

MISINFORMATION

in the public eye

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Authors

Amel Ghani
Sadaf Khan

Edit and Review

Asad Baig
Aroosa Shaukat

Data Collection

Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR)

Layout and design

Aniqa Haider

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Executive Summary	3
SECTION 1 - BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION	5
Chapter 1 - Introduction	6
Chapter 2 - Literature Review	8
Chapter 3 - Methodology and Limitations	10
SECTION 2 - SURVEY FINDINGS	14
Chapter 4 - Perceptions about Misinformation	15
Chapter 5 - Sources of Misinformation & Public Trust in Media	23
Chapter 6 - Dealing with Misinformation	33
SECTION 3 - ANALYSIS	35
Chapter 7 - Understanding the Findings	36
Chapter 8 - Recommendations for Further Research	39
ANNEXURES	40
Annex 1 - Research Questionnaire	40
Annex 2 - Respondent Demographics	44

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Studies on misinformation and its perception in public have not been widely conducted in Pakistan. Organisations working on media information literacy and related initiatives have struggled with a populace that sees the information disorder from the narrow lens of ‘fake news’, a contradictory term that carries various meanings and has been much exploited. A lack of local academic literature on the theme creates a gap in relevant knowledge, and this research aims to fill a part of it.

Designed as an exploratory study, this research aims to create the basic groundwork for further research.

The research explores three basic questions:

1. How does the public perceive misinformation?
2. What is the impact of misinformation on public perception and trust on news media?
3. Is the public using any strategies to tackle misinformation?

The study is based on a close-ended research survey conducted with a set of 503 respondents across Pakistan.

The following are the findings of this research.

- A significant majority, 9 out of 10 respondents, feels that misinformation is a challenge for Pakistan. Almost 5 in 10 respondents say they come across misinformation at least once a week, while 2 in 10 say that they come across misinformation every day.
- Only 3 out of 10 respondents felt that they can always identify misinformation. Three in ten respondents feel that politicians and political parties are the main source of misinformation in Pakistan, while 1 in 10 believe that journalists are responsible for spreading misinformation.
- Seven in ten respondents believe that Facebook is the digital platform that is used most often to spread misinformation; one in ten see Youtube and Twitter as the main platforms used to spread misinformation. Collectively, 75% of the respondents believe that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, the three platforms owned and operated by Facebook, are being used most often to spread misinformation.
- Newspapers are the most trusted source of information for respondents, with 3 in 10 saying that newspapers are never used to spread misinformation. Trust in social media is lowest with almost 4 out of 10 respondents (39%) saying that social media is always used to spread misinformation.
- Two in ten respondents between 18 - 25 years of age believe that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation. Women are 10% more likely to trust information they receive through WhatsApp, as 21% of women believe that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation as opposed to 11% men who have the same perception.
- Three in ten respondents have a low level of trust in the news media while 6 in 10 have an ‘average’ level of trust. About 5 in 10 respondents feel that the media is not free of political and economic influences.
- Four in ten respondents believe that improvement in the policies can help in dealing with online misinformation and three in ten respondents think that online misinformation can be dealt with

by improving media and information literacy of citizens.

- Five in ten respondents think that the government should prioritise development of a technical tool to counter disinformation.

Section 1

**BACKGROUND
AND
INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“False political news traveled deeper and more broadly, reached more people, and was more viral than any other category of false news. It reached more than 20,000 people nearly three times faster than all other types of false news reached just 10,000 people. News about politics and urban legends spread the fastest and was the most viral. Falsehoods were 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than the truth, even when controlling for the age of the account holder, activity level, and number of followers and followees of the original tweeter and whether the original tweeter was a verified user”¹, writes Sinan Aral in his acclaimed book *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health*.

The past decade has seen massive changes in the way people consume and understand news. The rise of digital mediums, specifically social media, has drastically changed the way in which news is disseminated and produced. The spread of misinformation and disinformation, commonly referred to as ‘fake news’ – a term popularised and used by authoritarian leaders often to discredit news – has become an important and consistent conversation throughout the world, given the huge impact this type of content has had on democratic processes in Western democracies, and the way social media platforms can be used to manipulate information². More recently, with the spread of the pandemic, it has become even more important to understand the information people consume across all platforms and the trust they place in it.

The 2020 Reuters Institute Digital News Report states that their research from before the global outbreak of COVID-19 showed that consumers were concerned about what is true on the Internet. As part of the survey, consumers blamed Facebook the most for the spread of misinformation. However, in some countries including Brazil, WhatsApp was thought to be the main source and amplifier of misinformation. The same study also showed that people’s trust in the news they consume has fallen over the past year. The research found that less than half, only 46 percent people, say they trust the news they consume.

Research has also shown that consuming news largely on social media leads to lower levels of trust in it, and at the same time increased exposure to misinformation, regardless of the platform, also decreases trust in more traditional sources of news.³ A study by the *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* in 2020 that examines news consumption habits of consumers in the US over a one-month time frame in 2018 found that exposure to misinformation resulted in a decreased trust in news by 5 percent amongst the participants.⁴

1. Aral, S. (2020). *Hype machine: how social media disrupts our elections, our e* (4th ed.). Currency.

2. Erlanger, S. (2017). ‘Fake News,’ Trump’s Obsession, Is Now a Cudgel for Strongmen. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/world/europe/trump-fake-news-dictators.html>

3. Kalogeropoulos, Antonis & Suiter, Jane & Udris, Linards & Eisenegger, Mark. (2019). News media trust and news consumption: factors related to trust in news in 35 countries. *International Journal of Communication*. 13.

4. Ognyanova, K., Lazer, D., Robertson, R., & Wilson, C. (2020). Misinformation in action: Fake news exposure is linked to lower trust in media, higher trust in government when your side is in power. Retrieved 20 January 2021, from <https://misinformationreview.hks.harvard.edu/article/misinformation-in-action-fake-news-exposure-is-linked-to-lower-trust-in-media-higher-trust-in-government-when-your-side-is-in-power/>

These signs do not paint a very positive picture for the news media and journalists. The use of social media platforms and the role they play in spreading misinformation and disinformation has also been well documented.⁵

At times, disinformation and misinformation is shared by malicious networks specifically mimicking authentic news outlets. A similar case, the *Indian Chronicles*, was recently uncovered by the EU Disinfo Lab expose that revealed an operation to “discredit nations in conflict with India in Asia, in particular Pakistan but also China to a lesser extent”[4]. The “operation”, or as it was termed by the EU Disinfo Lab, among other activities, consisted of “creation of fake media in Brussels, Geneva and across the world, as well as the repackaging and dissemination of content via ANI and obscure local media networks – at least in 97 countries – to multiply the repetition of online negative content about countries in conflict with India, in particular Pakistan”.

At other times, the way that platforms prioritise information sharing allows for misinformation to be spread more easily[5]. More recently, with the role of social media platforms in the spread of misinformation being criticised, most of them have started marking news that is either inauthentic, not true or from dubious sources more clearly, also pointing readers to a more authentic news source.⁶

In Pakistan, an informal online survey conducted by Dawn.com — the digital wing of the daily newspaper *Dawn* — in 2017 showed that 57.5 percent of the participants felt that ‘fake news’ was a problem; and while 87.2 percent blamed social media, over 20 percent of the respondents in the survey blamed websites, and another 26.2 percent put the burden of spreading ‘fake news’ on television channels.⁷

This, however, does not mean that journalists and news media organisations have been relieved of the burden. It makes it even more important for news outlets to verify and fact-check the content that they share through their own channels and mediums, especially when a substantial percentage of misleading and false content in online spaces is shared with fake accounts of leading journalists. It is important for news mediums to be more trusted by the people so that the public can know the difference and find it easier to differentiate between authentic and inauthentic sources of information.

5. Meserole, C. (2018). How misinformation spreads on social media—And what to do about it. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/09/how-misinformation-spreads-on-social-media-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

6. Akala, A. (2020). NPR Cookie Consent and Choices. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/16/924625825/dont-censor-stop-the-hoaxes-facebook-twitter-face-a-catch-22>

7. Haque, J. (2017). Journalism in the ‘disinformation age’. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1374499>

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Misinformation, media and public trust

Media performance is an important indicator when it comes to understanding the level of trust that the public places in the content they consume on various news platforms. When it comes to trust within the context of the media, it refers essentially to the relationship that individuals not only have with media as a whole, but also with journalists (Blöbaum, 2016; Kohring, 2004). The viewers are putting their trust in the journalist's ability to be objective and fair in their reporting and the information they present (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017, p. 704), and also in the selective information that is provided to them, and decisions made by journalists to provide information with relevant context (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 239).

There is a wide variety of research looking at media performance and public trust. Dorothee Arlt, 2018, in their study look at political characteristics, which essentially mean political leanings, that have an impact on trust. They also look at exposure to news and the social demographics to understand how public trust in news is shaped. However, while these attributes can have an impact on the individuals' trust in the news they consume, these indicators do not speak to the public's perception of news quality.

A Gallup survey in the US highlights lack of accuracy and/or perceived biases as the most frequently mentioned factors that people say leads them to distrust the news media.⁸ Annika Sehl, 2020, in her research, essentially on public service media in Europe and trust, takes into account the six core values of public service media laid out by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Their main focus is the value that public service media adds to society (van Eimeren, 2019, p. 452). The six main principles include independence, excellence, diversity, accountability and innovation. Urban and Schweiger (2014) reworked these criteria and created six basic dimensions to understand quality from the audience's perspective. These are: diversity, relevance, accuracy, comprehensibility, impartiality, and compliance of ethical standards.

The same factors can be used to understand and study public trust in the media, in addition to the aforementioned principles of objectivity and fairness. The public perception of the quality and impartiality of the media they consume impacts the level of trust they put in it as an institution and system of information.

The digital wildfire & its impact

The digital wildfire that WEF predicted in 2013 is now burning across the globe. As digital transformation picks pace, more and more people connect and get access, the reach and potential impact of misinformation also increases. A UNESCO study states that "the rapid and wide spread of "fake news" has been largely a result of the capabilities provided by social networks and digitally-enabled messaging tools".⁹

The impact is evident.

