

COVID-19: Australian news and misinformation



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by Sora Park, Caroline Fisher, Jee Young Lee and Kieran McGuinness

NEWS & MEDIA RESEARCH CENTRE

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ABOUT THE NEWS & MEDIA RESEARCH CENTRE

The News and Media Research Centre specialises in research exploring news consumption, the changing media environment, and the impacts of social and digital media on society. It is the home of the annual *Digital News Report Australia*.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the economy and daily life. Social distancing measures put in place by the government to halt the spread of the virus have led to a surge in media consumption while Australians spend more time at home. This has fuelled concern about an 'infodemic' alongside the health pandemic.

This report is based on a national online survey of 2,196 Australians aged 18 and older, conducted between 18 and 22 April 2020. It examines how and where Australians are getting information about COVID-19, which sources they find trustworthy and what impact the intense news coverage has on their wellbeing.

CONCERN AND CONSUMPTION

Most Australians are concerned about the COVID-19 outbreak. 60% say they are either very or extremely concerned about the coronavirus, 32% are somewhat concerned, and 8% are not very or not at all concerned.

Concern is driving news consumption. Those who are concerned are consuming more news than before, with 78% of those who are concerned saying their news consumption has increased during the pandemic.

Overall, Australians are accessing more news than usual. During social isolation, Australians are staying at home to flatten the curve of the spread of the disease. This has resulted in an increase in news and media consumption, particularly among women and young people. More than two-thirds (70%) of Australians say they are accessing news more than once a day since the COVID-19 outbreak. This is much higher than usual. Last year, the *Digital News Report Australia 2019* showed only 56% accessed news more than once a day.

Australians have turned to TV news during social isolation. Half of Australians (51%) are using TV as their main source of news about COVID-19. This is a nine percent increase from last year when 42% said they relied on TV for news (*Digital News Report Australia 2019*). Print and radio have decreased, and the use of online and social media sources have remained much the same.

Australians are tired of news about COVID-19 and are avoiding it. More than two-thirds (71%) say they are avoiding news about the coronavirus. This is 9% higher than last year, when 62% said they avoid news generally (*Digital News Report Australia 2019*). Women (75%) are more likely to avoid news about coronavirus than men (67%) and younger generations avoid COVID-19 news more than older generations. News fatigue is driving avoidance. Half (52%) say they feel tired of hearing about COVID-19 and 46% say they find the news coverage overwhelming. Women are more likely to avoid it because they find it upsetting and men are more likely to avoid it because they are overwhelmed by the volume of news.

NEWS AND WELLBEING

News coverage is impacting on people's wellbeing. While news about the coronavirus provides an important topic of conversation (53%) it is also making people feel more anxious (52%). Women are more likely to feel an increase in anxiety because of COVID-19 news (59%) than men (44%). Compared to older generations, Gen Y (61%) and Gen Z (56%) are more likely to say news about the coronavirus makes them feel more anxious.

News and stockpiling. Those who are consuming more news than usual are more likely to say they have stocked-up on essentials (41%), compared to those whose news access has stayed the same (23%) or decreased (26%).

TRUST & MISINFORMATION

Government is doing a good job of informing the public, but the news and social media exaggerate. Australians trust scientists and health experts the most as sources of information about the coronavirus (85%), followed by the government (66%) and news organisations (52%). Australians also think the federal government has done a good job of informing them about the pandemic (75%) and how they should respond (81%). We also found high levels of satisfaction with news coverage of the issue (73%). However, people are more inclined to think the news media (38%) and social media (36%) have exaggerated claims about the virus and its impacts, compared to the government (18%).

Australian government and news media perform better than in the UK and US

Three-quarters (75%) Australians think the government has done good job informing them about the pandemic compared to 63% of people in the UK and 45% in the US. However, fewer people in the UK think the government has exaggerated this issue (11%) compared to 21% in the US and 18% here. Similarly, 33% in the UK think the news media has exaggerated the issue compared to 38% in the US and Australia.

Trust in news about COVID-19 is higher than trust in news in general. Overall trust in the news media has risen during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, general trust in news was 44% according to the *Digital News Report Australia 2019*, compared to 53% during the pandemic.

The majority did not come across misinformation about coronavirus. Less than a quarter (23%) of people say they have encountered a great deal or a lot of misinformation about the coronavirus, and 30% say they haven't encountered much or at all. Around one-third (36%) say they come across misinformation some of the time and 12% didn't know.

Social media is the main source of misinformation. Two-thirds (66%) of people say they have encountered misinformation about COVID-19 on social media. More than one-third (36%) say they mainly encounter it via the news media, and 19% say they saw it from politicians.

Concern about COVID-19 drives verification. While 62% of the respondents say they engaged with at least one type of news verification behaviour, 38% said they do nothing when they encounter misinformation about the virus. About one-quarter (27%) say they have stopped paying attention to information shared on social media by people they do not trust, 23% say they searched for different sources to check the accuracy of information, and 12% used a fact checking website. Those who are concerned about COVID-19 are more likely to engage in verification behaviours than those who are not concerned.



INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven that everyone is thirsty for credible and fast news and information. Across the globe newsrooms are working overtime to keep their communities informed and news consumption has increased exponentially as the public tries to make sense of this rapidly evolving crisis. After the implementation of strict social distancing measures in March 2020, major news platforms had a surge in their audiences, particularly on TV. According to Nielsen Digital Content Ratings the top ten news websites in Australia saw an average increase of 57% in traffic compared to February of 2020. Leading this surge has been the public broadcaster ABC News, which reached an online audience of more than 15 million unique visitors.

Despite a general increase in demand for news, many outlets have been adversely impacted by a sudden slump in advertising revenue. Local media have always been an important way for Australians to access news and information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local newspapers have been particularly hit hard as advertising partners such as businesses and sporting clubs have been forced to close, limit services and cancel events. As a result of this, the local news media landscape is shrinking at a time when the public needs news the most.

This presents a risk, as vulnerable individuals living in these communities will lose access to critical and localised guidance for how to deal with the ongoing health risks presented by coronavirus. The *Digital News Report Australia 2019* reports that 29% of regional news consumers access local newspapers compared to 14% of major city consumers. As their main source of news regional news consumers rely heavily on TV.

The loss of reliable local news is being compounded by the rise of misinformation about the coronavirus. In February, the World Health Organization declared an 'infodemic', reflecting their concern that audiences were being exposed to an over-abundance of both accurate information and misinformation about the coronavirus, making it difficult to determine trustworthy and authentic medical advice. A recent study into the spread of misinformation found there has been a nine-fold increase in the number of fact-checks related to COVID-19 between January and the end of March 2020. Their study found that most of the fake news (88%) appeared on social media. Many are aware of and are particularly concerned about the consequences of misinformation. While Australians are generally satisfied with how governments and businesses have reacted to the crisis, they are significantly more concerned that others in their community might not be reacting appropriately.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus what is at stake in a media landscape deprived of trustworthy and credible sources of news and information. As digital and social media sources of news continue to become increasingly popular, it has become vitally important to understand how audiences react to global health and economic crises, where they seek out information from and who they look to for guidance. Of particular concern is the interaction between misinformation and the formation of public opinion and public policy. As recent events in the US show, the cost to life of failing to accurately communicate the risk presented by global crises can be catastrophic.

In light of these challenges, the News and Media Research Centre undertook this urgent study to find out where Australians are getting their news and information about COVID-19, how much misinformation they are encountering and their responses to it.

We are grateful for the support of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Research and Innovation, Professor Leigh Sullivan, for supporting this important study.



METHODOLOGY

THE SURVEY

An online survey of N=2,196 Australians aged 18 and older was conducted by McNair yellowSquares Pty Ltd between 18-22 April 2020. The final sample is reflective of the population that has access to the internet. We used a quota for gender, age and education, reflecting the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016 for adults aged 18+. The data was weighted based on the quota.

Among the N=2,196 respondents, 1,082 (49%) were male, 1,110 were female (51%) and 2 identified as non-binary. A further two respondents chose not to disclose. Of the respondents, 177 (8%) were Gen Z, 691 (31%) were Gen Y, 577 (26%) were Gen X, 608 (28%) were Baby Boomer, and 143 (7%) were 74+.

The majority of the respondents (76%) live in major cities and 24% reside in regional areas. In terms of education, 461 (21%) of the respondents had high school education or lower, 922 (42%) had post-secondary education or lower, and 813 (37%) had a university degree. Of the respondents, 602 (27%) earned less than \$39,999, 875 (40%) earned between \$40,000 and \$99,999, and 526 (24%) earned \$100,000 or above. More than half (54%) were in paid employment, 28% were involved in unpaid work, and 13% were unemployed (see table 1). The majority of respondents were living with others. Only 373 (17%) were living alone and 613 (28%) had children under 18 at home.

Table 1 Summary of respondents

		N	%
Gender	Male	1082	49
	Female	1110	51
	Non-binary	2	0.1
	Prefer not to disclose	2	0.1
Age ¹	Z (18-22)	177	8
	Y (23-38)	691	31
	X (39-54)	577	26
	Baby Boomer (BB) (55-73)	608	28
	74+	143	7
Region ²	Major cities	1677	76
	Regional areas	519	24
Education ³	Low	461	21
	Medium	922	42
	High	813	37
Income	Low (under \$39,999)	602	27
	Medium (\$40,000~99,999)	875	40
	High (\$100,000 or over)	526	24
	Don't know	193	9
Employment	Paid work	1184	54
	Unemployed	279	13
	Retired or other unpaid work	624	28
	Other/ Don't know	109	5
Household	Live alone	373	17
	Live with others	1823	83
Total		2196	100

1 We used the generational categories used in the *Digital News Report Australia 2019*.

2 We combined respondents outside of major cities as 'regional'.

3 The education question reflects the categories in UN's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED).

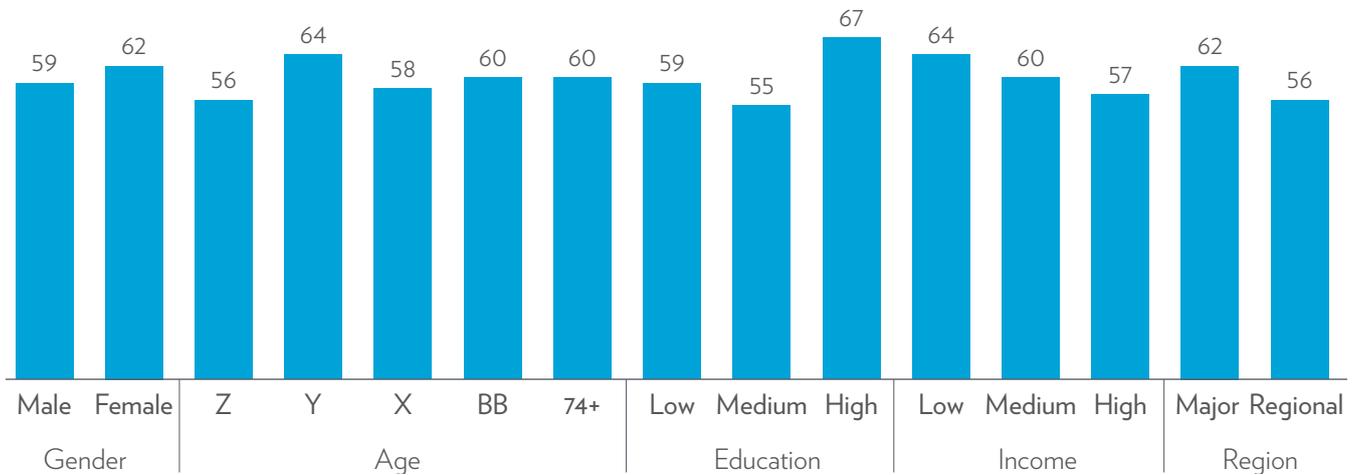
NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 IS HIGH AMONG AUSTRALIANS

Most Australians are concerned about the COVID-19 outbreak; 60% say they are either very or extremely concerned about the coronavirus, 32% are somewhat concerned and 8% are not very or not at all concerned. Younger generations, especially Gen Y (64%) are concerned. Those with low incomes are more concerned (63%) than those with high incomes (57%).

People living with children under 18 are more concerned (64%) than those without (59%). This reflects the perceived degree of impact COVID-19 may have on their lives. Those who think the pandemic and the resulting social distancing measures will have a large impact on their lives are more concerned (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Concern about COVID-19 by demographics (%)



Q3. How concerned are you about the coronavirus outbreak? Included those who answered a great deal and a lot.

NEWS CONSUMPTION HAS INCREASED SHARPLY

On March 23rd the government placed restrictions on non-essential gatherings due to the coronavirus. This survey was conducted one month later. With the majority of Australians spending more time at home and in need of essential health information, access to news has increased.

