at least "somewhat" well in combatting disinformation
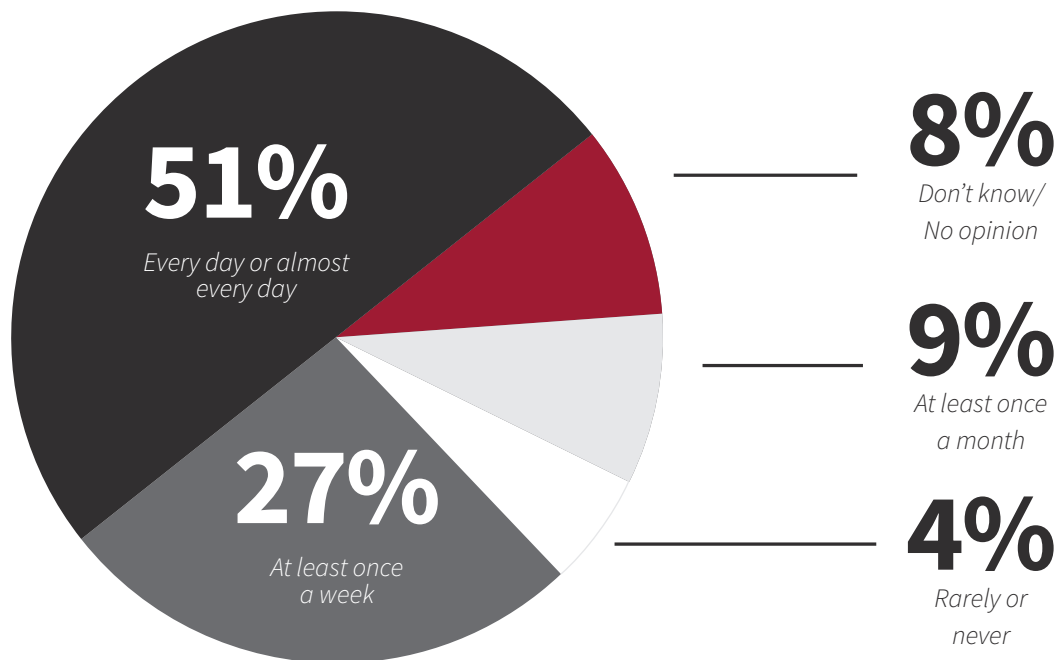
Source	Percentage
People like me	55%
The Supreme Court	51%
Fact-checking websites (e.g., Snopes, PolitiFact)	49%
Local broadcast news (TV)	48%
Local newspapers	48%
Radio news (e.g., NPR)	46%
Journalists	44%
Newspapers (e.g., WSJ, NYT)	44%
Network TV news Stations (e.g., ABC, CBS)	44%
Internet search engines (e.g., Google, Bing)	39%
College and university professors	39%
Cable news (Fox News, MSNBC, CNN)	38%
General public	38%

PART
FOUR

EXPOSURE TO FALSE INFORMATION

How often do Americans come across news or information that misrepresents reality or is false?

51%
Every day or almost every day

27%
At least once a week

8%
Don't know/ No opinion

9%
At least once a month

4%
Rarely or never

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

More than half of Americans (51%) said they come across false news or information almost every day. More than three-quarters of Americans (78%) come across this type of information at least once a week. Only 4% said they never or rarely come across false news or information.

How confident do Americans feel in their ability to recognize news or information that misrepresents reality or is false?

Overall, Americans are confident in their ability to recognize news or information that mispresents reality or is false. Four in five Americans said they are confident in their ability; 28% are "very confident," and 52% are "somewhat confident." Only a small number of respondents do not have confidence in their abilities; 12% are "not very confident" while 2% are "not at all confident."

Compared to adults overall, higher-income adults who make over $100k (34%), Democrats (33%), and men (32%) gave themselves most often the highest scores for being "very confident" in their ability to recognize news that misrepresents reality or is false.

How often do people go to other websites or media sources to verify information?

Nearly half of Americans (47%) 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. Thirty percent "sometimes" go to other sources while 18% "rarely" or "never" check alternative sources.

Younger adults (18-34) (55%), independents (49%), and higher-income adults who make over $100k (52%) are much more likely to check news against other sources "always" or "often."

METHODOLOGY:

This poll was conducted between March 19-24, 2019 by Morning Consult among a national sample of 2,200 adults. The interviews were conducted online and 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 2 percentage points.

For the full report and charts, please visit the Institute for Public Relations website at **instituteforpr.org/ipr-disinformation-study**. If you are an academic researcher who would like access to the data, please contact Tina McCorkindale at tina@instituteforpr.org.

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