

Infodemic? Americans were actually well-informed at the start of the pandemic

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Research by communication scientist Aart van Stekelenburg reveals that the average American had a pretty accurate picture of the facts about COVID-19 in the first months of the corona pandemic. His research will

be published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* on 12 January.

"We asked ourselves if it was true what the World Health Organization (WHO) had said: that we are in the middle of a COVID 'infodemic.' With such an abundance of information and misinformation about the [pandemic](#), it was thought that people would have difficulty figuring out what was true and what was not," explains Van Stekelenburg. "But how susceptible are people to misinformation actually?"

Van Stekelenburg and his colleagues decided to conduct a survey at the beginning of the pandemic among some 1200 Americans balanced regarding age, gender and ethnicity. "We wanted to get a good picture of the average American's knowledge of the facts."

Fever, 5G and bleach

The participants were asked to respond to statements about the COVID-19 pandemic in four online questionnaires during the months of April and May, at the height of the first wave. Half of the statements presented to the participants were scientifically accurate, the other half inaccurate. Van Stekelenburg and his colleagues decide to conduct their survey in the United States because it was the country hardest hit by the [virus](#) at the time.

A number of new statements were added to get responses to current events every week. Examples of the statements were "Social distancing helps to reduce the spread of the virus," "The virus is man-made," "Radiation from 5G towers helps to spread the virus," "One of the symptoms of COVID-19 is fever" and "Injecting or swallowing bleach is a safe way to kill the virus."

Accurate beliefs

Van Stekelenburg also found a correlation between the accuracy of people's beliefs and their reported behavior, such as washing hands and social distancing. "Although it is not clear if this is a [causal relationship](#), it could mean that people who are more aware of the facts also take more account of the effect of their behavior on the spread of the virus," he continues.

The research also revealed how individual characteristics affected the accuracy of the beliefs. For example, Americans who got their news about the pandemic from CNN and FoxNews had less accurate beliefs, while the beliefs of people with more confidence in scientists were more accurate, and conservatives/Republicans were generally less accurate than liberals/Democrats.

More information: Aart van Stekelenburg et al. Investigating and Improving the Accuracy of US Citizens' Beliefs About the COVID-19 Pandemic: Longitudinal Survey Study, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.2196/24069](https://doi.org/10.2196/24069)

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