One month into social distancing restrictions, more than two-thirds (70%) of Australians were accessing news more than once a day. This is much higher than usual. Last year, the *Digital News Report Australia 2019* shows only 56% accessed news more than once a day (see table 2).

Table 2 Frequency of news consumption (%)

	Apr 2020 during COVID-19 pandemic*	Feb 2019 <i>Digital News Report Australia</i>
Heavy news consumers	70	56
Light news consumers	30	44

*excluded 'non-users' for comparison purposes

Q1 On average, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online).

We asked respondents if the amount of news they are consuming has changed since the social isolation measures were put in place.

The majority (71%) said it had increased, 25% said it had remained the same and 4% said it decreased (see table 3).

Table 3 Change in news consumption (%)

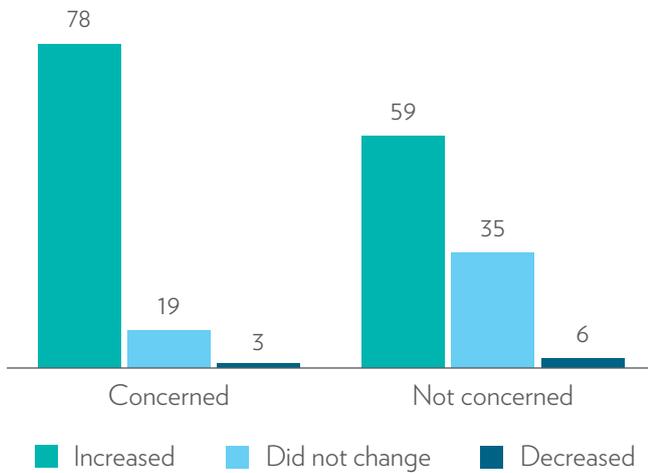
Increased	Remained the same	Decreased
71	25	4

Q2. On March 23rd the government placed restrictions on non-essential gatherings due to the coronavirus. We are now required to stay at home unless we are engaging in essential activities such as going to work or education, essential shopping, personal exercise, and medical appointments. Since these measures have been in place, has the amount of news you read, watch or listen to changed?

THOSE WHO ARE CONCERNED TURN TO NEWS FOR MORE INFORMATION

The majority (78%) of those who are extremely or very concerned about COVID-19 experienced an increase in their news consumption after the outbreak. Among those who are not concerned, 59% experienced an increase in their news consumption (see figure 2).

Figure 2 Increase in news consumption by concern level (%)

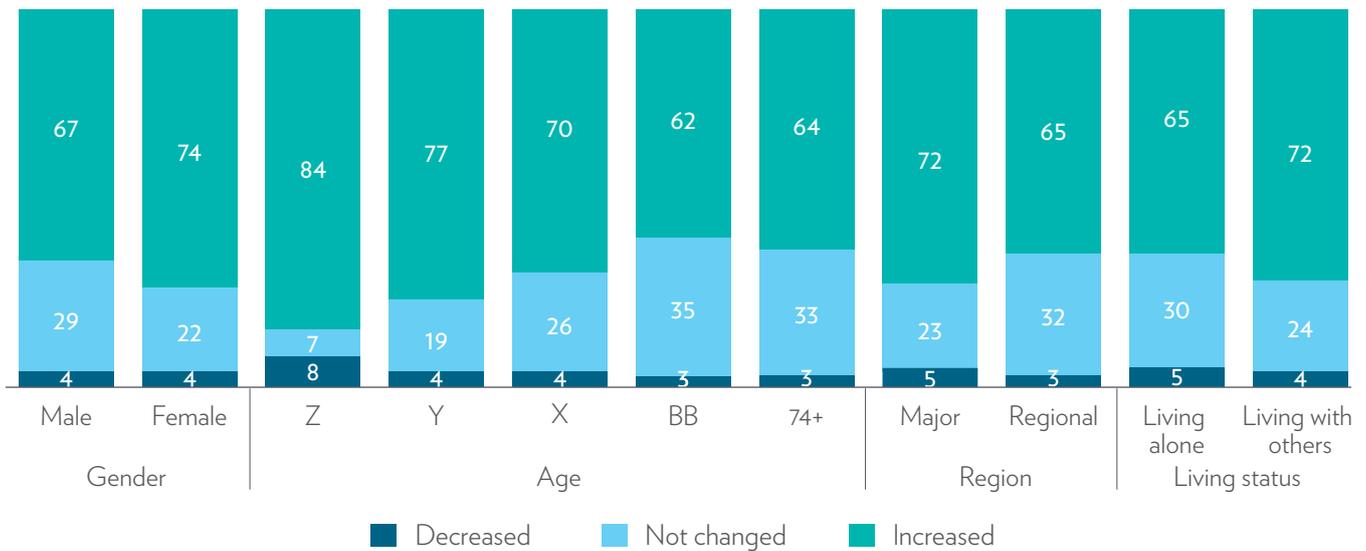


WOMEN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S NEWS CONSUMPTION HAS INCREASED THE MOST

Interestingly, we see big increases among groups traditionally less interested in news. Women are usually less interested in news than men and young people are normally less interested in news than older generations. However, during the COVID-19 outbreak three-quarters of women (74%) say their news consumption has increased compared to 67% of men; and 86% of Gen Z say they are using more news compared to 67% of people aged 74+.

We also see big increases among people who live with children under the age of 18 and those who live with grandparents. People with caring responsibilities say they have increased the amount of news they consume during the outbreak, compared to people who live on their own. People who live on their own already consume a lot of news and this did not change.

Figure 3 Change in news consumption by demographics (%)



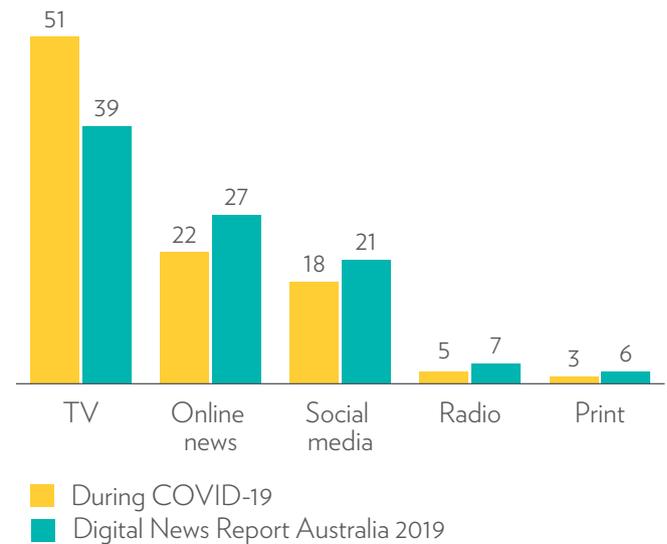
MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS IS STILL TV

TV has become even more popular as a source of news during social isolation. According to *Digital News Report Australia 2019*, 42% used TV as their main source of news, but this has risen to 51% during the pandemic.

Print and radio have decreased during this time and the use of online and social media for news have remained much the same.

Q4. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? Please select all that apply. Q5. Which of the following would you say is your main source of news?

Figure 4 Main source of news (%)

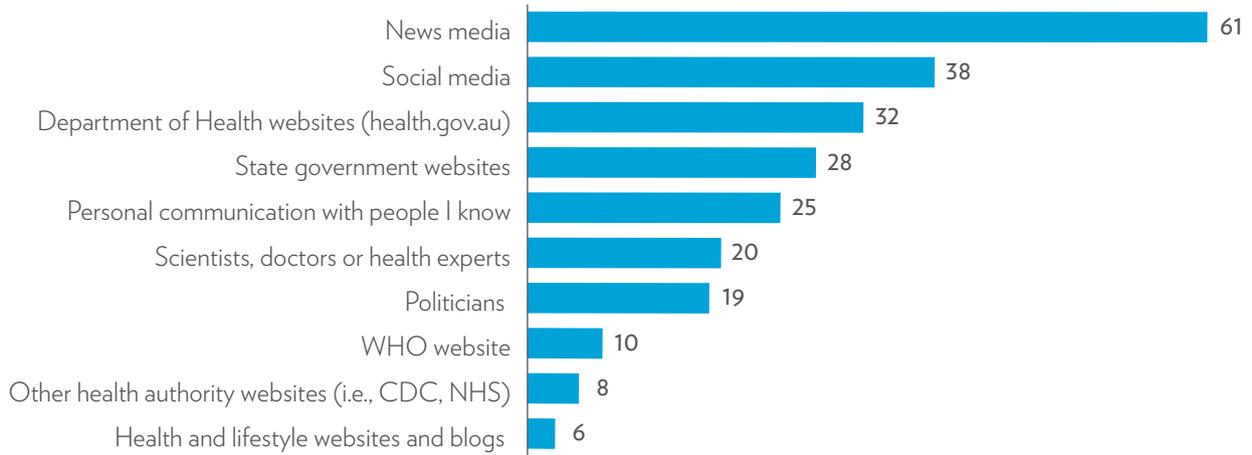


News media are the most popular source of information about COVID-19

We asked respondents which information and news sources they used in the last week to get information about COVID-19. We gave them ten different options (see figure 5). The most common source of information was news media (61%)

followed by social media (38%) and the Department of Health website (32%). About 10% said they did not use any of the listed sources to get news about coronavirus in the previous seven days).

Figure 5 Source of news and information about COVID-19 (%)

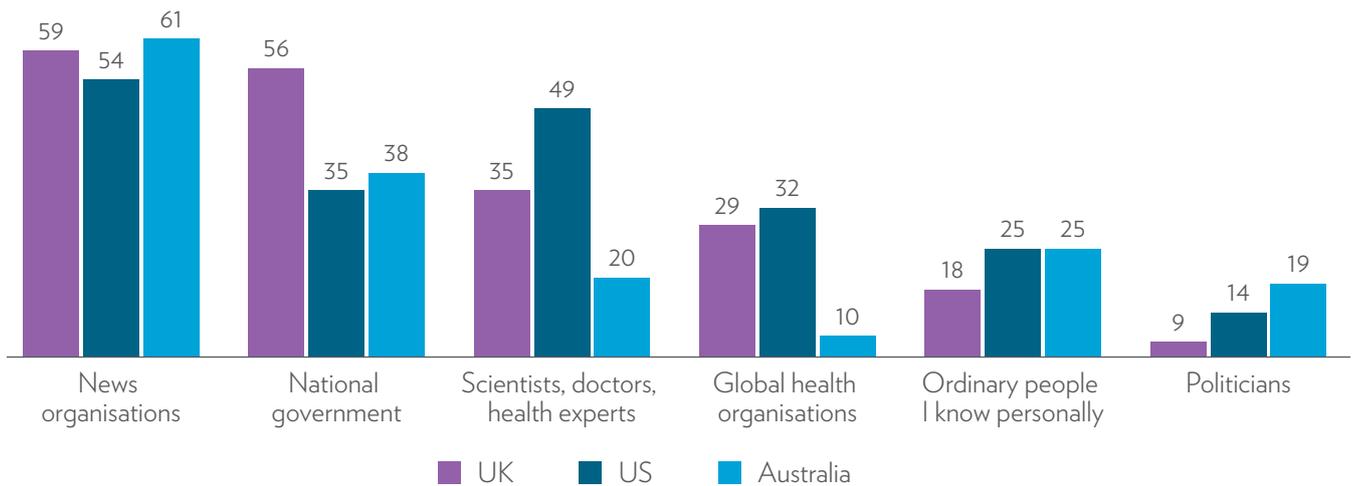


Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news or information about the coronavirus? Please select all that apply.

We compared our data with a recent report published by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism⁴. Australians tend to get information from news organisations more than news consumers in the US and UK. UK news consumers

rely more on the government than Australian and US news consumers. Australians rely more on politicians compared to US and UK news consumers (see figure 6).

