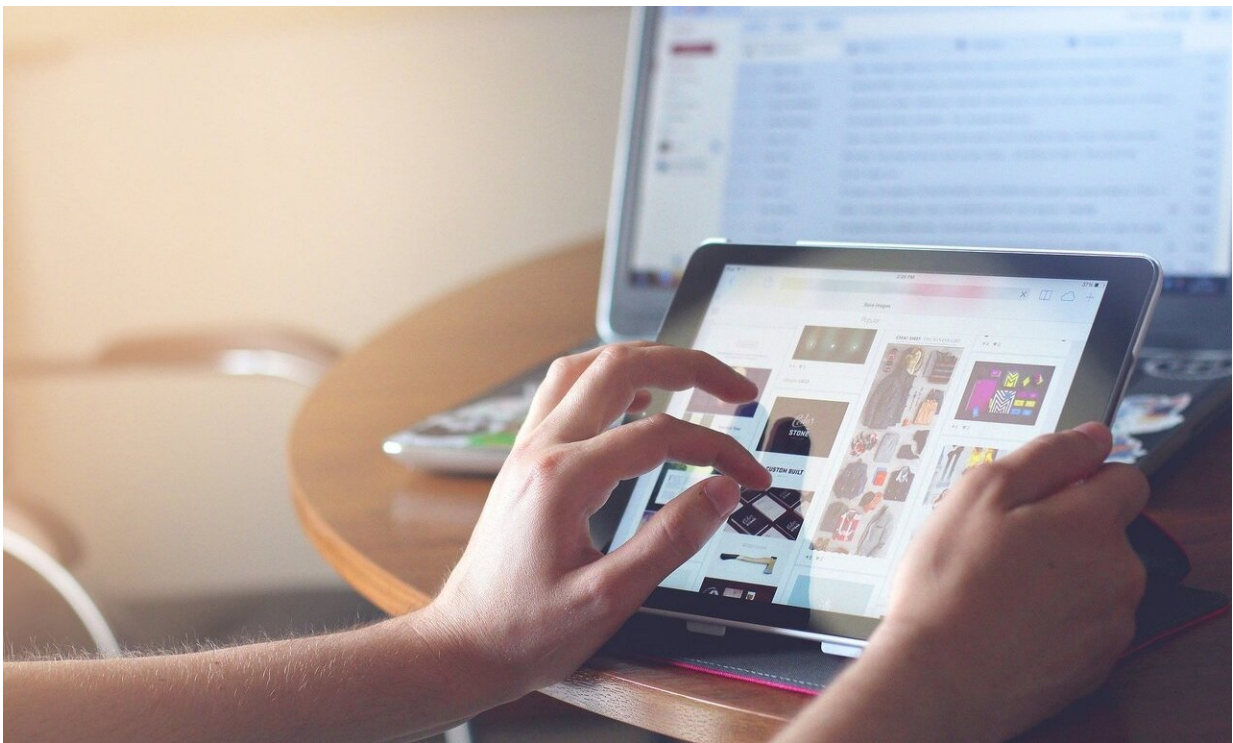


People use, trust different COVID-19 information sources depending on gender, age, and other factors

October 8 2020



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Gender, age, education level, and political affiliation predict where people turn for information about COVID-19—and what sources they use and trust is linked to differing beliefs about the pandemic, according

to a new study by NYU School of Global Public Health researchers.

The findings—drawn from surveys of more than 11,000 U.S. adults during the first few months of the pandemic—are published in *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*.

"Our study is one of the first data-driven efforts to not only think about what is being said across different sources of COVID-19 [information](#), but who is using what source, who is trusting what source, and what real impact this is having on knowledge and beliefs about the pandemic," said Shahmir Ali, a doctoral student at NYU School of Global Public Health and the study's lead author.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an urgent need to communicate [health information](#) to the public—but how can public health officials best reach people, given the myriad channels available? In March 2020, as it became clear that the coronavirus was spreading in the U.S., NYU researchers created and deployed an [online survey](#) to gauge how people were getting their information on COVID-19. The survey was based on a model used to study information sources during previous outbreaks of SARS and Ebola.

