

Younger people and users of niche social media platforms are more likely to share COVID-19 disinformation, says study

June 4 2020



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COVID-19 disinformation is more likely to be shared by younger people and those who use smaller social media channels, research shows.

Academics at Cardiff University's Crime and Security Research Institute investigated the UK public's exposure to [disinformation](#) during the first weeks of the lockdown.

Half (51%) of people surveyed said they had seen disinformation or [fake news](#) about the pandemic in the past month and of that group, 79% agreed they see false stories more regularly now than in the past. A significant portion (12%) also said they had shared coronavirus disinformation with others in the past month.

More than a quarter (28%) of those who had shared disinformation were aged 18-29 and a quarter (25%) were aged 30-39, compared to 15% of those aged 40-49 and 15% of those aged 50-59. An even smaller proportion of those aged 60-69 and 70 and above (9% and 7% respectively) said they had shared fake stories.

Facebook had the lowest proportion of everyday users who admitted sharing disinformation (14%) either intentionally or unintentionally, followed by Instagram (18%) and Twitter (20%). This was in comparison to everyday users of VK (44%) Weibo (37%), OK (36%), Linked-In (34%), TikTok (33%) and Tumblr (30%).

Professor Kate Daunt, who led the study, said: "Our research carried out at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown shows the worrying extent of disinformation during this pandemic. More than half of those questioned identified false information online relating to COVID-19, and it's likely that within the remaining 49%, there are a large number of people who have been exposed to fake stories without realizing it. Nearly four out of every five people reported seeing more disinformation today than in the past."

"There has been much discussion on the responsibilities of mainstream social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter in tackling fake news.

But our research demonstrates that this approach may be overly simplistic.

"We think some may people share content to call out inaccuracies. But because of the way that the social media platform algorithms work, this may have actually succeeded in giving the COVID-19 disinformation more credence and prominence."

Disinformation is described as deliberate attempts to mislead by providing people with untrue, deceptive or [false information](#).

The research also showed that while over half of the sample agreed that "the government does what is right", a higher proportion who had seen fake news stories relating to COVID-19 disagreed with this statement. Respondents who had seen and shared fake news about coronavirus were also more likely to believe that disinformation had an impact "to a great extent" on trust in scientists and experts.

Professor Daunt added: "Disinformation risks damaging trust and causing confusion at a time when people are searching for clarity. With restrictions on our way of life set to continue for months to come, a deeper understanding of how fake [news](#) spreads across multiple platforms is going to be vital to ensure accurate public health messages do not get lost."

The study, which is part of a wider research project covering 12 countries, involved surveys with 722 UK citizens between 21 March and 5 April this year using an online platform. The questions covered a range of topics including awareness of and attitudes towards disinformation in the media; domestic and world views; social [media](#) usage; demographic information.

Provided by Cardiff University

Citation: Younger people and users of niche social media platforms are more likely to share COVID-19 disinformation, says study (2020, June 4) retrieved 11 December 2023 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-06-younger-people-users-niche-social.html>

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