Figure 6 Source of news and information about COVID-19 by country (%)



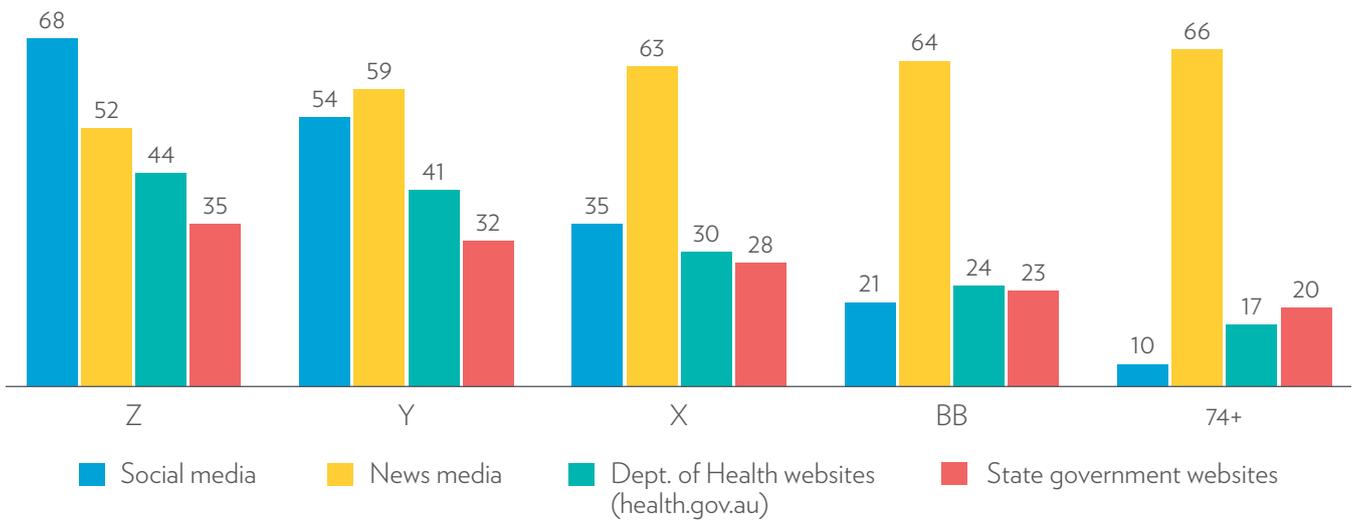
⁴ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/infodemic-how-people-six-countries-access-and-rate-news-and-information-about-coronavirus>

YOUNGER GENERATIONS USE A WIDER RANGE OF INFORMATION SOURCES

There are generational differences in the types of information sources people use. Young people rely heavily on social media with 68% of Gen Z using social media to get news about COVID-19, compared to 21% of Baby Boomers and 10% of people aged 74+. More young people are also going directly to government or health authority websites for information than older people.

While all age groups are widely accessing the news media to stay up-to-date, older generations are relying on news more than the younger generations. Two-thirds (66%) of people aged 74+ accessed news media for COVID-19 information compared to 52% of Gen Z. Overall, young people access a wider range of information sources about the virus than older people (see figure 7).

Figure 7 News and government sources about COVID-19 by generation (%)

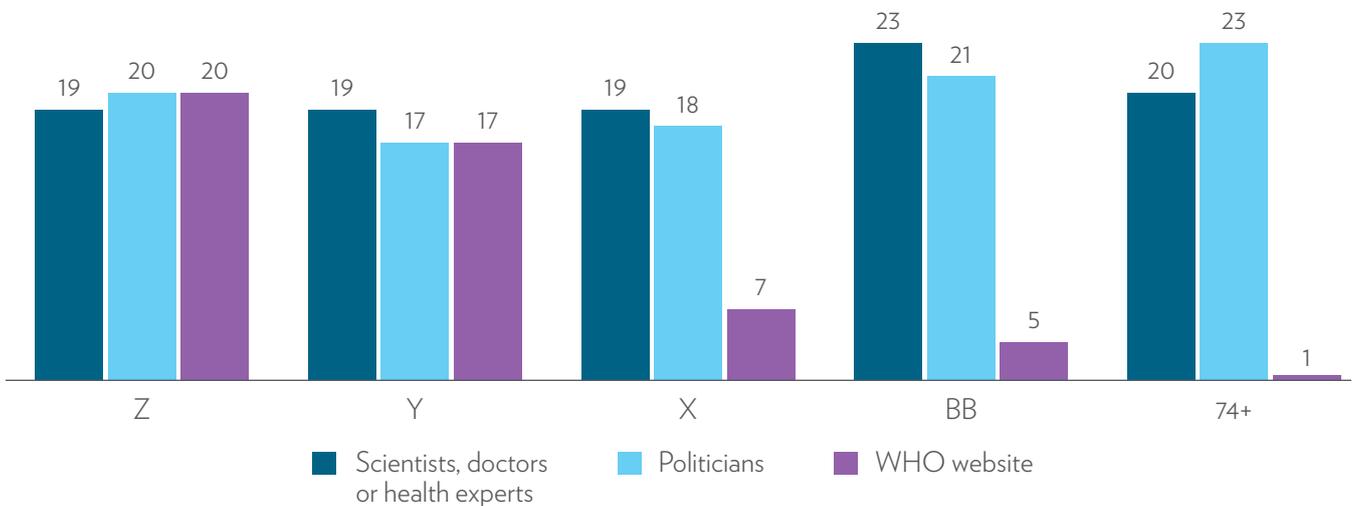


Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news or information about the coronavirus? Please select all that apply.

There are generational differences in the types of non-news sources people are using as well. Younger generations are sourcing information about the coronavirus as much from scientists and experts as they are from politicians or the World Health Organisation (WHO) website.

However, older generations are tending not to use the WHO website and are relying more on experts or politicians (see figure 8).

Figure 8 Non-news sources about COVID-19 by generation (%)



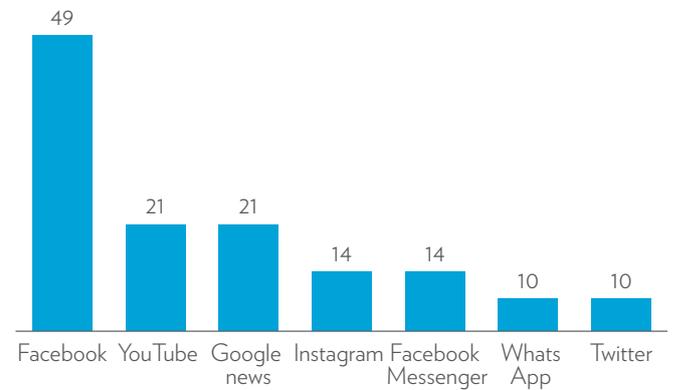
USE OF FACEBOOK HAS RISEN DURING COVID-19

Over the past few years, the use of Facebook as a source of news had plateaued. In 2019, roughly one-third (36%) of Australians used Facebook to access news. However, during the coronavirus outbreak, 49% of people say they are using Facebook to stay informed.

Other social media platforms have not seen significant increases (see figure 9). This 13% rise in the use of Facebook is important in the context of misinformation during the outbreak and is discussed later in the report.

Q7. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week as a source of news or information about the coronavirus? Please select all that apply.

Figure 9 Online and social media platforms for COVID-19 news and information (%)



News brand matters on social media

The data show that people do pay attention to where news and information comes from when they are on social media. Only 8% say they do not notice the origin of the information. Almost two-thirds (64%) of people say they are aware that the majority of information on social media comes from traditional news sources and can name the brand.

Slightly less than half say they are conscious of seeing health information from official health sources, such as the federal government or the WHO (see table 4). Contrary to concerns that people do not notice where news and information comes from when on social media, this suggests that they do. This should be a comfort to news organisations.

Table 4 Sources of information on social media (%)

	Sources of information on social media
Directly from news media such as the ABC, Sydney Morning Herald, news.com.au	64
Directly from official sources such as the government, WHO etc	47
Links forwarded/posted/shared from a person you know	31
Opinions from a person you know	22
Links forwarded/posted/shared from a person you don't know	15
Opinions from a person you don't know	8
I don't notice where the information is coming from	8

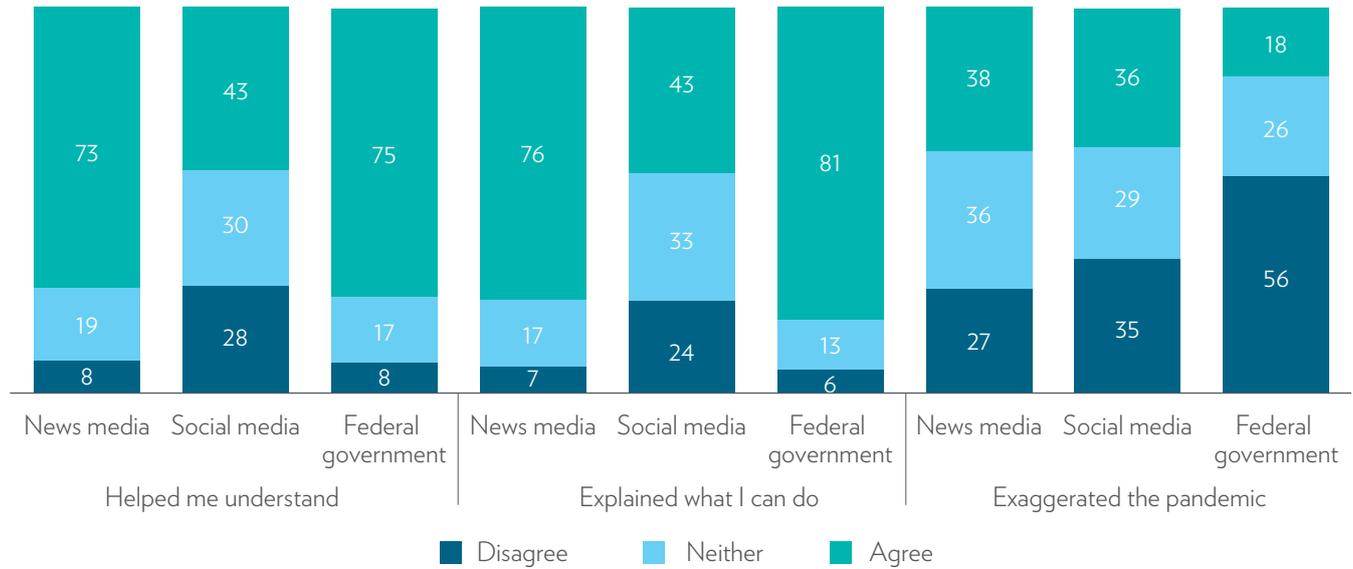
Q8. Thinking about what you are seeing on social media, which of the following sources are you getting information about coronavirus from?

PERFORMANCE OF INFORMATION SOURCES

Like other recent surveys⁵, our respondents think the federal government has done a good job of informing them about the pandemic and how they should respond. We also found high levels of satisfaction with news coverage of the issue.

However, people are more inclined to think the news media (38%) and social media (36%) have exaggerated claims about the virus and its impacts, compared to the government (18%) (see figure 10).

Figure 10 Quality of information source (%)



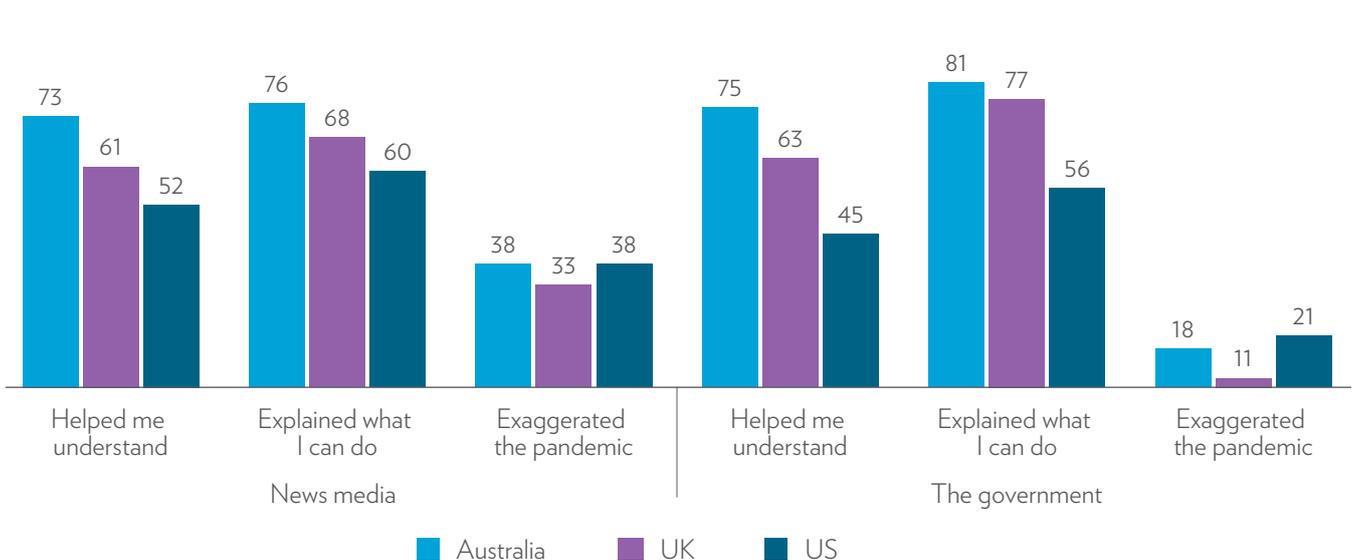
Q9. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the coronavirus?

GOVERNMENT AND NEWS MEDIA PERFORMANCE BETTER THAN IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Compared to US and UK news consumers, Australians are more positive about the performance of both the news media and the government.

However, Australians think the media and the government have exaggerated the pandemic more so than those living in UK, and less so than those in the US (see figure 11).