8. Knight Foundation. 2018. Indicators of News Media Trust. Miami: Knight Foundation.

9. UNESCO. 2018. Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation. Paris: UNESCO

In June 2018, graphic images of mass graves, a baby's mutilated body and a man's cracked skull floated on Facebook feeds in Nigeria. The accompanying text blamed the Fulani Muslims of perpetrating violence against Berom Christians and within hours a vigilante mob had attacked Fulani men. Ten people were killed in the violence (Logan, 2019).

In Myanmar, Facebook was extensively used by the military and military intelligence as "a tool for ethnic cleansing" (Mouzir, 2018). In 2014, the platform had been used to falsely accuse a Muslim of raping a Buddhist woman resulting in violence that killed two and injured 20 people (McLaughlin, 2018). In March 2018, a UN investigator said that Facebook was used to incite violence and hatred against Muslims in Myanmar and the platform had "turned into a beast" (Stecklov, 2018). In April 2017, a 23-year-old student was brutally murdered by a mob in Pakistan after fake posts with blasphemous content surfaced online (Abbasi, 2017). Similar incidents of violence, triggered by hate campaigns on Facebook occurred in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Ethiopia.

All the incidents referred here have some common trends – they all took place in countries that have internal religious and ethnic conflicts with a history of violence and prevalent digi-social inequalities.

However, a look at global literature on misinformation shows a gap in misinformation related literature emerging from the Global South.

With Cambridge Analytica, the discourse on misinformation – popularly termed 'fake news' – in the Global North took a serious turn. The World Economic Forum (WEF) identified misinformation as a threat to democratic societies in its global risk assessment report,¹⁰ and universities and research institutes in the West started exploring the phenomena and a plethora of literature¹¹ exploring various aspects of the 'information disorder', a term coined in a Council of Europe report.¹² However, local studies in the Global South have been few and far between.

There is a growing body of literature that is exploring the link between violence, misinformation and political manipulation – but the body of work that explores this phenomena from the perspective of information consumers remains limited.

10. World Economic Forum (2013), "Digital wildfires in a hyperconnected world", Global Risks 2013, available at: <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/>

11. Lee, T. (2019), "The global rise of "fake news" and the threat to democratic elections in the USA", *Public Administration and Policy: An Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 15-24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PAP-04-2019-0008>

12. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

Research focus

Studies on misinformation and its perception in public have not been widely conducted in Pakistan. Organisations working on media information literacy and related initiatives have struggled with a populace that sees the information disorder from the narrow lens of ‘fake news’, a contradictory term that carries various meanings and has been much exploited. The general lack of public and academic discourse on misinformation created challenges. First, there haven’t been any large scale studies and surveys to map perceptions around misinformation and its impact, thus, the researchers did not have access to a baseline on which further information could be built. Second, the engagement with journalists, students and news consumers for related media information literacy initiatives showed a culture of making value based judgements about information.

While the latter was a much more complex and a very important premise, it could not be studied without first creating a baseline that allows studies regarding behaviour and value judgements to be situated within their basic context. Thus, this study is designed as an exploratory study. It aims to create the basic groundwork for further research and is being launched in conjunction with a set of other studies mapping the misinformation challenge within newsrooms¹³ and journalistic skills regarding information verification in the context of the information disorder.

The research explores three basic questions:

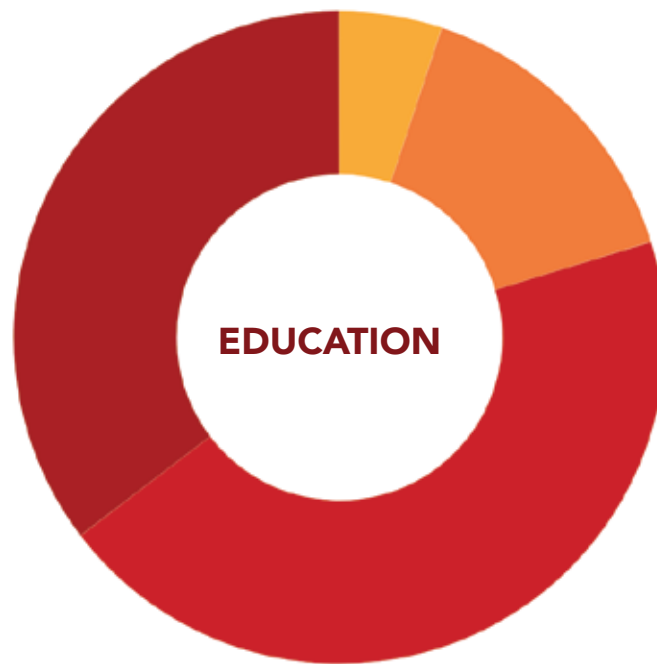
1. How does the public perceive misinformation?
2. What is the impact of misinformation on public perception and trust on news media?
3. Is the public using any strategies to tackle misinformation?

Research methodology

For this study, a singular method of data collection – close-ended survey – was used. As this is an exploratory research seeking to generate a basic understanding of the context in which misinformation is spread and utilised, the survey methodology seemed to be most appropriate. Given the resource constraints, a limited sample size of 500 respondents was chosen, and additional variables, like gender and geographical representation were introduced to create a balanced sample. Due to COVID-19, the survey was conducted via telephone calls. The survey was conducted in English and Urdu languages, depending on the preference of the respondents.

13. Khan, S., & Ghani, A. (2021). *Disorder in the Newsrooms* [Ebook]. Islamabad: Media Matters for Democracy.

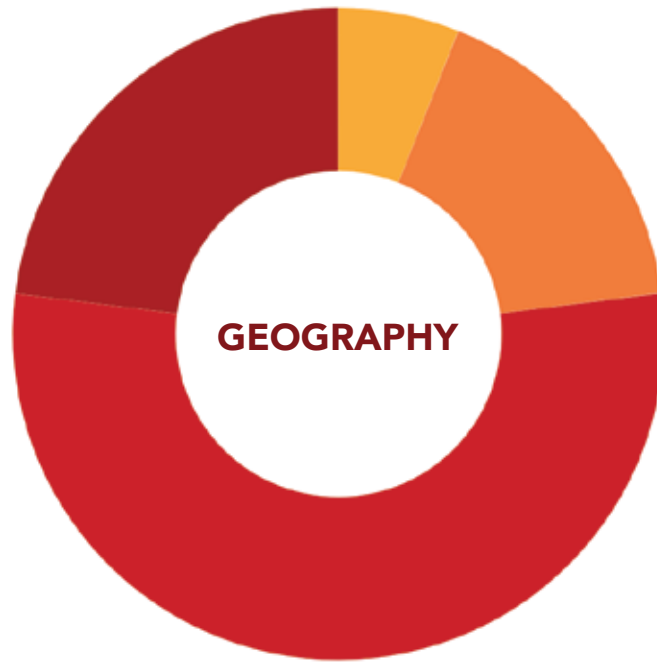
A total of 503 respondents took the survey, whose demographics are as follows;



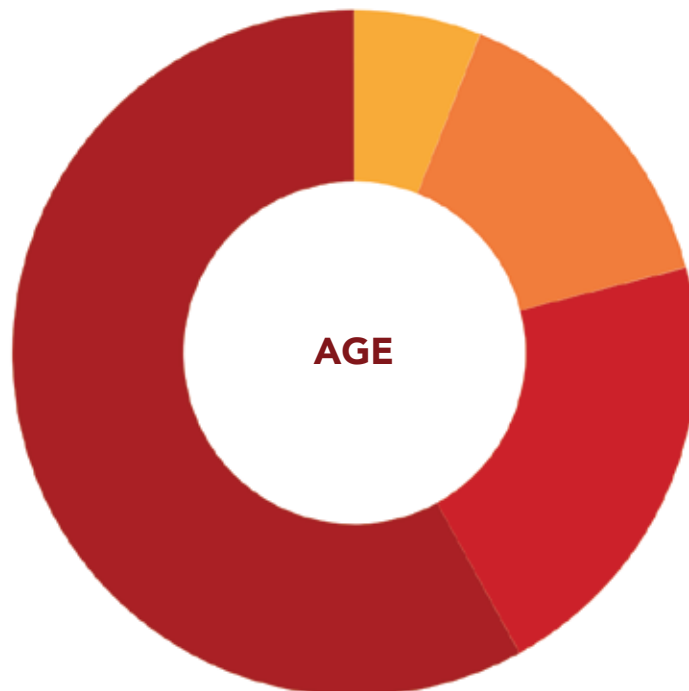
■ Postgraduate 5.1%
■ Highschool 35.4%

■ Graduate 15.2%

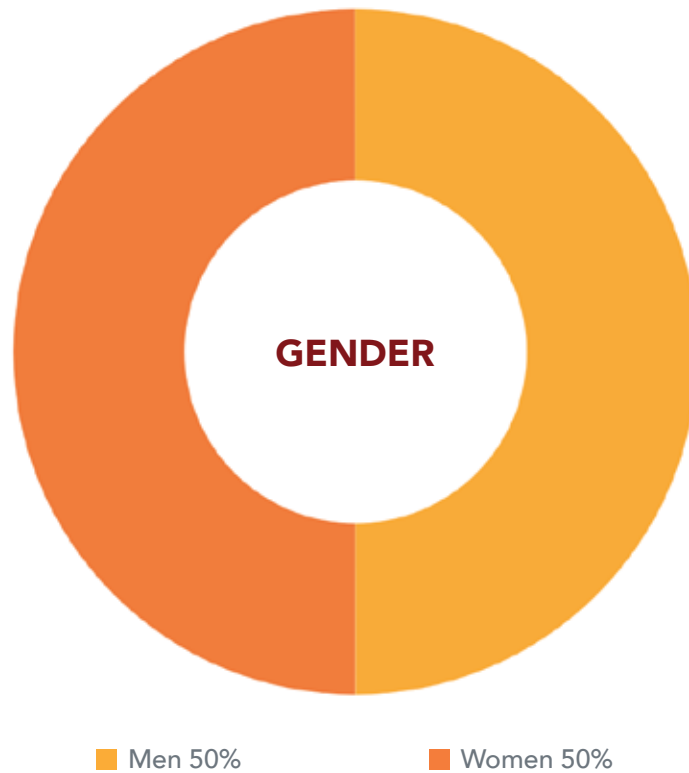
■ Undergraduate 44.4%



■ Balochistan 6% ■ Sindh 23% ■ Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 17%
■ Punjab 54%



■ 51+ (6%) ■ 41-50 (15%) ■ 18-25 (21%)
■ 26-40 (58%)



The survey had only one open-ended question that allowed respondents to define what the term ‘misinformation’ meant. The generic term ‘fake news’ was used for the purposes of the survey as it is more widely understood. However, the open-ended question was used to provide insight into how people view and understand the term.

