January 25, 2021
COVID-19: Social Media, Politicization, and Misinformation

Summary: Researchers at the University of South Florida, in partnership with the Florida Center for Cybersecurity, conducted a nationwide survey of 1,003 U.S. adults to measure their use of social media to engage with the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their attitudes regarding the accuracy of the information they encounter online and politicization of the pandemic. The survey included a representative sample of American adults, fielded between January 9th and 12th. Results are reported below with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error +/- 3.

Politics has affected many people's ability to learn about COVID-19. Two-thirds of respondents (67%) agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has been too politicized on social media. Three-quarters of Americans (76%) say that "politics has made it harder to learn the truth about COVID-19".

COVID-19 has been a source of personal tension for many Americans. Nearly a third of respondents (30%) agreed that COVID-19 has caused tension in their family and/or friendships. More than one in five Facebook users (22%) report having "unfriended" or "unfollowed" someone because of something they posted about COVID-19.

Americans have relied heavily on social media to stay informed about COVID-19. Three quarters of Americans (76%) say that they have relied on social media at least a "A Little" to stay informed about COVID-19, while just under half (46%) say they have relied on it "A Lot". A significant majority (70%) report that they read information about COVID-19 on social media at least "Once a Week", while 32% say that they do so "Every Day".

Despite Their Reliance on Social Media, Many Don't Trust the Information They Encounter There. While social media has been heavily relied on during the pandemic, only a third of Americans (32%) say that they are confident in the accuracy of the information that they see about COVID-19 on social media. Only a quarter (26%) trust social media in general as a source of news and information.

Social media users are wary of misinformation about COVID-19, but most have not relied on medical experts to "fact-check" information. Nearly three-quarters of Americans (73%) agree that "there is a lot of false information about COVID-19 on social media", and more than half (56%) say that they have personally encountered misinformation about the pandemic online. However, only 36% report talking to a doctor or healthcare professional about the accuracy of something they saw on social media about COVID-19.

Some Partisan Differences. Republicans were slightly more likely to see the COVID-19 pandemic as "politicized", with 78% either "somewhat" or "strongly" agreeing that the pandemic "has been too politicized on social media", compared with 60% of Democrats, and 73% of Independents. Republicans were also slightly more likely to believe that politics has made it harder to learn the truth about COVID-19 (86% vs. 71% of Democrats and 77% of Independents). However, majorities in both parties agreed with each of these sentiments.

Summary of Responses

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: ***The COVID-19 pandemic has been too politicized on social media.***

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	402	40.1
Somewhat Agree	273	27.2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	219	21.9
Somewhat Disagree	66	6.6
Strongly Disagree	42	4.2

N = 1,002

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: ***Politics has made it harder to learn the truth about COVID-19.***

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	437	43.7
Somewhat Agree	324	32.4
Neither Agree nor Disagree	149	14.9
Somewhat Disagree	50	5.0
Strongly Disagree	40	4.0

N = 1,000

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: ***Disagreements over COVID-19 have caused tension in my family and/or friendships.***

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	102	10.2
Somewhat Agree	201	20.1
Neither Agree nor Disagree	210	21.0
Somewhat Disagree	189	18.8
Strongly Disagree	300	29.9

N = 1,002

How much have you relied on social media to stay informed about the COVID-19 pandemic?

	Frequency	Percent
A Great Deal	207	20.6
A Lot	250	24.9
A Little	305	30.4
Not at All	241	24.0

N = 1,003

On average, how often do you read information about COVID-19 on social media?

	Frequency	Percent
Every Day	323	32.2
A Few Days a Week	271	27.0
Once a Week	112	11.2
Less Often	297	29.6

N = 1,003

Thinking about social media, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: ***I am confident in the accuracy of the information I see about COVID-19 on social media.***

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	73	7.3
Somewhat Agree	250	24.9
Neither Agree nor Disagree	252	25.1
Somewhat Disagree	188	18.7
Strongly Disagree	240	23.9

N = 1,003

Thinking about social media, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: ***There is a lot of false information about COVID-19 on social media.***

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	391	39.0
Somewhat Agree	341	34.0
Neither Agree nor Disagree	183	18.2
Somewhat Disagree	63	6.3
Strongly Disagree	24	2.5

N = 1,003

Thinking about social media, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: ***In general, I trust social media as a source of news and information.***