Figure 11 Comparison of government and news media's performance (%)



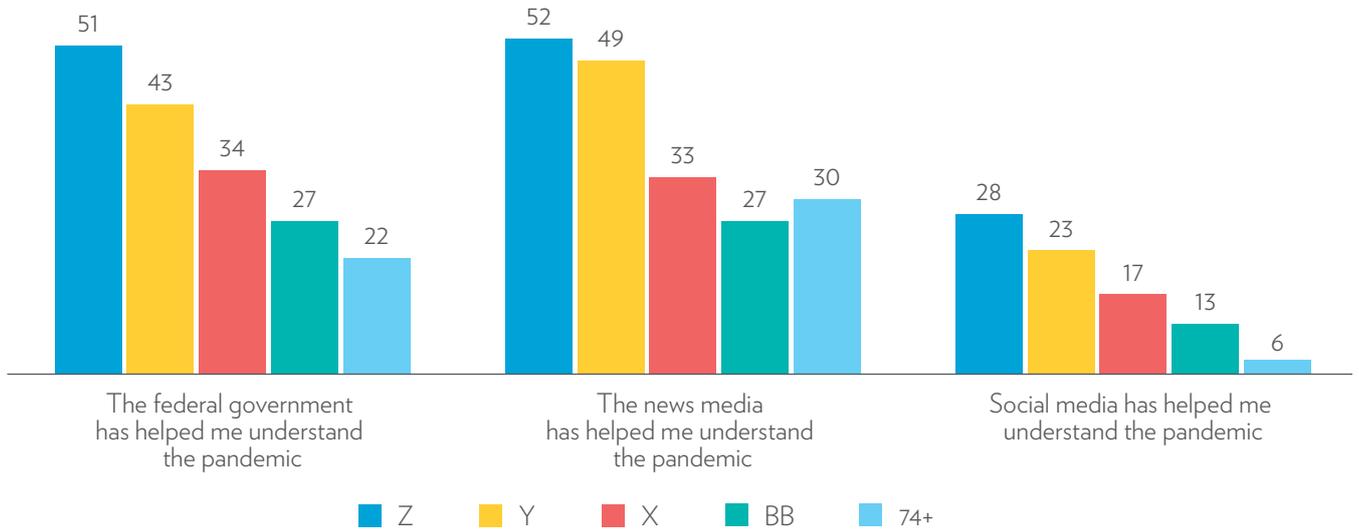
5 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/apr/07/australians-trust-in-government-and-media-soars-as-coronavirus-crisis-escalates>

YOUNG THINK THAT NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 IS BEING EXAGGERATED

However, younger people are more likely to think all sources of information have made exaggerated claims about the coronavirus. About half of Gen Z think both the news media and social media have exaggerated the

pandemic, and almost one-third think the government has (see figure 12). This is possibly a reflection that they believe they are less vulnerable to the virus than older age groups.

Figure 12 Exaggerate the pandemic by generation (%)



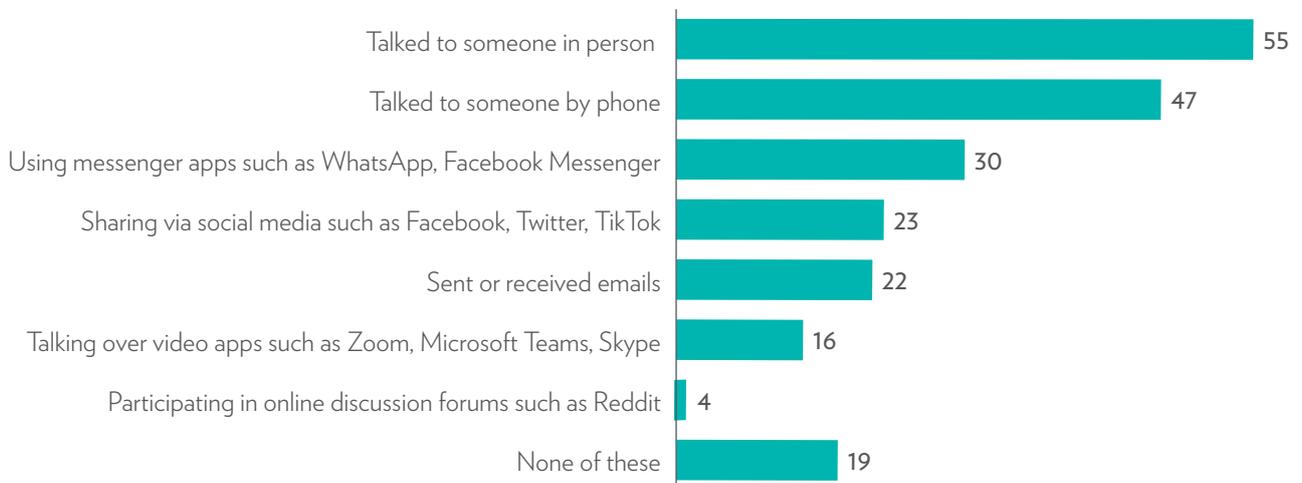
Q9. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the coronavirus? (The news media has exaggerated the pandemic/ Social media has exaggerated the pandemic/ The federal government has exaggerated the pandemic)

PEOPLE ARE ACTIVELY SHARING NEWS AND INFORMATION WITH OTHERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

We asked people if they had shared any information or news about the coronavirus since the outbreak. More than half (55%) say they have talked to someone in person about it.

Almost one-quarter say they have shared items on social media; around one fifth are sending information via email and 16% are using video apps such as Zoom or Skype to talk to people about the virus (see figure 13).

Figure 13 Sharing information and news about COVID-19 (%)



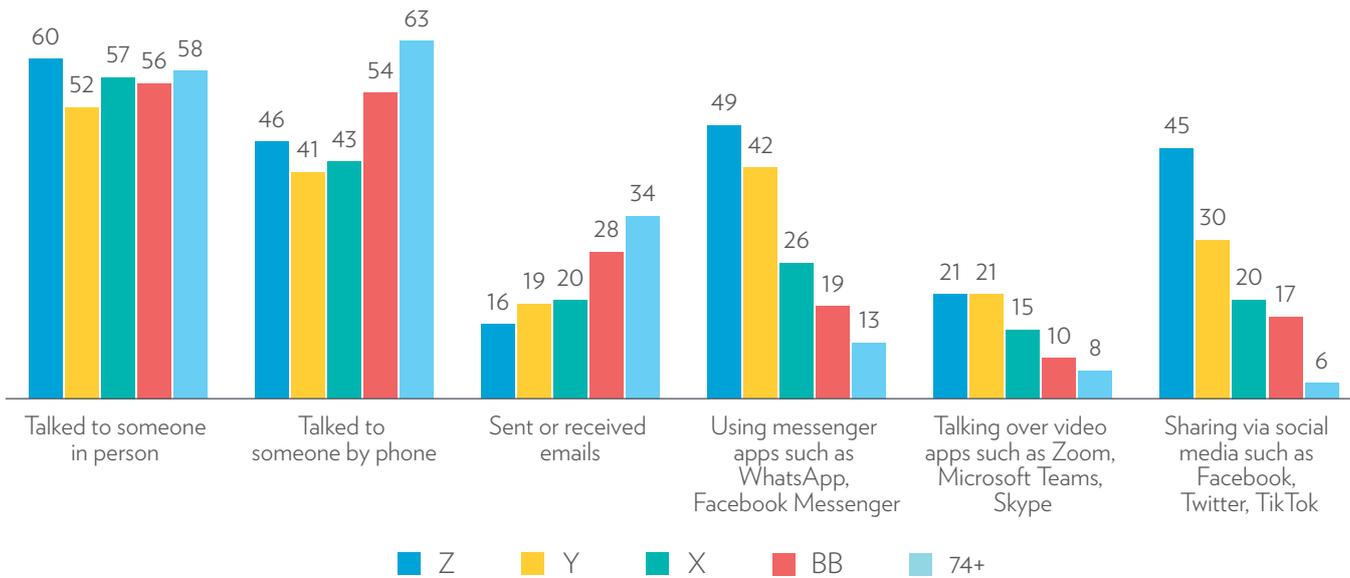
Q11. In the past month, how have you shared information or news about the coronavirus? Check all that apply.

TALKING FACE-TO-FACE IS THE PREFERRED METHOD OF SHARING COVID-19 INFORMATION

While face-to-face communication is preferred across all generations, young people are more likely to use messaging, social media and video apps. People aged 74+ noticeably use the telephone more to talk to people about the pandemic.

Given that 32% of those in the survey aged 74+ live alone, their reliance on the telephone and email is possibly a reflection of their greater social isolation and lower digital skills (see figure 14).

Figure 14 Sharing information by generation (%)



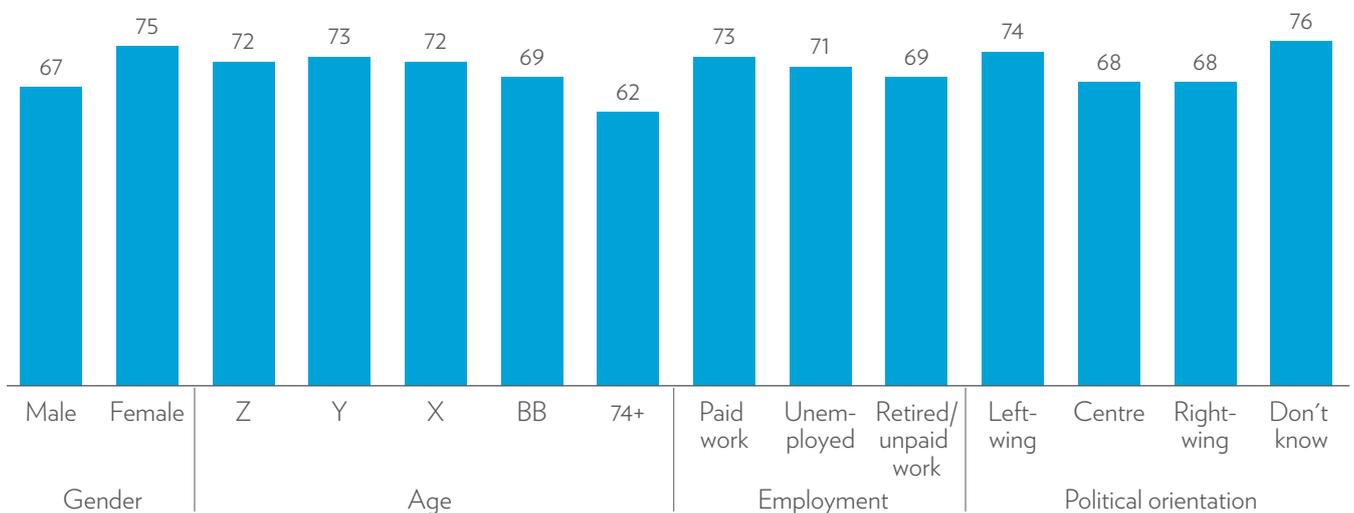
NEWS FATIGUE AND AVOIDANCE

MOST ARE AVOIDING NEWS ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME.

As the volume of news about the COVID-19 outbreak had increased, we asked respondents how they felt about it, whether they avoid news and the reasons why. To the question ‘do you find yourself trying to avoid news about the coronavirus?’ 71% of the respondents said ‘yes’ (11% often, 30% sometimes, 30% occasionally). About 27% said they never avoid news about the coronavirus and 2% said they didn’t know.

Women are more likely (75%) to avoid news about coronavirus than men (67%). Younger generations avoid COVID-19 news more than older generations. People in paid employment are slightly more likely to avoid news than those who are unemployed or retired. Those who do not have a particular political leaning (“don’t know”) (76%) or left-leaning (74%) are more likely to avoid news about the coronavirus, compared to centre (68%) or right-leaning participants (68%) (see figure 15).

