

RTI PRESS RELEASE

Social Media Analysis Describes Spread of COVID-19 Misinformation Online and Strategies Being Used to Counter It

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Misinformation about the virus continues to proliferate online, particularly on social media platforms

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, N.C. — Researchers at RTI International, a nonprofit research institute, [released an analysis](#) on Monday that reveals trends in how COVID-19 has been discussed in the U.S. and how misinformation about the virus continues to proliferate online, particularly on social media platforms.

“It’s important to closely follow trends in the online discussion about the virus because as social distancing becomes more prevalent, people will be increasingly relying on social media to work, make social connections and get information,” said [Sarah Ray](#), MA, Communication Scientist in the Public Health Research Division at RTI. “Our analysis demonstrates the difficulties people face managing and understanding credible information during a pandemic.”

Using a timeframe of Jan. 1-March 31, RTI’s research team found that COVID-19 was mentioned over 115 million times on social media and other online platforms, including Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr, and various blogs and forums. The peak occurred on March 12 with 6.3 million mentions, the day after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic.

The research team also saw a shift in the ways people discussed the virus and its impact.

For example, in the three-week period between Feb. 19-March 10, topics related to the spread of the virus, testing, the impact on the economy and personal protective behaviors (for example, handwashing) were trending. That changed as cases grew, the pandemic was declared and more community mitigation measures were enacted. From March 11-31, primary topics shifted toward

discussions around the virus as a pandemic and social distancing and related guidance around stay at home, quarantine and shelter-in-place requirements.

Social media discourse and the type of misinformation around community mitigation strategies may evolve given current trends, the researchers noted, though due to the dynamic nature of the virus' spread and the response, continuing to monitor trends and considering the influence on public perception will be crucial.

RTI's research team observed that many social media and digital media platforms, including Google, Instagram, TikTok and Wikipedia, have begun directing users to vetted news sources, such as CDC.gov, when a user searches for "coronavirus," or COVID-19, or related terms.

For instance, WHO specifically joined TikTok to launch a TikTok information series that provides credible information about the virus.

"It's been great to see social media companies proactively working with government agencies to refer their users to authoritative sources at the top of their feeds," said [Annice Kim](#), PhD, Director of Health Media Impact and Digital Analytics Program in the Public Health Research Division at RTI. "Ongoing collaboration between health experts and technology companies will be critical to ensuring that credible information is being disseminated to the public."

The analysis was completed as part of RTI's investment in assessing public perceptions and knowledge about COVID-19 in the U.S. Partial results from the survey [released in mid-March](#) found knowledge gaps in the public's understanding of the virus.

To learn more about the survey, visit www.rti.org/coronavirus-united-states-survey.