The respondents were limited by demographics to intermediate levels of education to ensure a basic level of literacy amongst all participants. This was necessary since consuming news via digital or print platform requires that readers are able to read. A group of 39, 331 active cell phone users from all four provinces was selected for the survey, using educational qualification and maintaining an equal gender ratio. In the first stage, allocation was made by distributing samples to all the provinces as per their actual share. In the second stage, phone numbers were sorted by district, and then selection of respondents was made using Systematic Sampling with a Random Start (SSRS).

Limitations

- The study aimed to conduct a quantitative analysis to understand the relationship between misinformation and public trust in news. It does not go into detail to understand the reasons behind some of the findings. A qualitative analysis or case study would provide more insight for some of the reasons behind the findings of this survey.
- There was no concrete definition provided to the respondents for the term ‘fake news’ or ‘misinformation’ and they were not asked how they viewed the terms either. Hence, there is limited understanding of what they perceive to be misinformation.
- The study primarily focused on people with a more than basic level of literacy, which severely limits the sample size, since media and news are consumed by a large number of people.

Section 2

**SURVEY
FINDINGS**



Chapter 4

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MISINFORMATION

Highlights

- 9 out of 10 respondents feel that misinformation is a challenge for Pakistan
- Almost 5 in 10 respondents say they come across misinformation at least once a week, while 2 in 10 say that they come across misinformation every day
- Only 3 out of 10 respondents feel that they can always identify misinformation

The main purpose of the questions in this section was to understand the public's general perception of misinformation, in terms of how concerned people are about the information and, more specifically, the news they consume on a daily basis. It also aimed at understanding how conscious the public was with the type of information they were consuming and whether the platform they accessed it on impacted the way they processed and understood that information.

Perceptions about misinformation as a challenge

The data shows an overwhelming concern for misinformation in the country, which is in line with research from other countries mentioned at the opening of this study.^{14,15,16,17} There are no significant differences based on gender where the perception of and interaction with misinformation is concerned. The narrative of 'fake news' and, more recently, the term 'misinformation', has been quite commonly used by politicians on mainstream media and social media.

14 Erlanger, S. (2017). 'Fake News,' Trump's Obsession, Is Now a Cudgel for Strongmen. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/world/europe/trump-fake-news-dictators.htm>

15 BBC. (2018). The psychology behind Facebook data breach. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/technology-43674480>

16 Meserole, C. (2018). How misinformation spreads on social media—And what to do about it. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/09/how-misinformation-spreads-on-social-media-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

17 Carmichael, F., & Hussain, A. (2019). Pro-Indian 'fake websites targeted decision makers in Europe'. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50749764>



Is misinformation a challenge to Pakistan?

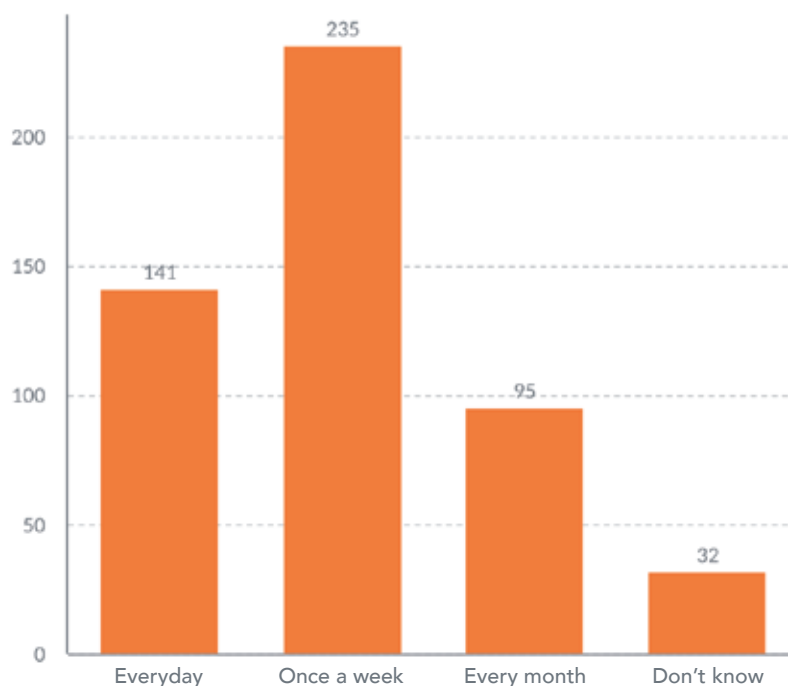
■ Yes (453)
 ■ No (41)
 ■ Don't know (9)

The perception that misinformation is a challenge to Pakistan remains largely the same regardless of the age group, gender, education and professional experience of the respondents. The majority of respondents from each group continue to identify misinformation as a challenge to Pakistan regardless of which gender and age group they belong to and what their education level or professional experience is.

Frequency of exposure to misinformation

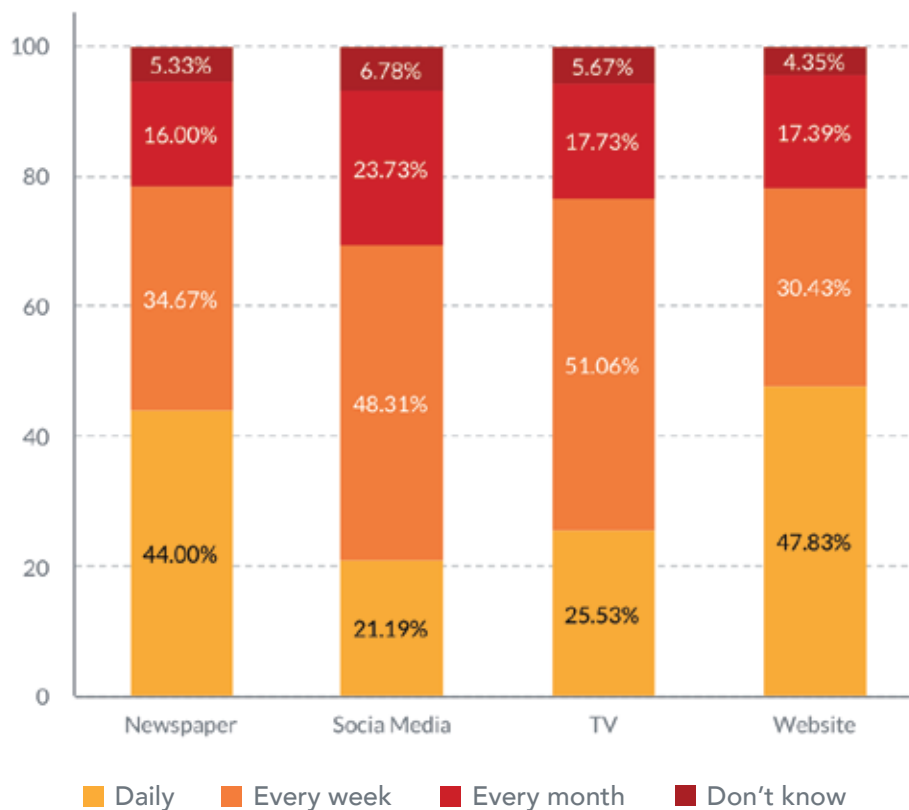
In response to a question about frequency with which respondents encountered misinformation the majority of respondents indicated that they frequently came across misinformation i.e. either daily or at least once a week.

How often do you come across misinformation?



Perceptions about frequency with which respondents encounter misinformation

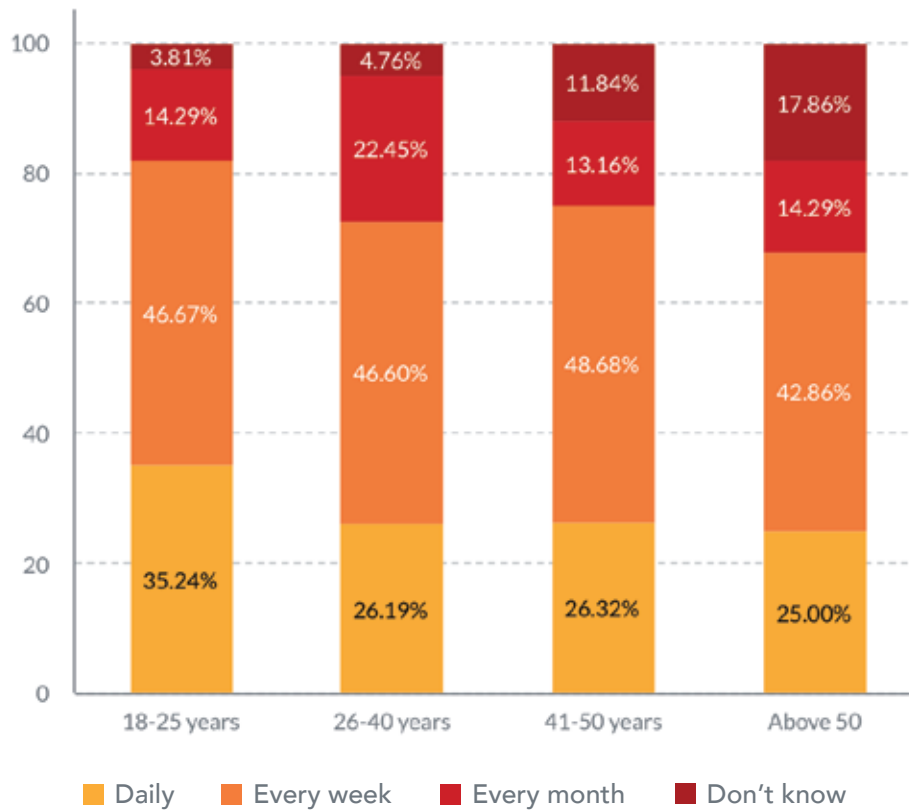
The perceptions about frequency of exposure to misinformation is higher for respondents who are using newspapers and websites as main sources of news. Interestingly, 42% of the total respondents, who identify social media platforms, have the smallest ratio of those who say they encounter misinformation on a daily basis.