Figure 15 COVID-19 news avoiders (%)

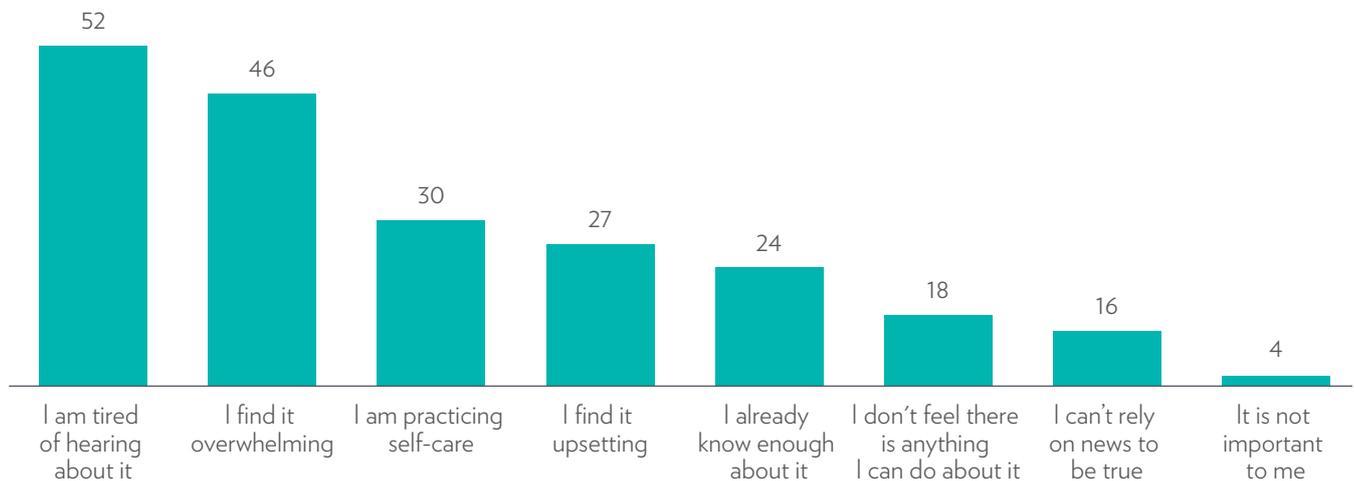


Q16. Do you find yourself trying to avoid news about the coronavirus? (Avoid=often/sometimes/occasionally)

PEOPLE AVOID NEWS BECAUSE THEY ARE TIRED OF IT

The key reasons given for avoiding news about COVID-19 were related to news fatigue. Half of the respondents said they felt tired of hearing about COVID-19 (52%) or found it overwhelming (46%) (see figure 16).

Figure 16 Reasons of avoiding news about COVID-19 (%)



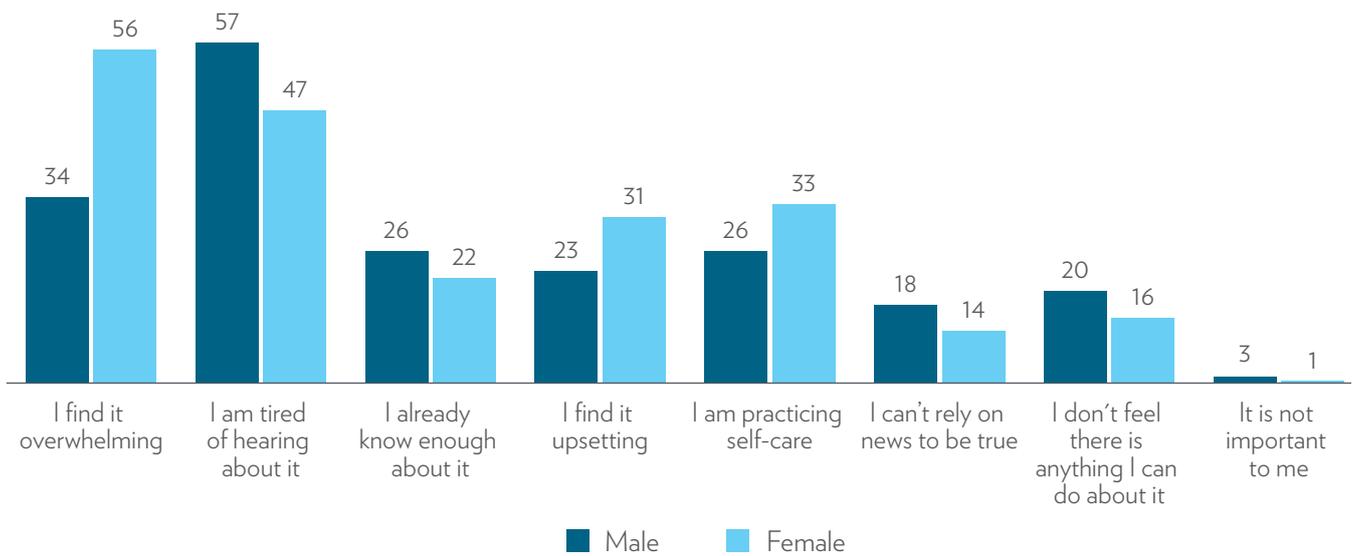
Q17. You said that you find yourself trying to avoid news about the coronavirus. Which, if any of the following, are reasons why you try to avoid news? Please select all that apply.

MEN ARE OVERWHELMED BY THE VOLUME OF NEWS, WOMEN ARE UPSET WITH THE CONTENT

Men and women had different reasons for avoiding news about COVID-19. Women were more likely to cite emotional factors – I find it overwhelming and upsetting –

as reasons for avoiding news, whereas men were more likely to cite reasons concerning news fatigue – I am tired of hearing about it and I already know enough about it (see figure 17).

Figure 17 Reasons of avoiding by gender (%)

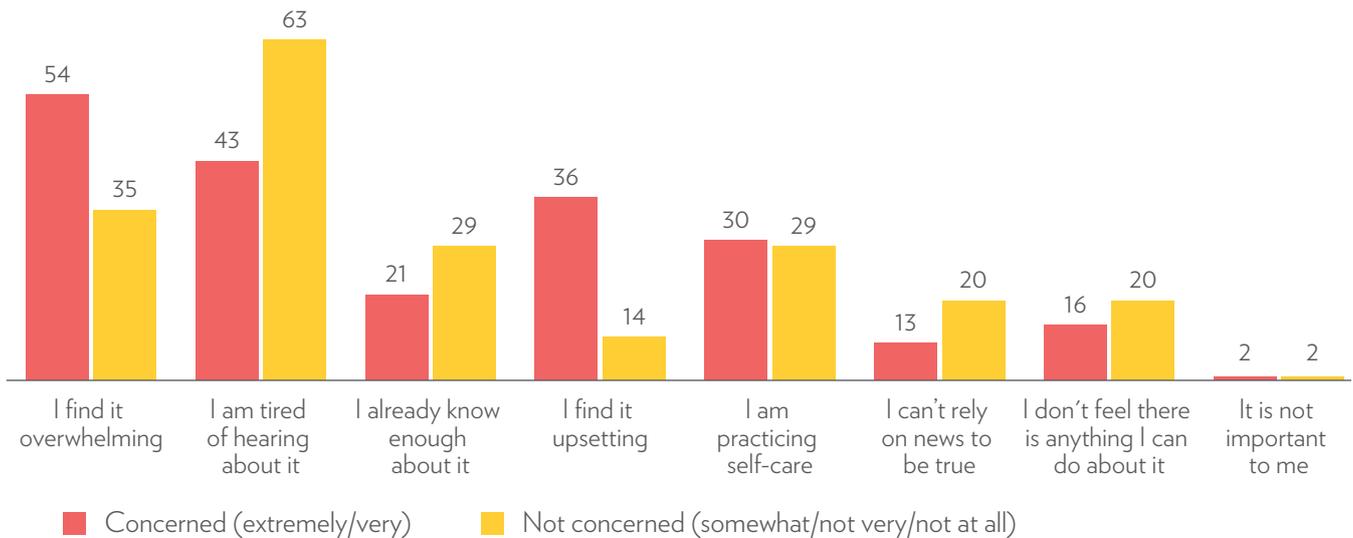


TO THOSE CONCERNED, NEWS IS BOTH UPSETTING AND OVERWHELMING

Reasons for avoiding news about COVID-19 are different depending on a person's level of concern. Those who are more concerned tend to avoid news because it is

overwhelming (54%), they are tired of hearing about it (43%), and find it upsetting (36%). Those who are not that concerned are just tired of hearing about it (63%) (see figure 18).

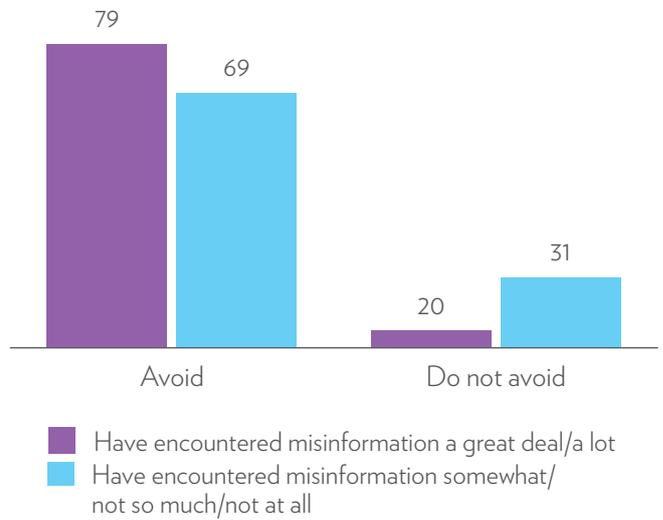
Figure 18 Reasons of avoiding by concern level (%)



EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION IS LINKED TO NEWS AVOIDANCE

Those who have experienced misinformation about the coronavirus are more likely to avoid news; 79% of those who say they have encountered misinformation about COVID-19 avoid news compared to 69% of those who haven't encountered misinformation about the virus (see figure 19).

Figure 19 News avoidance by misinformation experience (%)



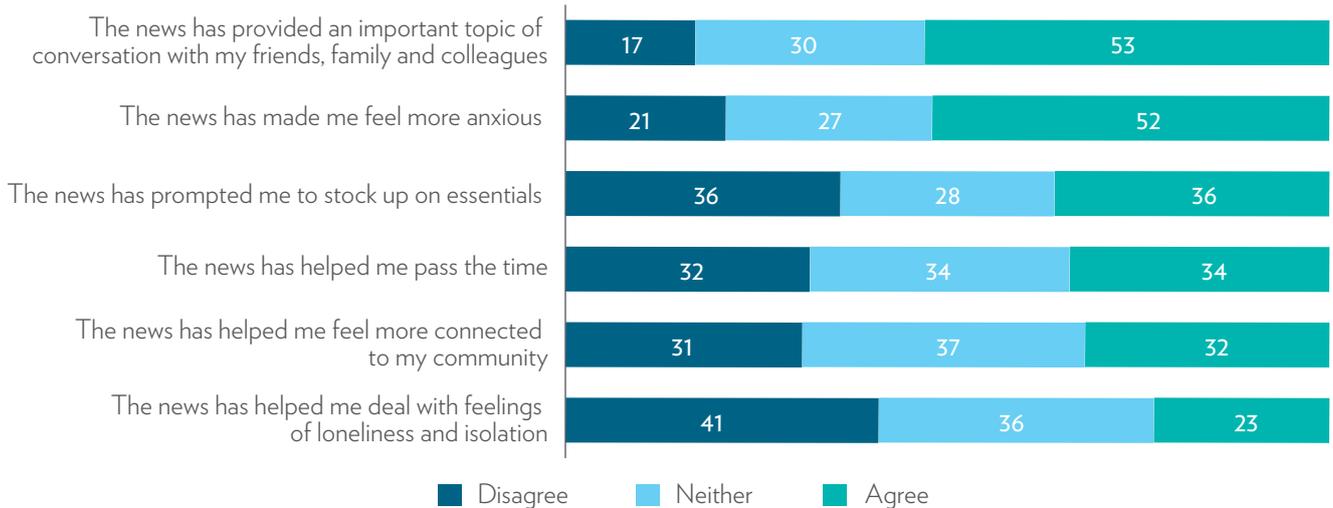
NEWS AND WELLBEING

NEWS PROVIDES A TOPIC OF CONVERSATION BUT INCREASES ANXIETY

More than half of the respondents (53%) felt news about COVID-19 had provided an important topic of conversation with their friends, family and colleagues. However, 52% say they feel more anxious because of the

news coverage; and 41% say news about the pandemic has not helped them deal with feelings of loneliness and isolation. In contrast, only 23% say the news has helped them deal with such feelings (see figure 20).

Figure 20 The role of news during COVID-19 pandemic (%)

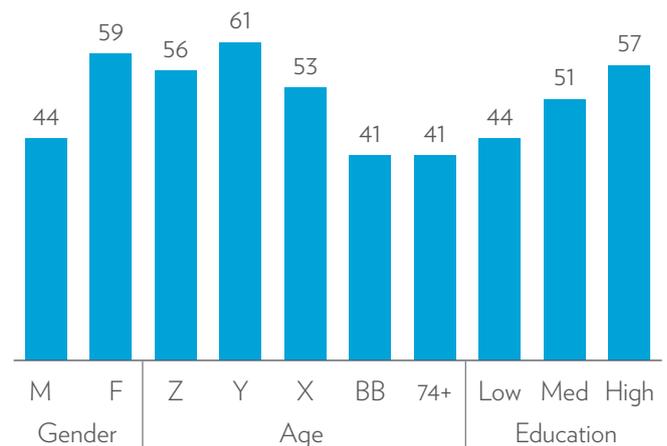


Q18. During the period of social distancing, has the role of news changed in your life? Please indicate the level of agreement with the following statements.