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	63	6.3
Somewhat Agree	202	20.1
Neither Agree nor Disagree	267	26.6
Somewhat Disagree	200	19.9
Strongly Disagree	271	27.0

N = 1,003

Since the start of the pandemic, have you encountered misinformation about COVID-19 on social media?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	556	55.5
No	142	14.2
Unsure	303	30.3

N = 1,001

Since the start of the pandemic, have you "Unfriended" or "Unfollowed" someone on Facebook because of something they posted about COVID-19?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	182	22.1
No	642	77.9

N = 824 (Facebook users only)

Since the start of the pandemic, have you used the "Snooze" feature to temporarily block someone on Facebook because of something they posted about COVID-19?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	179	21.7
No	645	78.3

N = 824 (Facebook users only)

Please indicate whether or not you've done each of the following since the start of the pandemic: ***I've done internet research to "fact check" something that I saw on social media related to COVID-19.***

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	578	57.6
No	425	42.4

N = 1,003

Please indicate whether or not you've done each of the following since the start of the pandemic: ***I've talked to friends, family, or coworkers about the accuracy of something that I saw on social media related to COVID-19.***

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	686	68.4
No	317	31.6

N = 1,003

Please indicate whether or not you've done each of the following since the start of the pandemic: ***I've talked to my doctor or a healthcare professional about the accuracy of something that I saw on social media related to COVID-19.***

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	36.4	36.4
No	63.6	63.6

N = 1,003

Partisan Differences

Party Affiliation of Registered Voters in Sample

	Frequency	Percent
Democrats	359	42.5
Independents	240	28.4
Republicans	246	29.1

N=845

The COVID-19 pandemic has been too politicized on social media BY Party ID.

Reported as percentage of column totals

	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Strongly Agree	31.8	49.0	48.4
Somewhat Agree	28.1	23.8	30.1
Neither Agree nor Disagree	26.2	16.7	14.2
Somewhat Disagree	7.5	7.5	4.9
Strongly Disagree	6.4	2.9	2.4

N = 1,003

Politics has made it harder to learn the truth about COVID-19 BY Party ID.

Reported as percentage of column totals

	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Strongly Agree	39.3	52.1	51.4
Somewhat Agree	32.0	25.4	34.2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	17.3	12.9	9.9
Somewhat Disagree	5.6	5.8	2.5
Strongly Disagree	5.8	3.8	2.1

N = 1,003

Survey Information

1,003 U.S. adults were surveyed via an online web-panel using Prodege MR, an industry leading market research provider. The survey was fielded from January 9th through 12th, and the results are reported with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of +/- 3.

Survey respondents were selected via a stratified, quota sampling approach in order to ensure a representative sample of Americans. Balanced quotas for gender, age, race, ethnicity, and education were determined based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 *American Community Survey* (ACS). The quotas were also stratified by census region to ensure geographical representativeness: [Northeast – 17.2%; Midwest – 21.0%; South – 37.3%; West – 24.5%]. Table A1 below summarizes the survey sample in comparison to the 2019 ACS.

Table A1
Sample Comparison

	USF Survey Sample	American Community Survey (2019)
Gender		
Female	51.2%	51.1%
Male	48.8%	48.9%
Age		
18-24	11.3%	11.9%
25-34	17.8%	17.8%
35-44	17.0%	16.5%
45-54	16.0%	16.0%
55-64	17.1%	16.6%
65+	20.8%	21.2%
Race		
Black/African American	15.7%	15.1%
White/Caucasian	73.2%	76.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	7.9%	7.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.0%	0.8%
Other	2.2%	0.2%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	17.7%	17.5%
Non-Hispanic	82.3%	82.5%
Education		
Less than High School	6.8%	11.4%
High School or Equivalent	25.9%	27.6%
Some College/Associates Degree	34.0%	30.4%
Four-Year Degree	21.5%	19.3%
Graduate/Professional Degree	11.7%	11.4%

About our Research Team

About Cyber Florida: The Florida Center for Cyber Security (also known as Cyber Florida) was established by the State of Florida in 2014 to make the Sunshine State one of the most cyber-secure in the nation by promoting cybersecurity education, research, and outreach in partnership with the 12 State University System of Florida (SUS) institutions. Hosted by the University of South Florida, the Center is committed to increasing the number of K-12 students interested in and prepared for careers in cybersecurity and related STEM disciplines.

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