Main source of news	Daily	Every week	Every month	Don't know
News paper	44.00%	34.67%	16.00%	5.33%
Social media	21.19%	48.31%	23.73%	6.78%
TV	25.53%	51.06%	17.73%	5.67%
Website	47.83%	30.43%	17.39%	4.35%

Perceived frequency of exposure to misinformation by consumers of different media

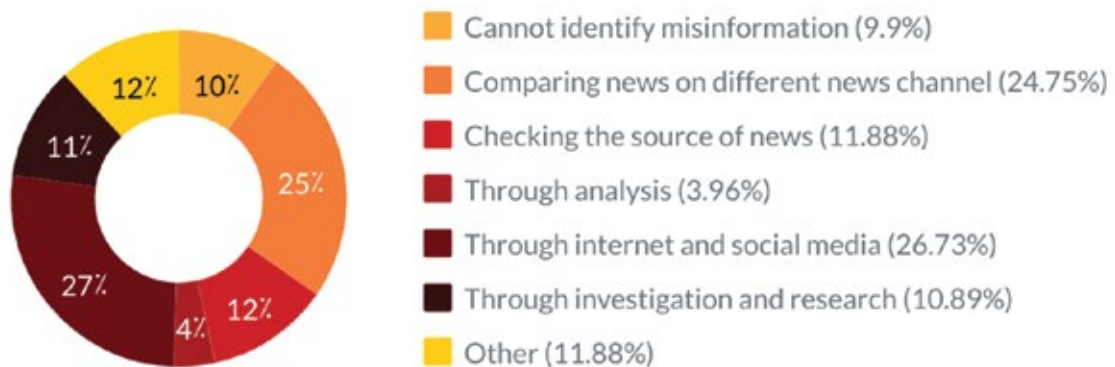
Over 35% of the youngest group i.e. respondents from 18 to 25 years of age, have said that they encounter misinformation on a daily basis. From all other age groups, only 25% to 26% of the respondents say that they come across misinformation daily. The majority of respondents from each age group say that they encounter misinformation at least once a week.



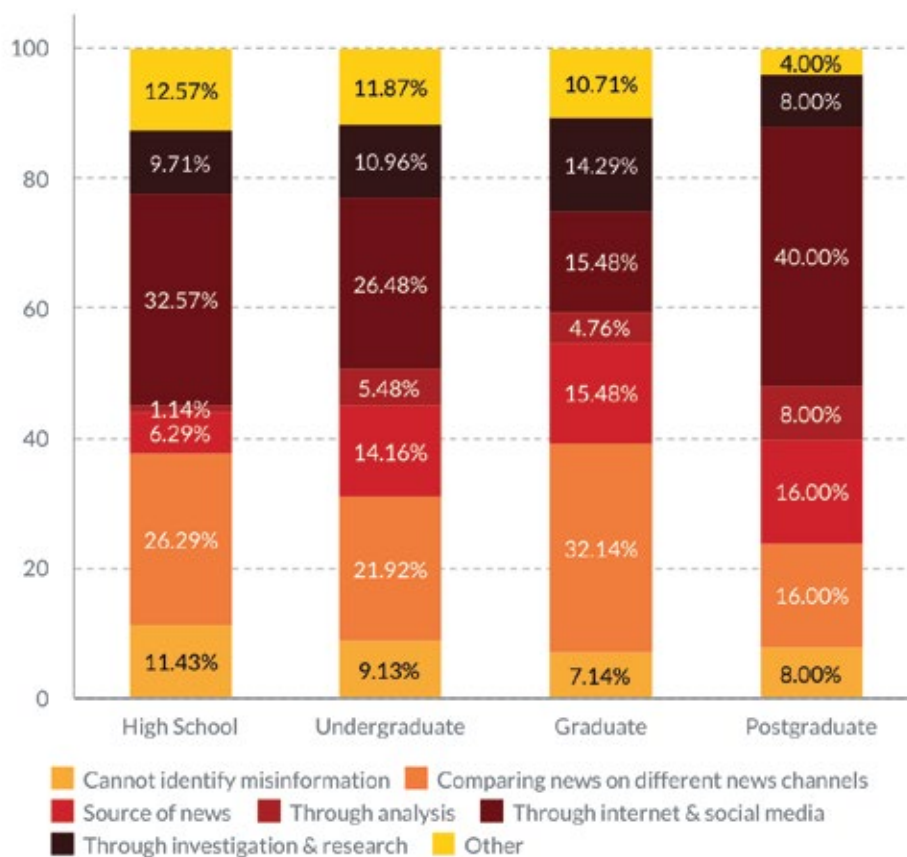
Identification of misinformation

The respondents were asked about the methods they use to identify misinformation. This was an open-ended question to allow the respondents to think and identify their own approach to information consumption. The responses were then grouped together in categories that appeared most often. While there is no one method that a majority of respondents use to identify misinformation, ‘comparing news on different channels’ and ‘using the internet appear’ to be the most commonly used methods. A quarter of the respondents, 25%, said that they identify misinformation by comparing news on different channels. About 28% of the respondents said that they used different digital platforms, including Google, Twitter, YouTube and other social media platforms to identify misinformation.

How do you identify misinformation?



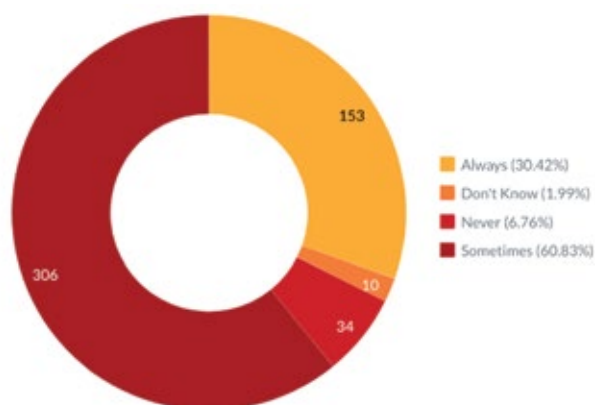
About 10% of the respondents said that they cannot identify misinformation.



Comparing trends between respondents of different educational levels, shows no significant differences between respondents with different levels of education. The percentage of respondents who cannot identify misinformation is highest in those with high school level education but the difference is just 2% to 4% from other education levels. Social media and internet based research and comparison between different news channels are the two methods most favoured by a majority of respondents across all education groups.

While only one in ten respondents answered this question by saying that they cannot identify misinformation, when asked directly if they can identify and recognise misinformation, only 3 in 10 said that they can always identify misinformation. The majority of respondents, 63% i.e. about 6 in 10 respondents, said that they can only identify misinformation sometimes.

Can you recognise misinformation?