NEWS MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE, WOMEN AND THOSE WITH HIGHER EDUCATION MORE ANXIOUS

Since the coronavirus outbreak, women are more likely to feel more anxious because of news about the pandemic (59%) than men (44%). Gen Y (61%) and Gen Z (56%) also say news about COVID-19 has made them feel more anxious. Those with high levels of education are more likely to say news increases their anxiety (57%) than those with medium (51%) or low education (44%) (see figure 21).

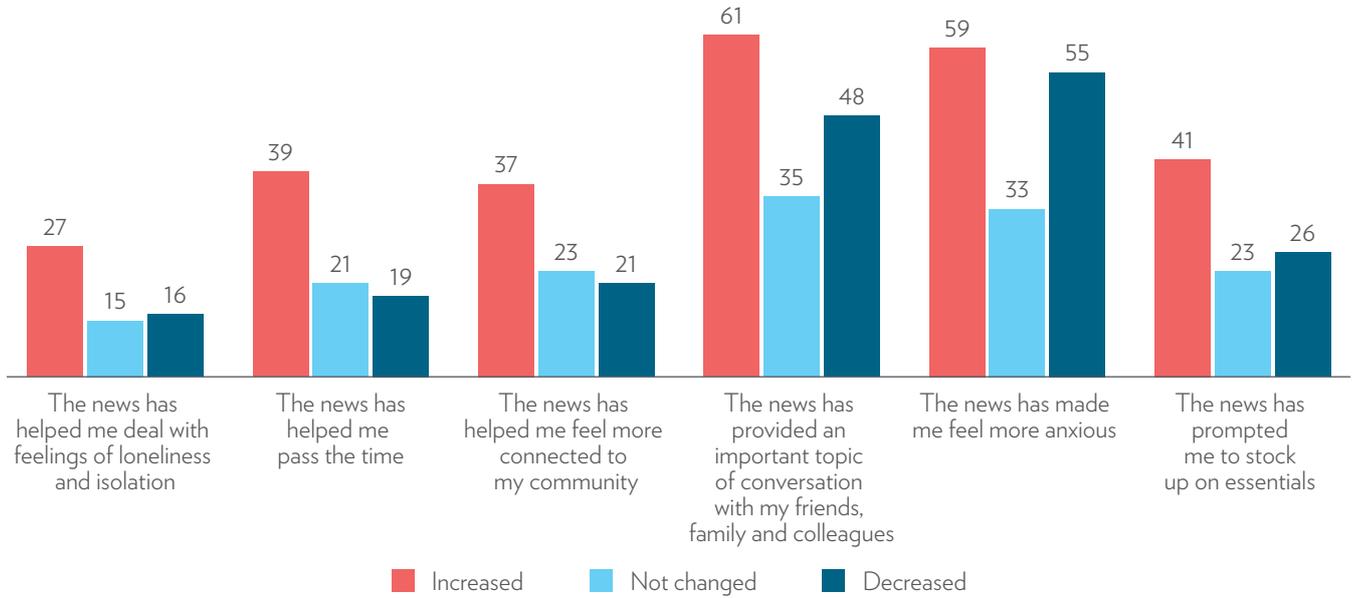
Figure 21 News makes me feel anxious by demographics (%)



NEWS DRIVES STOCKPILING

Those who have increased their news consumption during the pandemic are also more likely to say they have stocked up on essentials (41%) compared to those whose news access remained the same (23%) or decreased (26%) (see figure 22).

Figure 22 Role of news by change in news consumption (%)



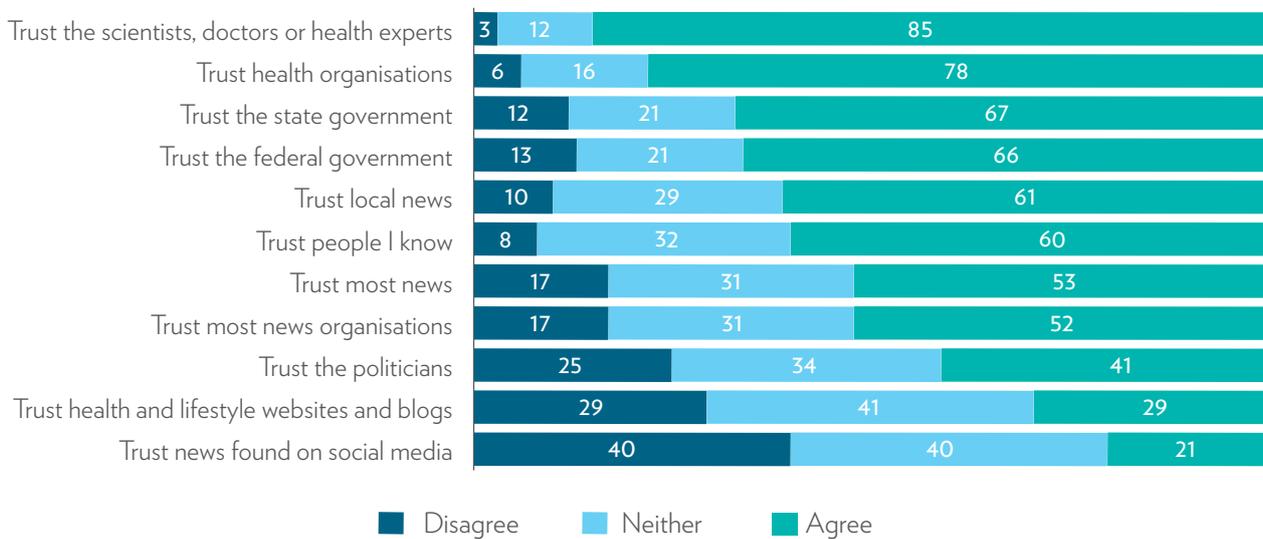
TRUST IN NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

TRUST IN NEWS IS HIGHER DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

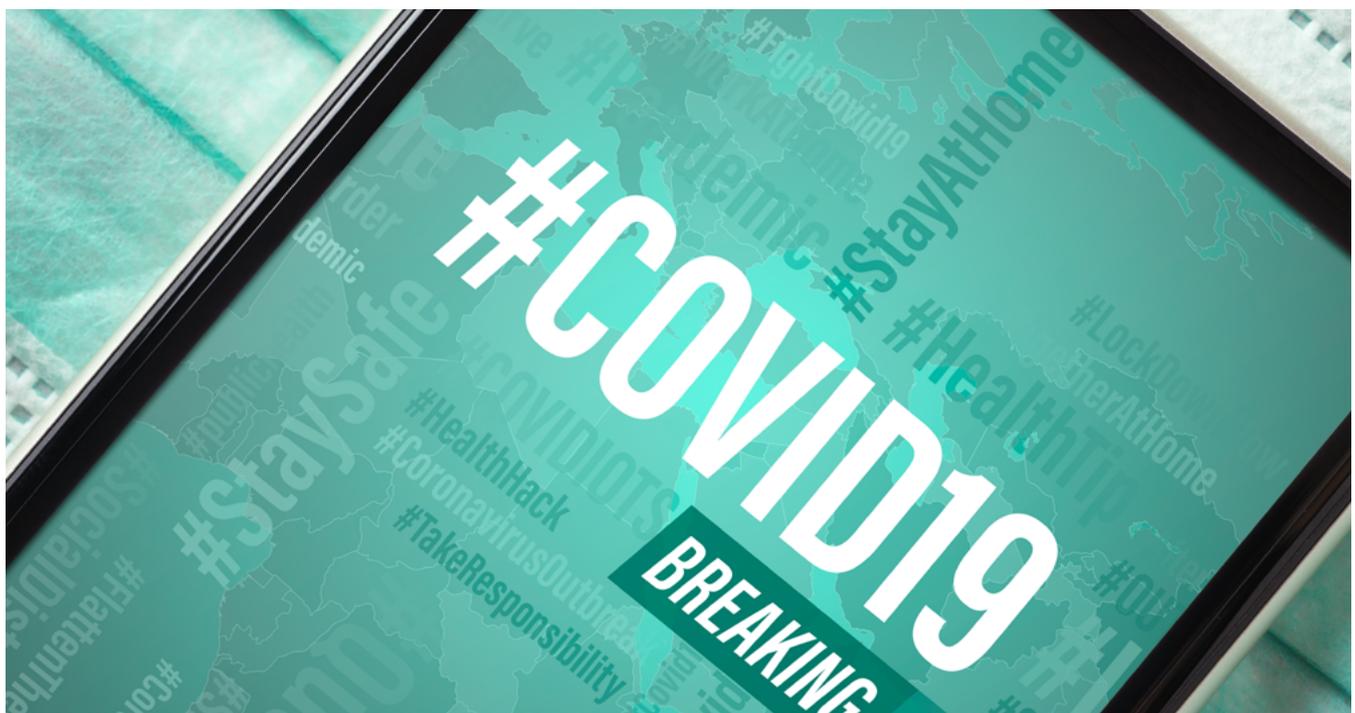
We asked respondents how much they trust news and information about the coronavirus from a range of different sources. Respondents say they trust scientists, doctors or health experts the most (85%), followed by health organisations (78%). Only half say they can trust most news (53%) and news organisations (52%) on this issue, however, local news is seen as more trustworthy (61%) than news in general (see figure 23).

Overall, trust in news is higher during the pandemic than usual. The *Digital News Report Australia 2019* reported trust in news was 44% last year, whereas trust in news about the coronavirus pandemic is 53%. This possibly reflects the public’s need to rely on the news media at this time and a perception that coverage during the pandemic has taken on more of a community service role disseminating health advice from official sources.

Figure 23 Trust in information sources (%)



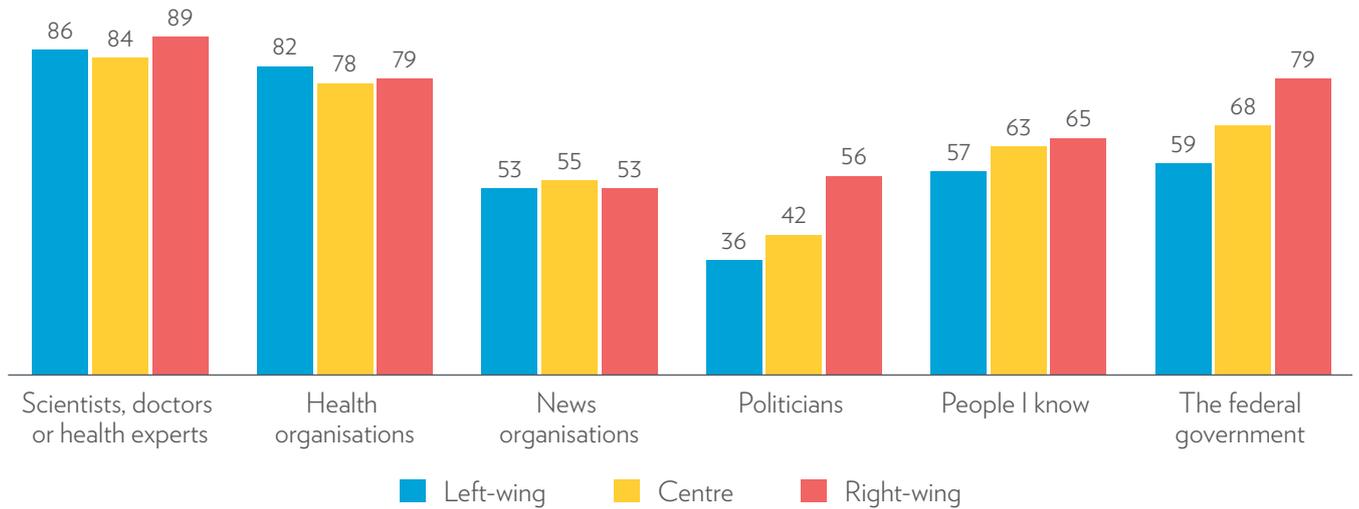
Q10. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about news and information provided about the coronavirus?



RIGHT-WING HAVE HIGHER TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICIANS

Those who are left-leaning are less trusting of the government, politicians and people they know compared to right-leaning news consumers (see figure 24).

Figure 24 Trust by political orientation (%)



Q20. Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. (Generally, socialist parties would be considered 'left wing' whilst conservative parties would be considered 'right wing'). With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale? Left= Very left-wing, Fairly left-wing, Slightly left-of-centre; Centre=Centre; Right=Slightly right-of-centre, Fairly right-wing, Very right-wing. Excluded 'Don't know'.



