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FEDERAL POLITICS

COVID-19 ‘infodemic’ reaching Canadians through social media and apps, survey suggests

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OTTAWA—Misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic is reaching a majority of Canadians who use social media and popular apps, suggests an online survey by Ryerson University researchers.

Nearly seven in 10 people who responded to an online survey from the Social Media Lab at Ryersons' Ted Rogers School of Management said they had personally encountered misinformation about the global health crisis on social media platforms, or on popular aggregator websites like Reddit.

The “infodemic” seems to be most acute on Facebook, where 80 per cent of users responded they encounter COVID-19 misinformation “sometimes” or more frequently. But while Facebook users were more likely to encounter misinformation, researcher Anatoliy Gruzd said misinformation is platform-agnostic.

“Misinformation can start as a post on Facebook, morph into an image on Instagram, and then become a part of a YouTube video,” said Gruzd on Tuesday. The survey included 1,500 adult Canadian internet users, and was conducted between April 7 and April 19. The results were weighted by region, age and gender for a more representative sample, based on 2019 Statistics Canada population estimates.



The findings come as Facebook announced it had flagged 50 million pieces of COVID-19 misinformation circulating on the platform in April.

Based on the research of independent fact-checking agencies, the social media giant slapped warnings on the false content. According to the company, once a piece of content is flagged as misinformation, 95 per cent of users scroll past it without clicking.

But even a cursory glance at some Canadian Facebook groups show that borderline content — such as articles calling COVID-19 a “political hoax” or conspiracy theories about the nature of the pandemic — remain online with no warning.

“We are removing content that could cause harm to people. (But) for other false news, like conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus we are reducing its distribution so less people see it and informing people with more context about why it’s false,” said Alex Kucharski, a spokesperson for Facebook Canada.

“We always encourage people to report false news and content that they don’t think should be on Facebook. We also encourage people, as always, to check links and verify the post is from a verified source.”

Gruzd and co-author Philip Mai found when Canadians encounter misinformation online, they’re most likely to consult other sources to verify that information. But 69 per cent of respondents said they’re also likely to spend less time on the platform or app where misinformation is spreading.

“This is yet more evidence why social media companies should take the spread of misinformation on their platform more seriously, as it may lead to fewer people using their sites,” their report read.



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