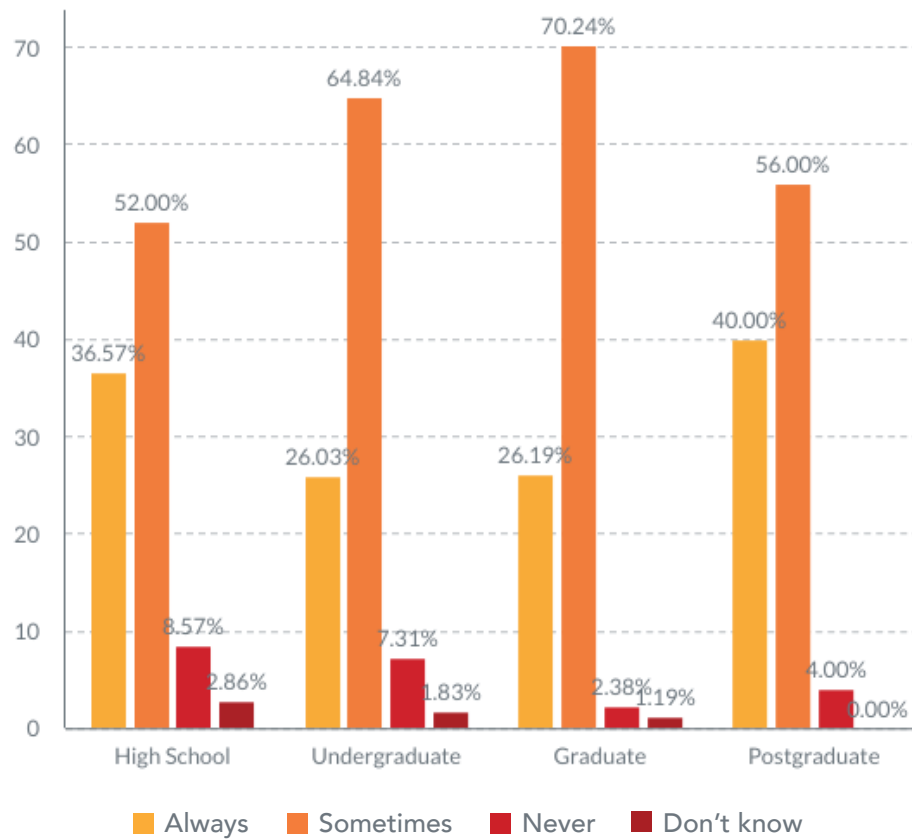


Frequency with which respondents think they can identify misinformation

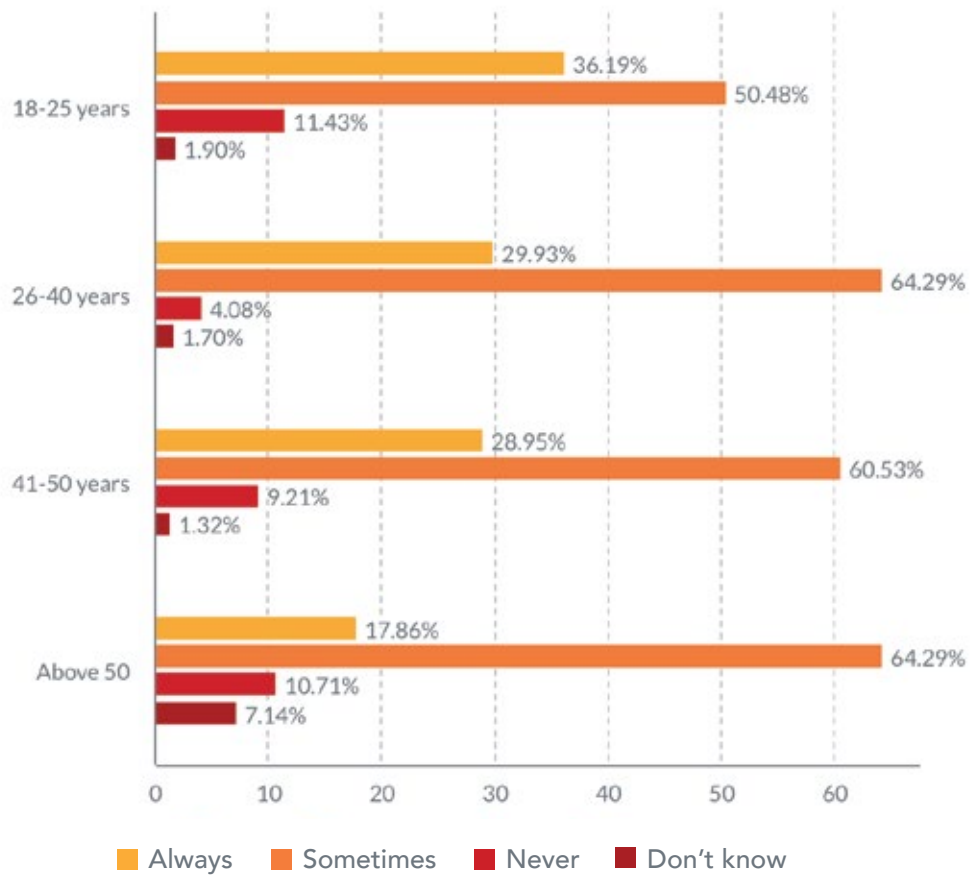
In response to another question in relation to the identification of misinformation, only 30% respondents could absolutely guarantee that they always identify misinformation.

Respondents with a postgraduate level of education appear to be most confident about their ability to identify misinformation with 4 in 10 saying that they can always identify and recognise misinformation.

Perceptions about ability to identify misinformation



The majority of respondents across age groups have said that they can identify misinformation only sometimes.

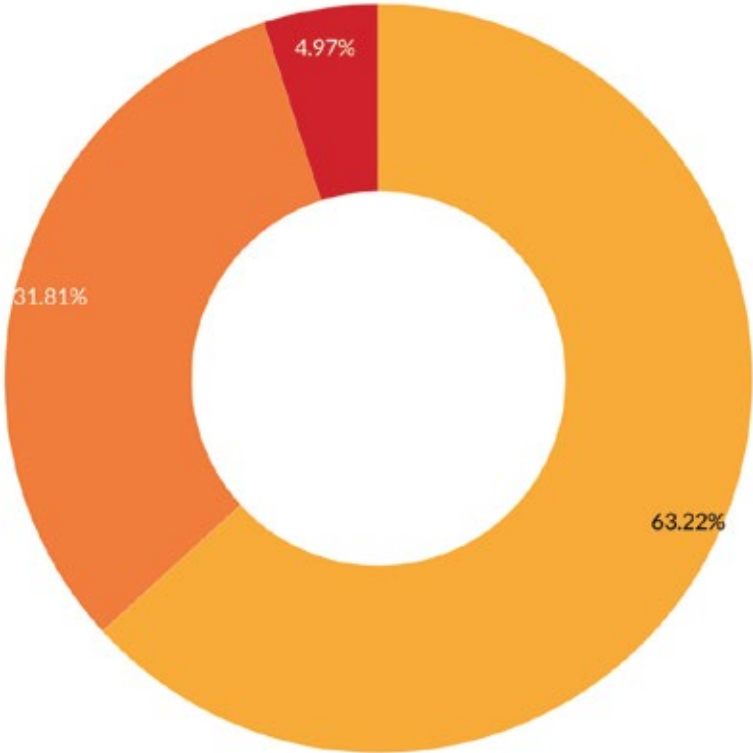


Age group	Always	Sometimes	Never	Don't know
18-25 years	36.19%	50.48%	11.43%	1.90%
26-40 years	29.93%	64.29%	4.08%	1.70%
41-50 years	28.95%	60.53%	9.21%	1.32%
Above 50	17.86%	64.29%	10.71%	7.14%

Respondents between 18 to 25 years of age appear to be most confident with 36% of them saying that they can always identify misinformation. Over 7% of the respondents above 50 years of age said that they don't know how often they can identify misinformation, while in the other age groups, the percentage of people who said they 'don't know' was less than 2%, showing that there may be a generational element that needs to be further researched.

In addition to assessing perceptions about self, respondents were also asked to assess the ability of others to identify and recognise misinformation. When asked if the majority of Pakistanis can identify misinformation, 63% of the respondents said yes, showing that the majority of respondents have confidence in the ability of fellow citizens to identify misinformation.

Can the majority of Pakistanis identify misinformation?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know

Chapter 5

SOURCES OF MISINFORMATION & PUBLIC TRUST IN MEDIA

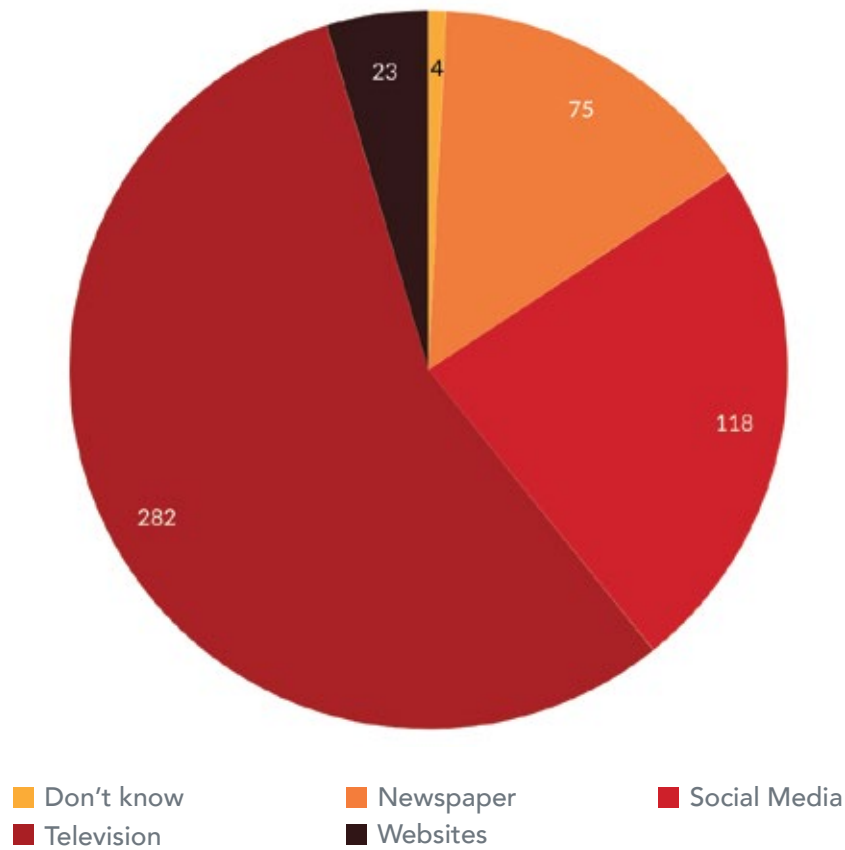
Highlights

- Three in ten respondents feel that politicians and political parties are the main source of misinformation in Pakistan, while 1 in 10 believe that journalists are responsible for spreading misinformation
- Seven in ten respondents believe that Facebook is the digital platform that is used most often to spread misinformation, while one in ten see YouTube and Twitter as the main platforms used to spread misinformation
- Collectively, 75% of the respondents believe that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, the three platforms owned and operated by Facebook, are being used most often to spread misinformation
- Newspapers are the most trusted source of information for respondents, with 3 in 10 saying that newspapers are never used to spread misinformation; trust in social media is lowest with almost 4 out of 10 respondents (39%) saying that social media is always used to spread misinformation
- 2 in 10 respondents between 18 - 25 years of age believe that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation
- Women are 10% more likely to trust information they receive through WhatsApp, as 21% of women believe that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation as opposed to 11% men who have the same perception
- 3 in 10 respondents have a low level of trust in the news media, while 6 in 10 have an 'average' level of trust
- About 5 in 10 respondents feel that the media is not free of political and economic influences

Media consumption & perceptions about sources of misinformation

Respondents were asked to identify their main sources of news and information.

