

Misinformation and Social Distancing: Evidence from 762 Million Tweets

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Abstract

This is a 2000-word excerpt from my dissertation on the impact of online misinformation on the spread of COVID-19 in the USA. I motivate the research design, conduct a literature review, and present descriptive statistics on a portion of the dataset.

1 Introduction

The early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic saw an unprecedented shift in behaviour for most citizens of the United States. In a short period of time, a large number changed their habits of working, socialising, and travelling. They did so both as a result of government restrictions in the form of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) and as a private response to the spread of the pandemic. Economists have taken interest in how citizens formed these behaviour changes; it has been shown that people largely pre-empted government restrictions and acted as a result of their own assessment of the unfolding pandemic. A key factor in how citizens changed (or failed to change) their behaviour, then, is the source and quality of the information they received. It is plausible that those who consumed more accurate information¹ acted earlier, and were more likely to comply with the government restrictions as they came into place. A key vector for this information is, increasingly, social media.

Social media is increasingly important for news consumption: a survey by the Pew Research Foundation indicates that in 2019, 18% of US adults identified social media as their primary source of political news (Mitchell et al., 2020). While a minority to Facebook and YouTube, Twitter is a significant platform: another Pew survey indicated that 22% of US adults use the platform, with 42% of these using it on a daily basis (Perrin & Anderson, 2019).

2 Methods

3 Results

270 words in main body, excluding headers and bibliography.

References

Mitchell, A., Jurkowitz, M., Oliphant, J. B., & Shearer, E. (2020, July 30). *Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable*. Pew Research Center. Washington, DC. Retrieved January 6, 2021, from <https://www.journalism.org/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/>. (Cit. on p. 1)

¹And also more cautious information; in this case the two are largely correlated, which is investigated in the full paper.

Perrin, A., & Anderson, M. (2019, April 10). *Share of U.S. adults using social media, including Facebook, is mostly unchanged since 2018*. Pew Research Center. Washington, DC. Retrieved January 6, 2021, from https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FT_19.04.10_SocialMedia2019_toplevel.methodology.pdf. (Cit. on p. 1)