Using Facebook to recruit 11,242 U.S. adults from all 50 states, the researchers surveyed one group of participants in March and another in April. The survey asked what sources people use and trust to get information on COVID-19: traditional media (TV, newspapers, and radio), social media, [government websites](#), other websites, personal connections (family, friends, and partners), [medical professionals](#), and religious leaders.

The researchers also measured participants' knowledge (e.g. whether masks, hand sanitizer, and avoiding school and work can protect you against the coronavirus) and beliefs (e.g. the virus was released as an act

of bioterrorism) about COVID-19.

When combined, traditional media sources—TV, radio, or newspapers—were the largest sources of COVID-19 information, with 91.2 percent of respondents turning to at least one. Popular outlets included CNN (24 percent of those using traditional media sources), FOX News (19.3 percent), and other local or national networks (35.2 percent).

After traditional media, government websites (87.6 percent) and social media (73.6 percent) were the most common sources of COVID-19 information, although participants reported trusting the government far more than social media: 43.3 percent listed the government as the most trusted source of information, compared with 1.2 percent for social media. Of note, trust in government websites varied by demographic—men and those 40 and older were less likely to trust the government—and faltered over time. The researchers measured a dramatic drop in people citing government websites as the most trusted source, from 53.3 percent in March to 36.8 percent in April.

"Perceptions and use of information sources can vary across different stages of a health crisis," said study author Yesim Tozan, assistant professor of global health at NYU School of Global Public Health. "Public health officials need to continually keep an eye on public perceptions and trust, and should adapt their communication strategies as needed so they remain effective."

The study also found that people use on average six different sources to gather information about COVID-19—although they tended to use more sources in March than in April. Participants with children and more education were likely to use more sources, while those who were male, aged 40 and older, not working or retired, or Republican were likely to use fewer sources.

"Twenty-five years ago, people would get their information by picking up the paper or watching the nightly news, but now, people get information from a variety of sources. While this can have benefits, many online sources are not vetted and may disseminate erroneous information, leaving it up to you as a consumer to sort it out," said Ralph DiClemente, chair of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at NYU School of Global Public Health and the study's senior author. Additional study authors include postdoctoral associate Joshua Foreman and doctoral students Ariadna Capasso and Abbey Jones of NYU School of Global Public Health.

The association between what sources participants used and their knowledge about COVID-19 was mixed. Using some information sources, such as medical professionals and [traditional media](#), was associated with having more knowledge in some areas but less in others.

However, many beliefs about COVID-19 were predicted by which sources of information people used. For example, those relying on CNN or MSNBC were more likely to agree that the coronavirus is deadlier than the flu, the amount of media attention to the coronavirus has been adequate, and the coronavirus is a bigger problem than the government suggests. Conversely, those relying on FOX News were more likely to agree that the coronavirus was released as an act of bioterrorism, warmer weather will reduce the spread of coronavirus, and the [coronavirus](#) is not as big of a problem as the [media](#) suggest.

"As public health professionals, it's important that we consider targeting [information sources](#) that are used and trusted by certain population groups in order to make sure that COVID-19 information is reaching a diverse audience," added Ali. "We have already started to see this, for instance, through initiatives by [social media](#) platforms to connect users with COVID-19 information while they are using these apps. Our research provides crucial evidence to push for these types of initiatives

to get COVID-19 information out to the public in a manner that matches what sources they already use and trust."

More information: Shahmir H Ali et al, Trends and Predictors of COVID-19 Information Sources and Their Relationship With Knowledge and Beliefs Related to the Pandemic: Nationwide Cross-Sectional Study, *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* (2020). [DOI: 10.2196/21071](https://doi.org/10.2196/21071)

Provided by New York University

Citation: People use, trust different COVID-19 information sources depending on gender, age, and other factors (2020, October 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-10-people-covid-sources-gender-age.html>

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