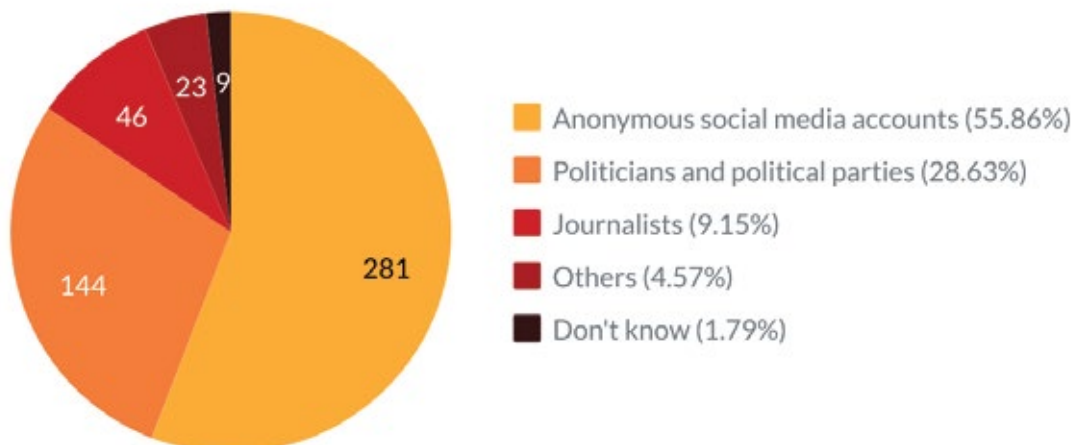
Main sources of news



Television channels appear to be the true ‘mass medium’ with a majority of respondents saying that they depend on TV for news and information.

Respondents were then asked to identify the sources that they think are most often spreading misinformation. While a majority of respondents, 55% felt that anonymous social media accounts were mostly responsible for spreading misinformation, 29% of the respondents identified politicians and political parties as main sources of misinformation.

Sources of Misinformation

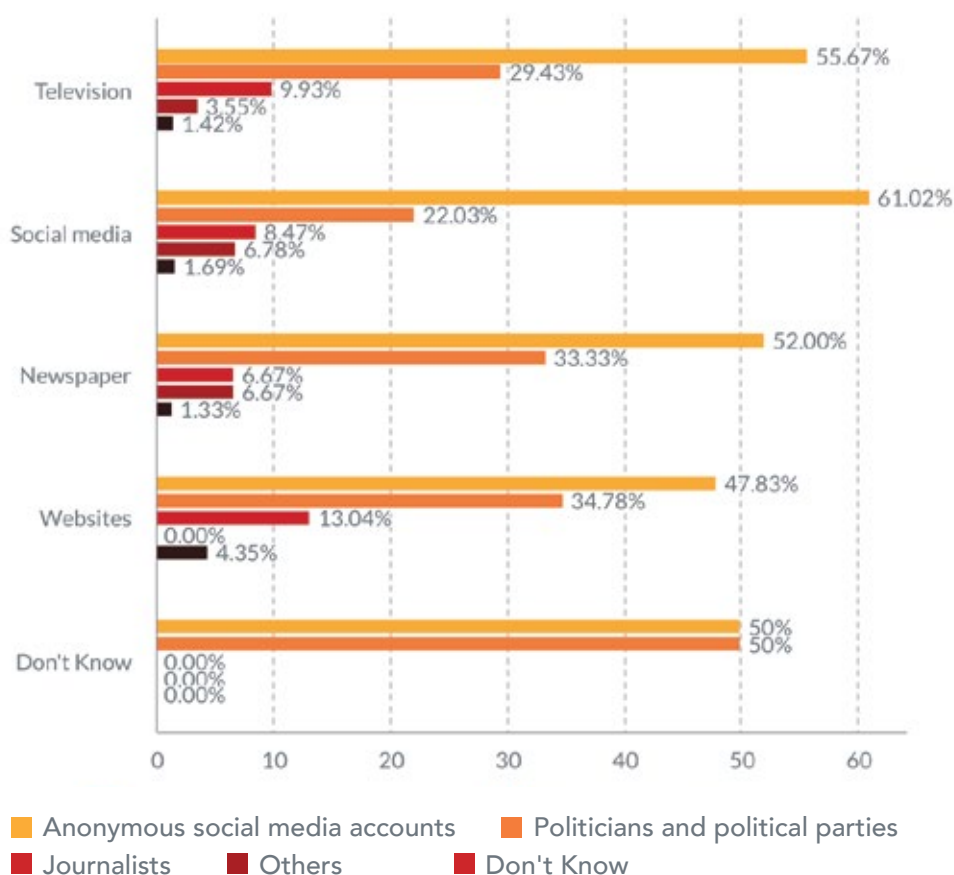


Sources in 'others' include corporate and businesses, NGOs and foreign actors.

There doesn't seem to be much difference in trends of perception of main sources of misinformation among respondents relying on different mediums for news. Almost or over half of the respondents from each cluster have identified anonymous social media accounts as main sources of misinformation.

Among the respondents who have identified a preferred source of news, distrust in politicians and political parties appears to be highest among consumers of news websites and newspapers.

News sources and perceptions about sources of misinformation

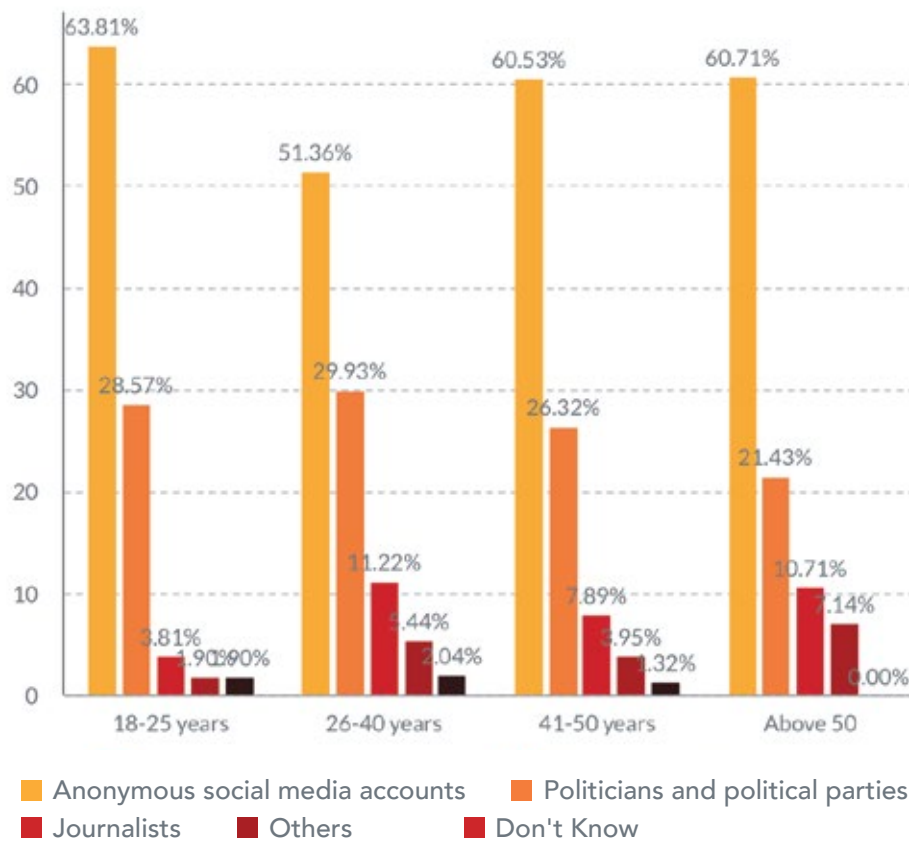


A total of 13% i.e. 1 in 10 respondents relying on websites for their news think that journalists are most often engaged in spreading misinformation while the ratio of those who see journalists as main sources of misinformation is less than 1% among other clusters.

Comparing the responses by age group again shows largely similar patterns of belief about the main sources of misinformation. Distrust in politicians appears to be highest among younger respondents – 29% to 30% of 18-25 and 26-40 years of age – who think that politicians are main sources of misinformation.

18 i.e. barring those who said they don't know what is their main source of news.

