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Data to Insights for a Better Canada

Misinformation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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by **Karine Garneau and Clémence Zossou**

Since the pandemic began, a great deal of information has circulated online and on social media about COVID-19, and many Canadians have turned to online resources to stay informed.

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by an infodemic—an overabundance of information, some which is true and some which is not, which made it very difficult for people to find facts and reliable sources. Misinformation in the context of COVID-19 can endanger the population's health, especially if the news that spreads is about false prevention measures or treatments, or if it undermines the population's trust in health services and public or political institutions (WHO 2020; OECD 2020).

For several years now, national and international organizations have been trying to better understand the mechanisms of misinformation and how to limit its reach. To counter misinformation, the public and policy makers need to rely on healthy, resilient information environments (OECD 2020). That means public institutions, online platforms and Internet users all have a role to play in reducing the impacts of misinformation.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has identified three pillars in combating misinformation: the importance of public institutions having transparent strategic communications; the role of online platforms as relevant players that are able to limit the spread of false claims; and, lastly, education, to equip future generations with appropriate digital and media literacy skills (OECD 2020; Goch 2020).

Nationally, the Canadian government has been involved in combating misinformation for several years, including supporting initiatives for digital citizenship education and creating healthy information ecosystems (Canadian Heritage n.d.a; Canadian Heritage n.d.b).

This article uses data from the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS) 4: Information Sources Consulted During the Pandemic, which was conducted from July 20 to 26, 2020,[1] among Canadians aged 15 and over living in the 10 provinces. The focus is on information found online by Canadians who used online resources to learn about COVID-19, as well as COVID-19 information sharing. In addition, the article examines the verification methods used by Canadians to check the accuracy of information found online as well as suspected information[2] seen online about COVID-19.

Nearly all Canadians saw COVID-19 misinformation online

During the pandemic, nine in ten Canadians (90%) used online sources to find information about COVID-19. The three main sources were; online newspapers or news sites (63%), social media posts from news organizations or magazines (35%), and social media posts from other users or influencers (30%).

During the first few months of this health crisis, 96% of Canadians who used the Internet to find information saw COVID-19 information that they suspected was misleading, false or inaccurate. Among these Canadians, one-quarter (25%) saw the suspected information multiple times a day, 14% saw it once a day and 29% saw it at least once a week. Just under one-third of Canadians (28%) said they rarely saw false information, and 4% reported never having seen any.

1. The CPSS is an online panel survey series launched by Statistics Canada in April 2020 to assess how Canadians are experiencing this time of the pandemic. In most cases, the same respondents are followed over time, and the panels are statistically representative of the Canadian population.
2. Questions about exposure to misinformation reflect respondents' perceptions of the quality of the information they have seen online. These perceptions are self-reported and Statistics Canada has not verified the accuracy of the information seen online.

In addition, regardless of gender, nearly two in five Canadians (40%) reported believing that the information they saw related to COVID-19 was true, then later realized that it was not.

Only one in five Canadians always checked the accuracy of online COVID-19 information

The survey found that many Canadians were not in a regular habit of checking the accuracy of information they found online, with only 21% reporting they always check the accuracy and 37% saying they often check. However roughly 36% of Canadians reported that they only sometimes (24%) or rarely (12%) checked the accuracy of COVID-19 information they found online, which facilitates the sharing of potentially misleading, false or inaccurate information.

The most common reason identified by the 1.5 million (6%) Canadians who never verified the accuracy of the information, was that they trusted the source (53%). Of the other reasons, 22% reported that they did not think about checking the accuracy of the information, 20% did not care about checking, 11% said they did not know how to check and 10% did not have time to check. Men and women both reported similar proportions for the reasons they didn't fact check the information found online.

Half of Canadians shared COVID-19 information they found online without knowing whether it was accurate

During the first few months of the pandemic, just over half of all Canadians (53%) had shared COVID-19 information they found online without knowing if it was accurate (22% always, often or sometimes shared, and 31% rarely shared), while the other half (47%) never shared unverified information. Information-sharing habits did not vary by gender, but differences were observed depending on the age group and education level of respondents.

Table 1
Frequency of sharing COVID-19-related information without knowing its accuracy, by age and highest educational attainment

		Shared always, often or sometimes	Shared rarely	Never shared
		percent		
Ages 15 and older	**Total, ages 15 and older**	**21.9***	**31.3***	**46.8**
	High school diploma or less	26.6*†	30.3*	43.0†
	Non-university postsecondary diploma	22.4*†	32.2*	45.4†
	University degree	17.0*	31.2*	51.8
Ages 15 to 54	**Total, ages 15 to 54**	**20.2*‡**	**29.5*‡**	**50.4‡**
	High school diploma or less	25.6E*	27.5*	47.0
	Non-university postsecondary diploma	19.5*	31.3*	49.2
	University degree	16.2*	29.3*	54.6
Ages 55 and older	**Total, ages 55 and older**	**25.3***	**34.8***	**39.9**
	High school diploma or less	28.5*†	35.4	36.1†
	Non-university postsecondary diploma	27.9*†	34.0	38.1
	University degree	18.8*	35.1*	46.1

E use with caution
* significantly different from estimate for reference category (Never shared) ($p < 0.05$)
† significantly different from estimate for reference category (University degree) ($p < 0.05$)
‡ significantly different from estimate for reference category (Total, ages 55 and older) ($p < 0.05$)
Source: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 4: Information Sources Consulted During the Pandemic.