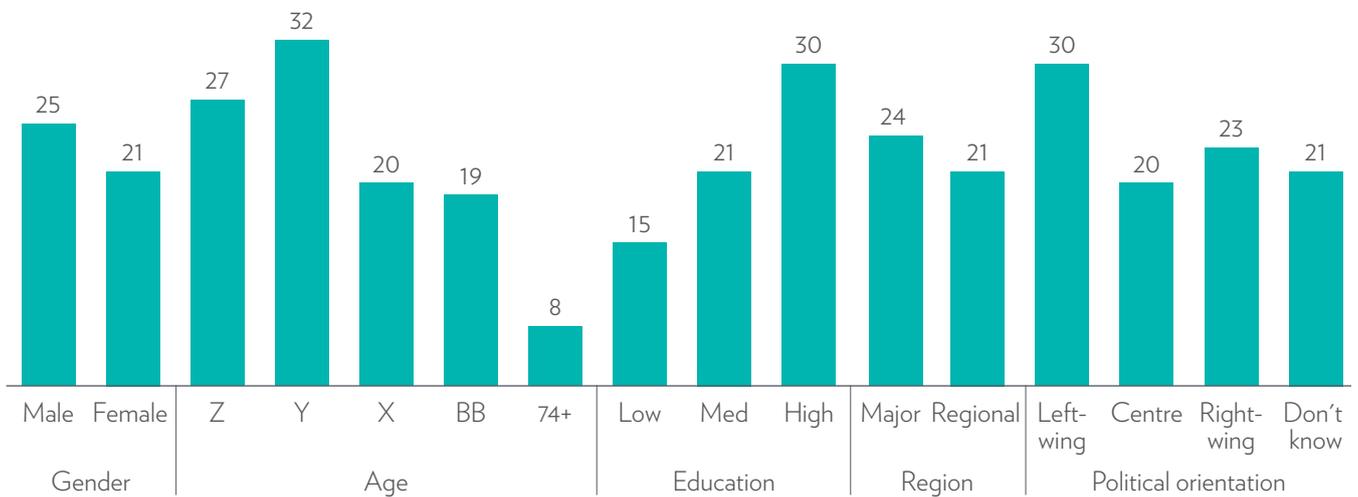
MISINFORMATION ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

THE MAJORITY DID NOT COME ACROSS MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

During this global pandemic there has been concern about an ‘infodemic’ and the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus. Because of this, we asked respondents how often they came across news or information they considered to be false or misleading about it. Less than a quarter (23%) say they have encountered a great deal or a lot of misinformation about the coronavirus and 30% say they didn’t encounter it much or at all. Around one-third (36%) say they came across misinformation some of the time, and 12% didn’t know.

Men (25%) and Gen Y (32%) say they more frequently encounter misinformation about COVID-19. People’s level of education also had an impact on whether they detected false claims. Those with higher education levels more frequently encounter misinformation, along with city dwellers and those who identify as left-wing. This possibly reflects higher media information literacy among these groups (see figure 25).

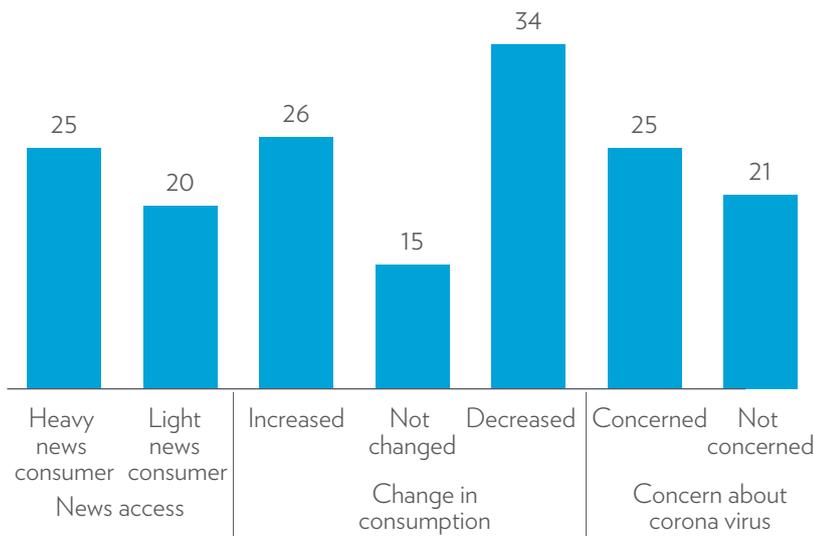
Figure 25 Experience of misinformation a lot or a great deal by demographics (%)



Heavy news consumers (25%) say they more frequently encounter misinformation about COVID-19 than light news consumers (20%). People who have decreased the amount of news they consume (34%) say they have encountered misinformation more than others.

Also, those who are concerned about COVID-19 (25%) tend to encounter more misinformation about it than those who aren't concerned (21%). These findings possibly reflect that those with a greater level of news engagement are more aware of the issue and therefore believe they can more readily detect false information about it (see figure 26).

Figure 26 Experience of misinformation a lot or a great deal by type of news consumer (%)



Social media is the main source of misinformation

Two-thirds (66%) of people say they encounter misinformation about COVID-19 on social media. Slightly more than one-third (36%) say they found false information in news media coverage, and 30% attributed the spread of

false information to people they knew. Almost one-fifth, attribute misinformation they have encountered about the virus to politicians. Health authorities and scientists were the least cited sources of misinformation (see table 5).

Table 5 Sources of misinformation (%)

	Source of misinformation
Social media	66
News media	36
People I know	30
Politicians	19
Health and lifestyle websites and blogs	15
State government	9
WHO website	8
Scientists, doctors or health experts	5
Department of Health (health.gov.au)	5
Other health authority website (i.e., CDC, NHS)	3

Q13. Where did you come across the misinformation? Check all that apply

DEALING WITH MISINFORMATION

While 62% of the respondents say they engaged with at least one type of news verification behaviour, 38% say they do nothing when they encounter misinformation about the virus. About one-quarter (27%) say they have stopped

paying attention to information shared on social media by people they do not trust, 23% say they searched for different sources to check the accuracy of information, and 12% used a fact checking website (see table 6).

Table 6 Dealing with misinformation (%)

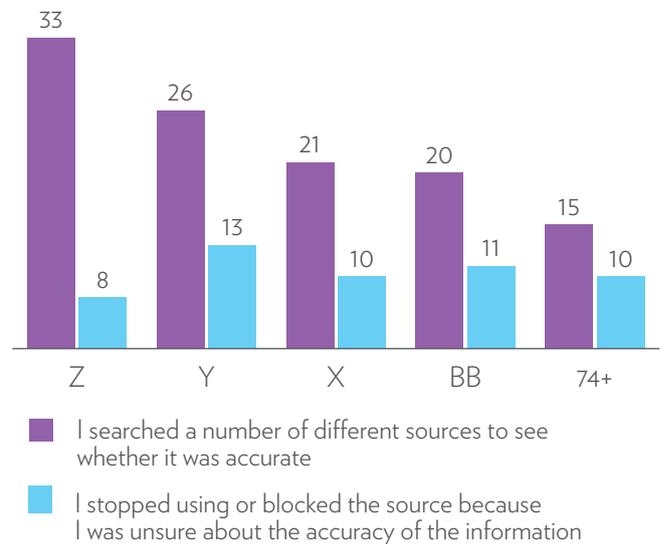
	Verification behaviors
I stopped paying attention to information shared on social media by people I don't trust	27
I searched a number of different sources to see whether it was accurate	23
I discussed the information with other people I trust	19
I started using established news sources	14
I used a fact-checking website	12
I stopped using or blocked the source because I was unsure about the accuracy of the information	11
I forwarded or shared it with other people	4
I made a complaint to the information provider	4
Did nothing	38

Q14. When you came across false or misleading information, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply.

GEN Z ARE MOST ACTIVE IN VERIFYING NEWS

Gen Z are the most likely to verify news about COVID-19. One-third say they have searched a number of different sources to check the accuracy of information, which is more than double the number of people aged 74+. In contrast, Gen Z were less likely than older groups to stop using or block sources that spread false information. These findings are consistent with the *Digital News Report Australia 2019* which showed that younger generations are the most likely to employ online fact checking techniques, which is likely a reflection of their greater digital literacy (see figure 27).

Figure 27 Verification by generations (%)



CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 DRIVES VERIFICATION

Those who are concerned about COVID-19 are more likely to engage in verification behaviours than those who are not concerned. Notably, those who are concerned (15%) are almost twice as likely to use a fact-checking

website than those who are not concerned (8%). Almost half (47%) of people who are not concerned about COVID-19 did not engage in any verification behaviours (see table 7).

Table 7 Dealing with misinformation and concern about COVID-19 (%)

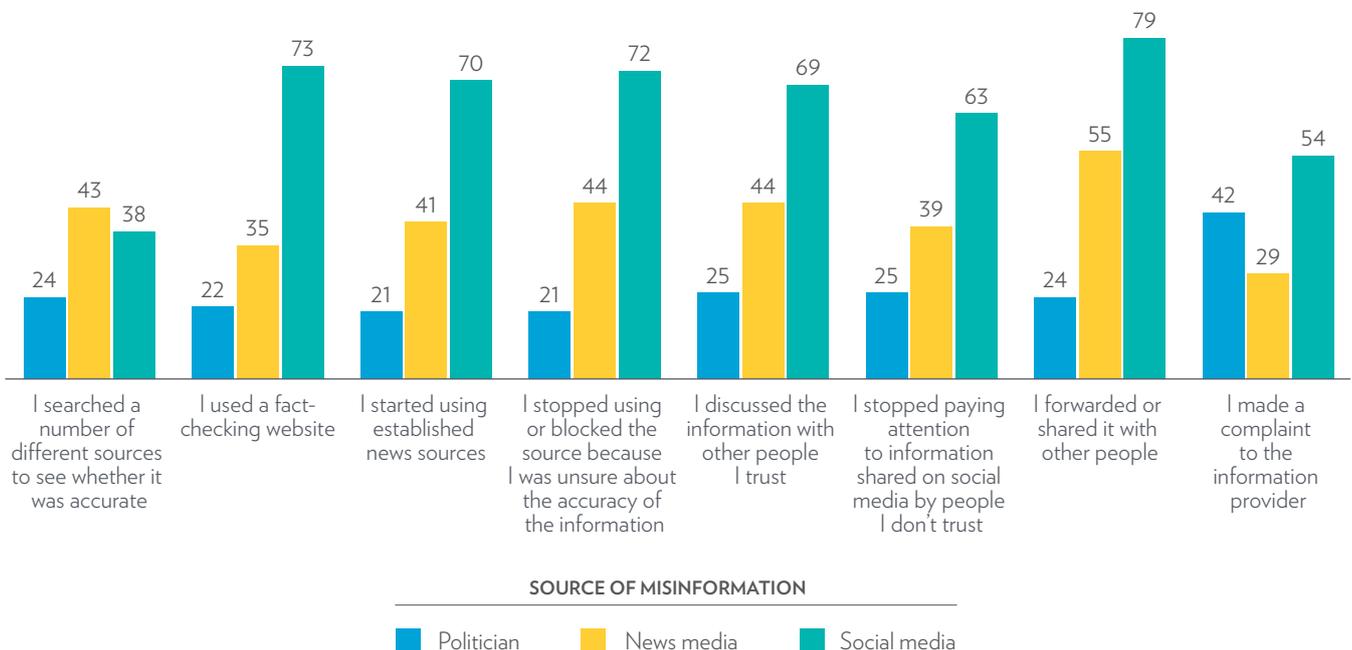
	Concerned	Not concerned
I stopped paying attention to information shared on social media by people I don't trust	29	26
I searched a number of different sources to see whether it was accurate	25	19
I discussed the information with other people I trust	22	15
I started using established news sources	16	10
I used a fact-checking website	15	8
I stopped using or blocked the source because I was unsure about the accuracy of the information	13	8
I forwarded or shared it with other people	5	3
I made a complaint to the information provider	5	2
Did nothing	32	47

PEOPLE FACT CHECK INFORMATION WHEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

People who come across misinformation on social media are more likely to undertake news verification activities than those who come across misinformation from news media or politicians. This may be due to the fact that news consumers are aware that misinformation can be spread easily on social media.

Those who encounter misinformation on social media are more likely to fact check, seek advice and share it with others (see figure 28). This possibly reflects that younger people rely more on social media for information and are aware that they can easily encounter misinformation on those platforms.

Figure 28 Fact checking activities by source of misinformation (%)



UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH COVID-19

ADJUSTING TO COVID-19

We asked respondents if they have modified their everyday lives in response to COVID-19 outbreak. The most common impact on Australians was to limit contact with people outside of their immediate household (64%).

About one-third say their work pattern had changed (33%). A similar number (32%) said they were in self-isolation and 18% said they had school-aged children at home. 15% said that their life had not changed much (see table 8).