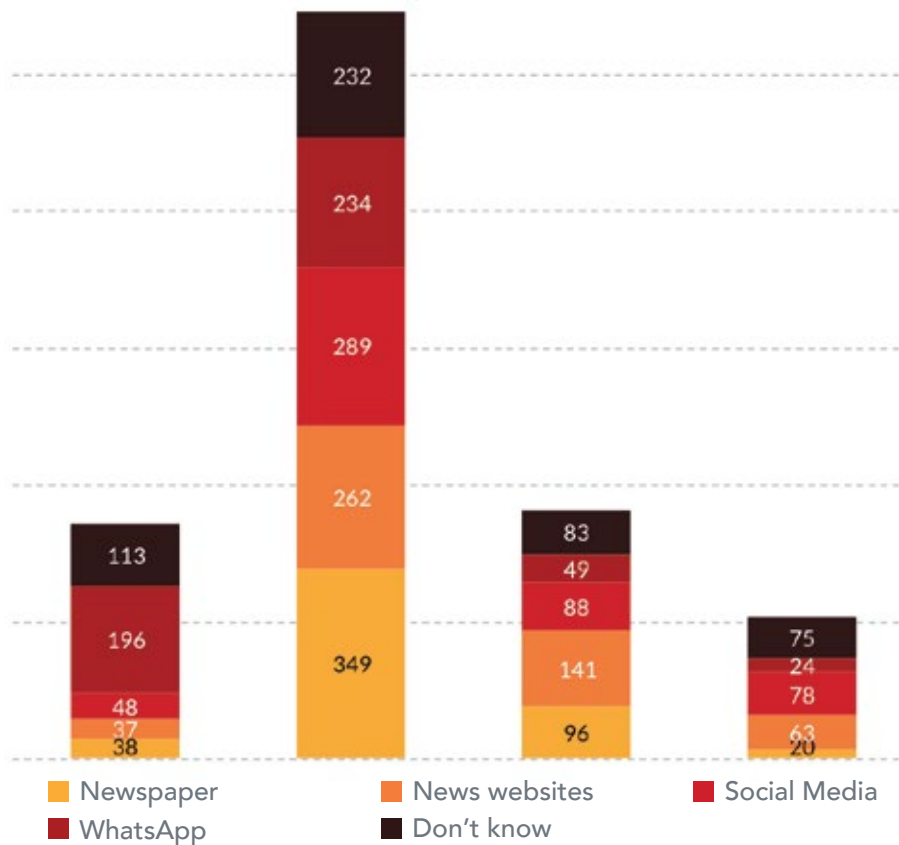
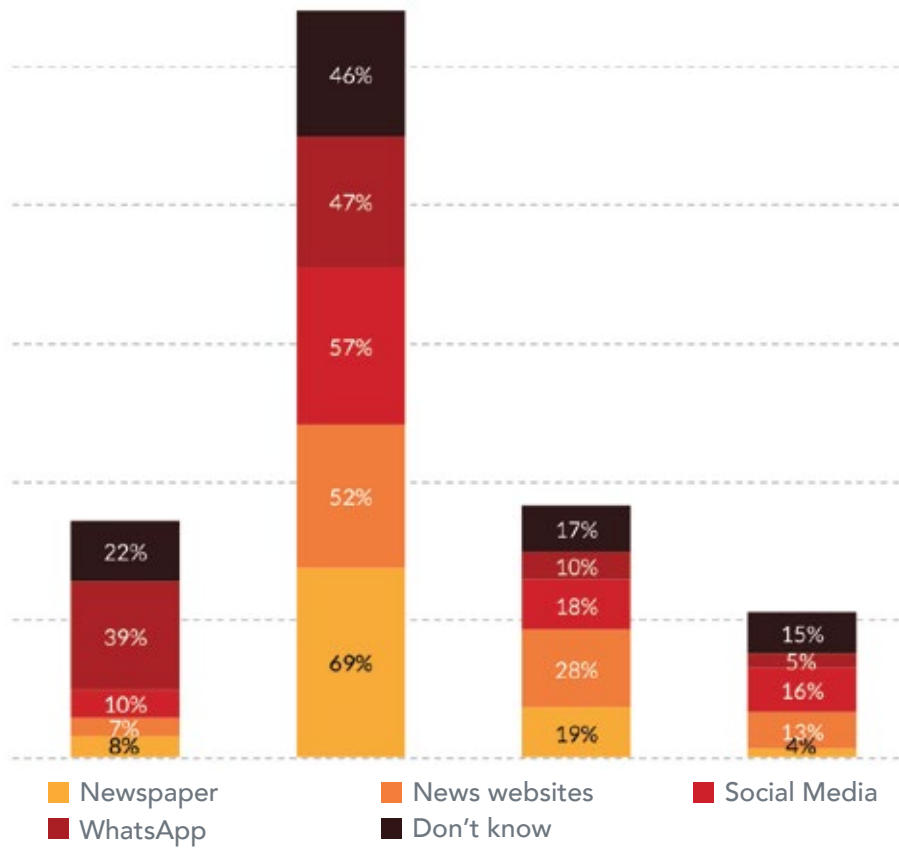
Age groups and perceptions about sources of misinformation



Trust in media

Respondents were asked to identify how often different kinds of news and information mediums are used to spread misinformation. According to the data collected in this question, trust in newspapers appears to be highest with almost 3 in 10 respondents saying that newspapers are never used to spread misinformation. Unsurprisingly, trust in social media is lowest with almost 4 out of 10 respondents (39%) saying that social media is always used to spread misinformation.

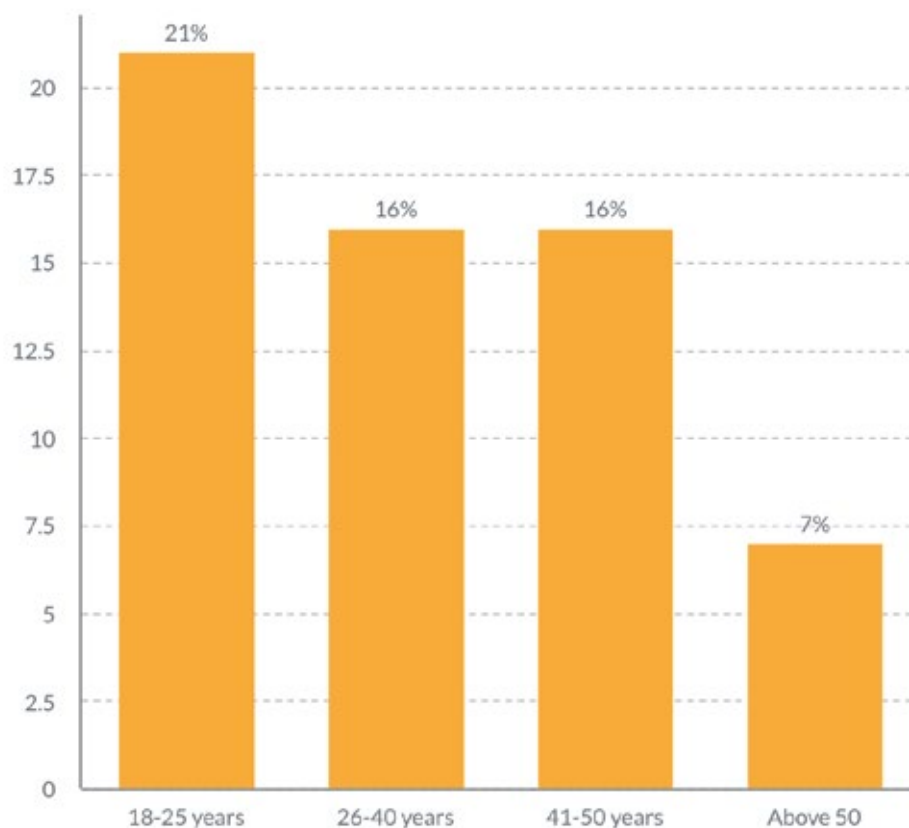
Perceptions about spread of misinformation on different news and information mediums



Only 2 in 10 respondents feel that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation, which is a concerning finding given the amount of viral falsified and fake content that is shared through WhatsApp in Pakistan. A closer look at the respondents who think that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation reveals a surprising element. It appears that respondents who are 18-25 years of age are more likely to believe information circulated on WhatsApp with 21% of the respondents from that age group saying that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation.

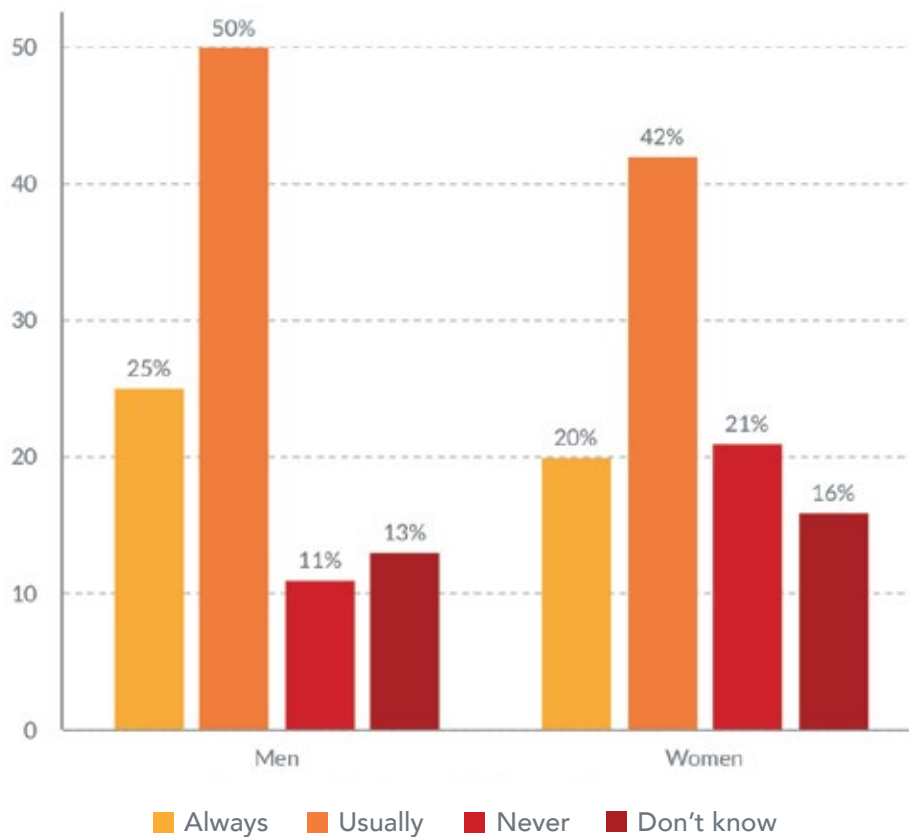
There is a popular belief (and as indicated in studies from other countries) that the older population may be more susceptible to misinformation being spread on WhatsApp. However, the data collected for this study shows that a lower percentage of respondents above 50 years of age put their trust in WhatsApp than other age groups. Only 7% of the respondents above 50 years say that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation while the percentage is higher than 16% in all other age groups.

Percentage of respondents who believe that Whatsapp is never used to spread misinformation



Deconstructing this data also shows that women are 10% more likely to trust information they receive through WhatsApp, as 21% of women believe that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation as opposed to 11% men who have the same perception.

How often is WhatsApp used to spread misinformation?