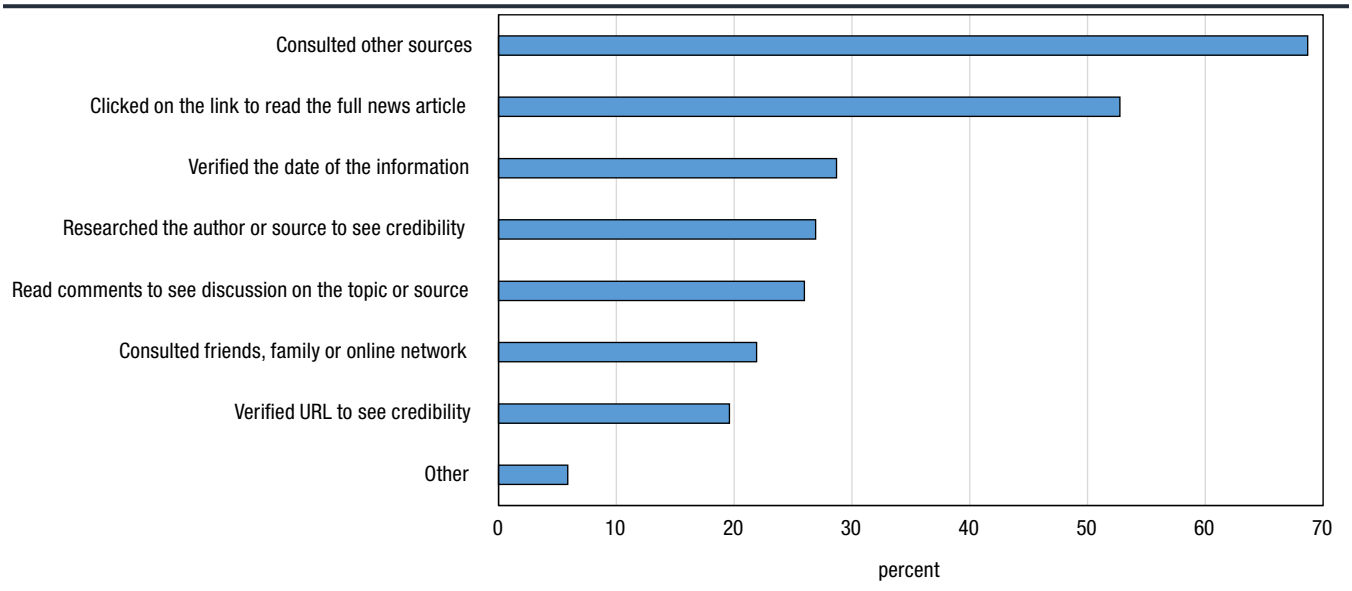
Canadians 55 years of age and over (25%) were more likely than those between 15 to 54 years of age to always, often or sometimes share COVID-19 information without validating its accuracy (Table 1). In addition, Canadians 15 years of age and over with a university degree (17%) were less likely than those with a high school diploma or less (27%) or those with a non-university postsecondary diploma (22%) to always, often or sometimes share unverified information.

For respondents 55 years of age and up, the higher their education level, the less likely they were to always, often or sometimes share information if they were unsure of its accuracy. Among Canadians 15 to 54 years of age, education level did not seem to have an impact on whether they shared unverified information.

Consulting other sources was the strategy most commonly used by Canadians to verify the accuracy of information about COVID-19 found on the Internet

Canadians used various methods to check the accuracy of online COVID-19 information. The two most commonly used methods were consulting other sources (69%) and clicking on the link to read the full article (53%). Checking the date of the information came third and was used by roughly one in three Canadians (29%) (Chart 1).

Chart 1
Methods used to check the accuracy of COVID-19 information found on the Internet



Source: Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey and 2020 Canadian Perspectives Survey Series.

The methods chosen to check the accuracy of online COVID-19 information varied by education level and age group, but didn't seem to differ by sex.

Respondents with a higher level of education were more likely than those with a lower level to consult other sources or click the link to read the full article to fact check information. For example, 77% of Canadians with a university degree consulted other sources, compared to 68% of those with a non-university postsecondary education and 61% of those with a high school diploma or less (Table 2). The same trend was observed for clicking the link to read the full article.

Furthermore, for each of the verification methods outlined in the survey, Canadians 15 to 54 years of age were more likely to use them to verify the accuracy of information found online, compared to those 55 years old and up. For instance, nearly 57% of Canadians younger than age 55 clicked on the link to read the full article, compared to 45% of those 55 years and older.

Among the other verification methods used, just under 30% of Canadians did some research to learn more about the credibility of the author or source (27%) or read the comments to see discussion on the topic or source (26%).

Table 2
Methods used to check the accuracy of COVID-19 information found on the Internet, by age and highest educational attainment

		Age group		Highest certificate, diploma or degree completed		
	Total	15 to 54	55 and older	High school diploma or less	Non-university postsecondary diploma	University degree
Methods of fact checking	percent					
Consulted other sources	68.7	70.6*	64.9	60.5†	68.0†	77.1
Clicked on the link to read the full news article	52.8	56.6*	45.2	46.0†	51.3†	60.7
Verified the date of the information	28.7	33.1*	20.1	23.8†	28.5	33.5
Researched the author or source to see credibility	26.9	29.8*	21.2	28.0	23.8†	29.5
Read comments to see discussion on the topic or source	26.0	27.8*	22.4	26.4	26.1	25.5
Consulted friends, family or online network	21.9	26.4*	13.1	23.8	18.7†	23.8
Verified URL to see credibility	19.6	24.9*	9.1	15.0[E]†	20.5*	22.9
Other	5.9	6.2[E]	5.3	F	6.3[E]	4.9[E]

[E] use with caution
F too unreliable to be published
* significantly different from estimate for reference category (55 and older) ($p < 0.05$))
† significantly different from estimate for reference category (University degree) ($p < 0.05$)
Source: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 4: Information Sources Consulted During the Pandemic.

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