Table 8 Changes due to COVID-19 (%)

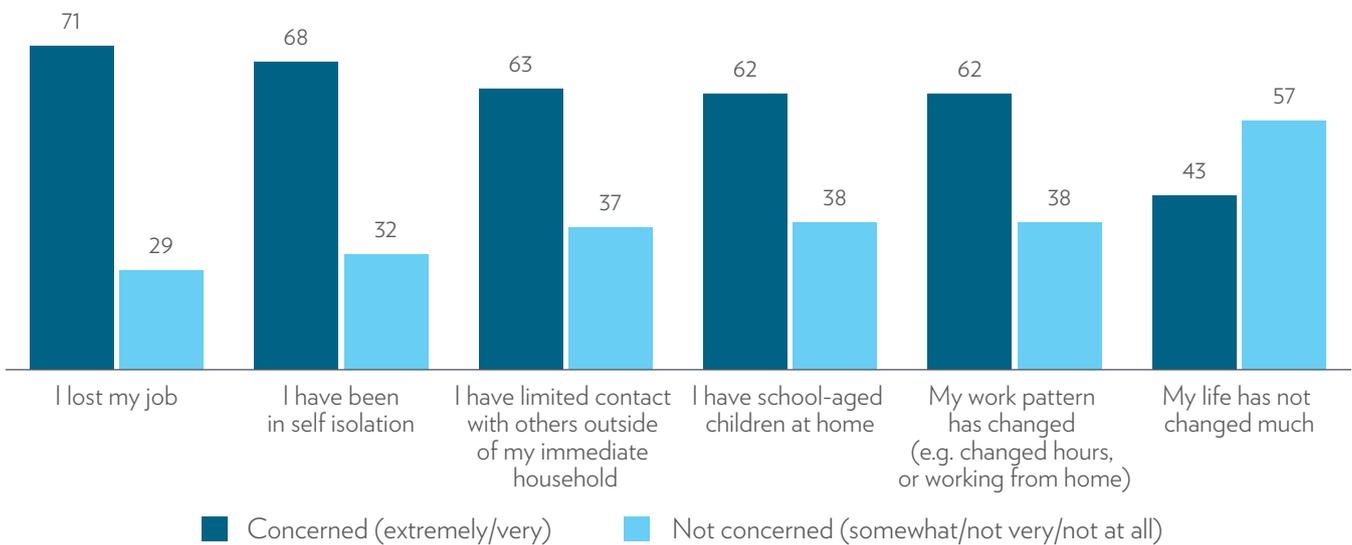
	Changes
I have limited contact with others outside of my immediate household	64
My work pattern has changed (e.g. changed hours, or working from home)	33
I have been in self isolation	32
I have school-aged children at home	18
My life has not changed much	15
I lost my job	12

Q19. In what ways have the coronavirus outbreak impacted your circumstances? Check all that apply.

Those who have made adjustments to their everyday lives are more concerned about the COVID-19 outbreak (57%) than those whose lives have not changed (43%).

Those who have lost their jobs are most concerned (71%), followed by those who are in self-isolation (68%) (see figure 29).

Figure 29 Concern about COVID-19 by change in behaviour (%)



HOW INFORMED ARE CITIZENS?

The public’s knowledge about COVID-19, including how to prevent the spread of the virus, is an important element in successfully containing the disease and flattening the curve. Five questions were asked to measure the knowledge level of the respondents. For each statement, we asked respondents whether it was true or false. We also gave them the option to say they ‘don’t know’. The number of correct answers is used as an indicator of how knowledgeable they are about COVID-19. The majority (85%) of respondents answered 3 or more questions correctly (see figure 30).

There was a considerable variation in the correct responses to the questions. Most people correctly knew (92%) that older people are more susceptible to COVID-19 and few people said they didn’t know (4%). In contrast, for the question ‘coronavirus was made in a laboratory’ only 38% answered correctly and 41% didn’t know (see table 9). This likely reflects the high level of debate about this issue in the news at the time of the survey.

Figure 30 Number of correct responses (%)

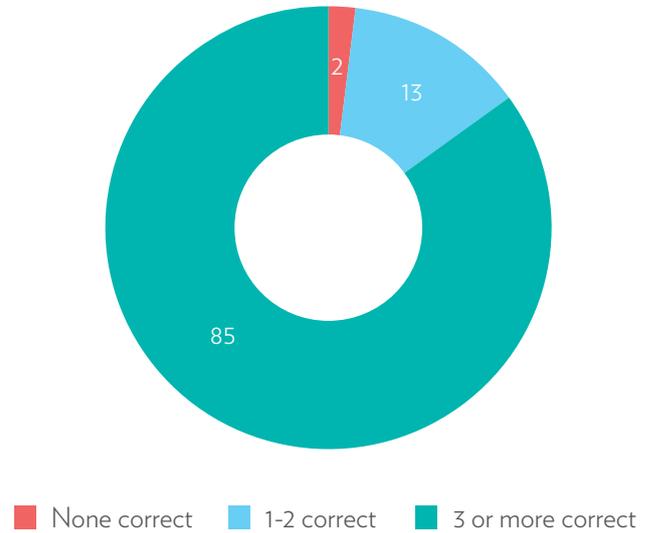


Table 9 Questions about COVID-19 (%)

	Correct	Incorrect	Don't know
Eating garlic can help prevent infection with coronavirus (false)	79	5	16
Older people are susceptible to coronavirus (true)	92	4	4
Coronavirus was made in a laboratory (false)	39	19	41
Antibiotics are effective in treating coronavirus (false)	72	6	21
Coronavirus is about as dangerous as the flu so young people don't have to worry about getting it (false)	84	8	8

Q15. The following statements have been said about coronavirus. To the best of your knowledge, do you think each one of them is true or false?

Those who get information about COVID-19 from experts scored the highest number of correct answers (3.98), followed by those who get information from politicians (3.94).

Those who get information from news media scored 3.79 (see table 10).

Table 10 Correct answers by source of information

	Average number of correct answers
Scientists, doctors or health experts	3.98
Politicians	3.94
Personal communication with people I know	3.86
Department of Health websites (health.gov.au)	3.86
Other health authority websites (i.e., CDC, NHS)	3.83
State government websites	3.83
News media	3.79
Social media	3.69
WHO website	3.68
Health and lifestyle websites and blogs	3.32
None of these	3.16

*The mean score is out of 5 where 0 is no correct answers and score 5 is all correct.

Those whose main source of news is either TV or online news scored higher. Women and older people answered more questions correctly, in particular, Baby Boomers. Those with high income and high level of education gave more correct answers. Left-wing respondents scored higher

as well. Heavy news consumers answered more questions correctly compared to light news consumers. This indicates that news media is playing an important role in informing the public (see table 10).

Table 11 Number of correct answers by demographics

Main source	Correct answers	Gender	Correct answers	Generation	Correct answers	News access	Correct answers
TV	3.77	Men	3.53	Z	3.57	Heavy	3.77
Radio	3.45	Women	3.81	Y	3.50	Light	3.54
Print	3.59			X	3.63	Non-user	2.99
Online	3.76			BB	3.92		
Social media	3.53			74+	3.73		

*The mean score is out of 5 where 0 is no correct answers and score 5 is all correct.

CONCLUSION

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, Australians are consuming more news and their trust in news is higher. While news is still the main source of information for Australians about COVID-19, many are also turning to scientists, health experts and the government to stay up to date with the rapidly changing situation. Overall, Australians think that the government is doing a good job of informing the public. Compared to the US and UK, the federal government should be pleased.

Interestingly, sections of the community who are normally less interested in news are consuming more of it during the pandemic. Women and young people are typically light news consumers with low interest in news, but they have engaged actively with news about COVID-19. This rise in news consumption has also led to an increase in their anxiety about the current situation. Women find news about COVID-19 upsetting and young people find it overwhelming. They are not alone. Seventy-one per cent say they are avoiding news about the pandemic, reflecting widespread news fatigue among news consumers.

The balance between getting adequate and accurate information, and not being overwhelmed by the content and volume of the information, is an important factor to an individual's wellbeing during a time of crisis. There has been a noticeable effort on the part of many news organisations to publish constructive and positive stories connected to the pandemic to try and break up the intensity of the distressing nature of the health and economic crisis. Despite this, more than two-thirds of Australians were avoiding news about the coronavirus at the time of our survey. People say they are tired of hearing about it and they find the news coverage overwhelming.

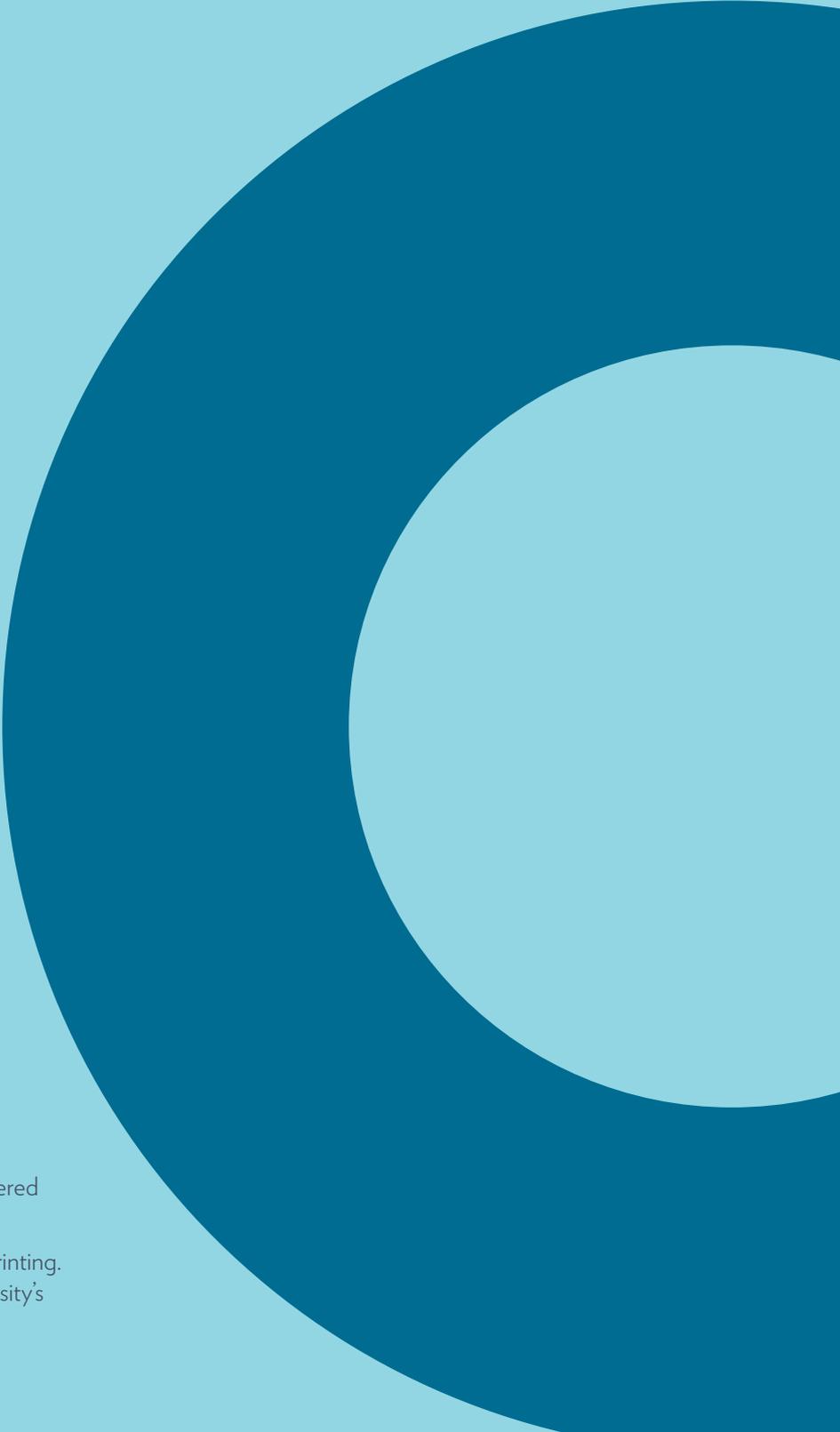
On a positive note, it was a minority that came across misinformation with less than a quarter saying they encountered a lot of misinformation about COVID-19. While most Australians are feeling increased stress and anxiety due to the coronavirus outbreak, a clear majority are responding by making themselves aware of the risks, talking to one another and limiting contact to help flatten the curve. Trust in news about the coronavirus is higher and audiences that are usually light consumers of news have shown greater interest in keeping up to date. The data show that news has played an important social role during the coronavirus pandemic, providing a shared topic of conversation, as well as helping some to feel more connected, deal with feelings of loneliness and pass the time.

The post-coronavirus recovery will likely see Australia emerge into a significantly changed media landscape, one marked by exceptional uncertainty over the future of journalism. The question remains however, whether COVID-19 will change attitudes towards news and information more permanently, or if the changes found in this survey will prove to be short-lived. We need further research to gauge the impact of this global pandemic on news consumers' attitude and behaviour.

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