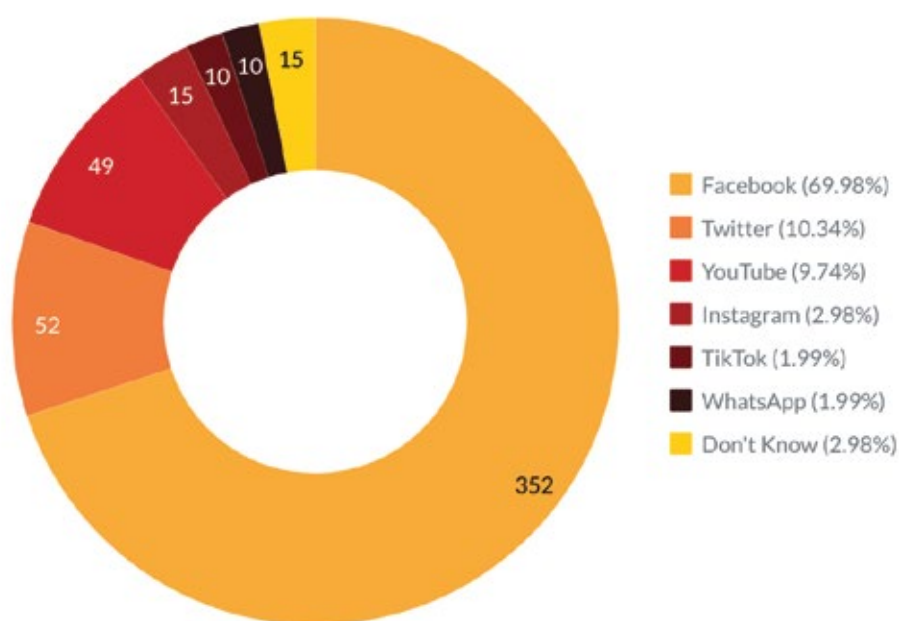


	Always	Usually	Never	Don't know
Men	25%	50%	11%	13%
Women	20%	42%	21%	16%

Surprisingly, trust in WhatsApp appears to increase with education level – 20% to 21% of respondents with graduate and postgraduate degrees trust that WhatsApp is never used to spread misinformation as opposed to 13% and 18% respondents with undergraduate and high school certifications. Data across age groups shows that respondents are least likely to place trust in content shared on social media and most likely to trust newspapers. This trend remains the same across all age groups. Respondents above 59 years of age are most suspicious of content on social media, with 46% saying that social media always spreads misinformation. This is a 5% to 6% increase from respondents in other groups who hold the same belief. Newspapers are the most trusted medium across all age groups. The trust in newspapers is highest among respondents in the 26-40 years age bracket, 3 in 10 of whom think that newspapers are never used to spread misinformation.

The respondents were also asked to identify the digital platform, which in their opinion is most often used to spread misinformation. Facebook, Pakistan's most popular social media platform, was identified by seven in ten respondents as being the platform that is used most often to spread misinformation. Twitter and YouTube were a distant second and third in the list of platforms that were perceived to be spreaders of misinformation by the respondents.

Digital platforms used to spread misinformation



There isn't any significant difference in the perception about Facebook across respondent demographics. A significant majority of respondents from all regions, genders, age groups, educational and professional backgrounds, all seem to have a similar perception about Facebook. It is important to note here that another 5 percent of the respondents believe that Instagram and WhatsApp is contributing most to the spread of misinformation in Pakistan. Considering the responses, and the fact that Facebook Inc owns Instagram and WhatsApp, a significant majority of respondents blame Facebook Inc for the spread of misinformation in Pakistan. Collectively, 75% of the respondents believe that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, the three platforms owned and operated by Facebook, are being used most often to spread misinformation.

Age group	Facebook	Instagram	Tiktok	Twitter	WhatsApp	Youtube
18-25 years	73%	2%	5%	11%	1%	7%
26-40 years	70%	4%	2%	10%	2%	10%
41-50 years	60%	3%		13%	3%	13%
Above 50	82%			4%		11%

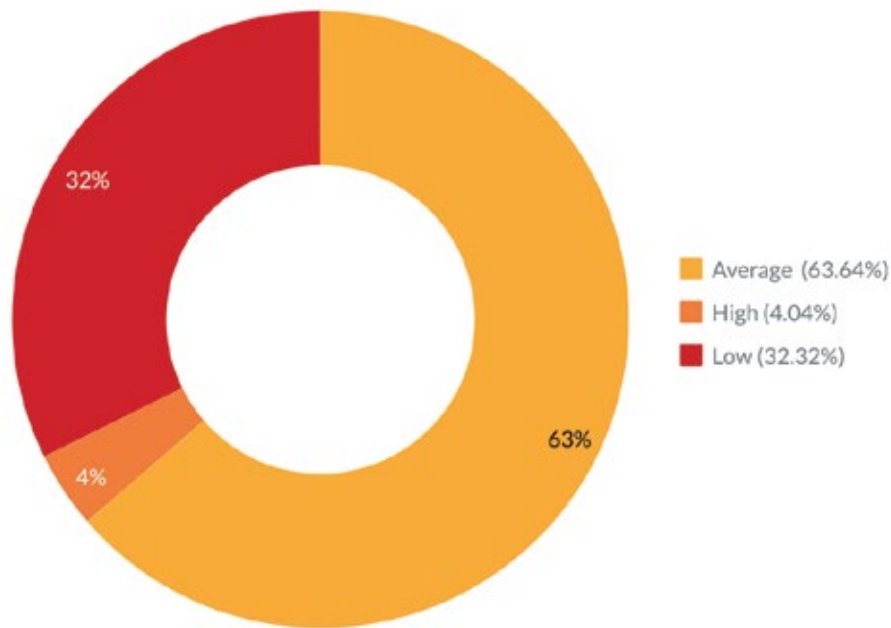
Age groups and perceptions about digital platforms spreading misinformation most often

Data also shows that respondents above 50 years of age are 20% more likely to distrust information on Facebook than respondents from 41-50 years.

Public trust in the media

In response to a question regarding trust in the news media, a majority – over 6 in 10 – said that they have only average trust in the media, and 3 in 10 said that they have low levels of trust in news media.

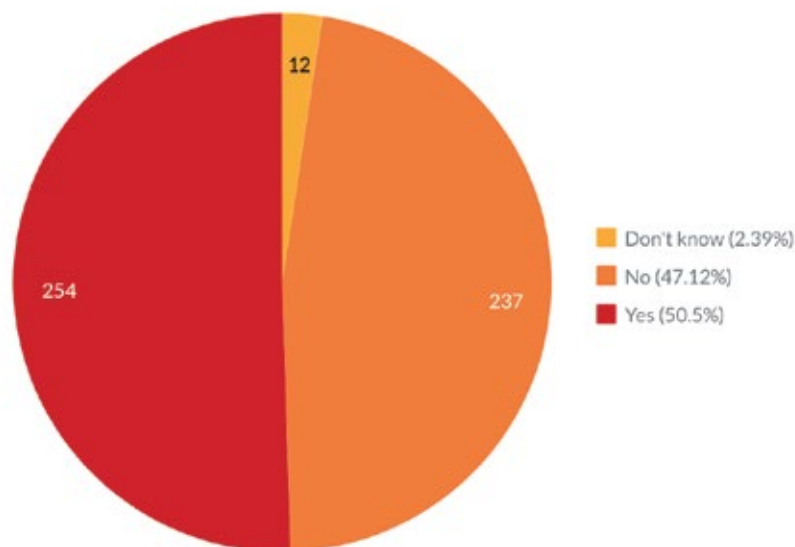
Level of trust in news media



The fact that only 4% of the respondents said that they have a high level of trust in news media¹⁹ demonstrates a trust deficit.

When asked directly about trust, the respondents generally showed low levels of trust in different mediums. However, when indirectly asked questions that would require trust in the information provided by the media i.e. reliance on news media to form opinions about important political and social issues, half of the respondents said that they do rely on news media.

Do you rely on the news media to form opinions about important social and political issues?

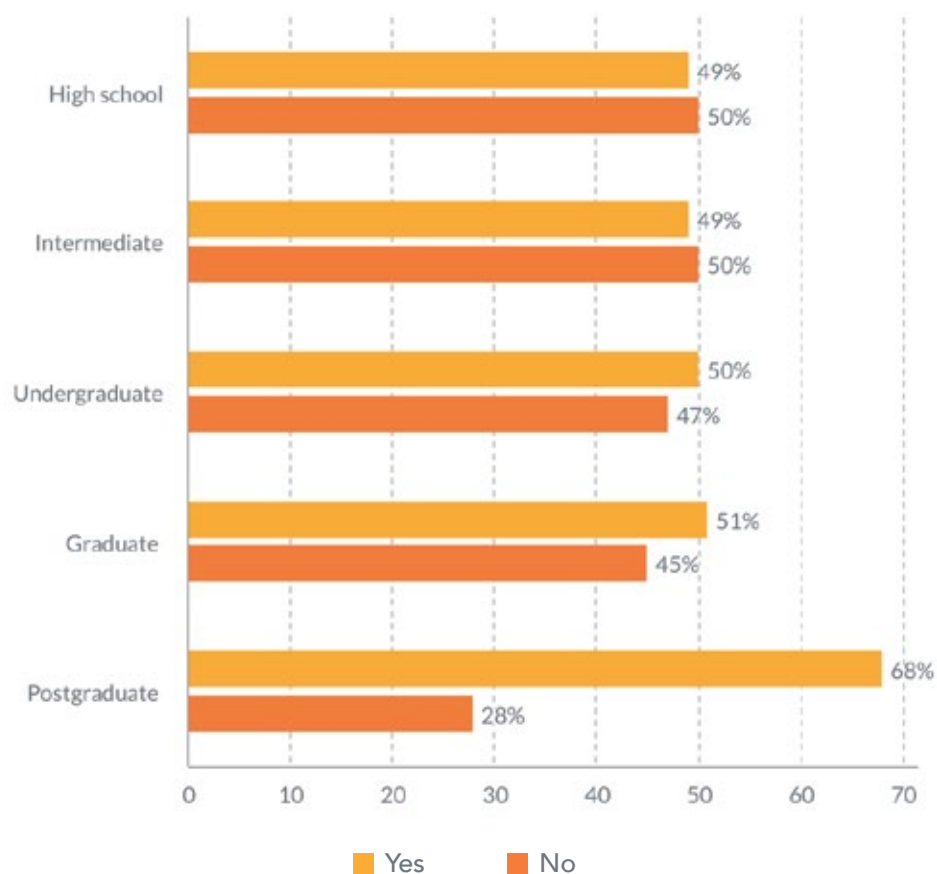


¹⁹ The remaining 1% said that they don't know.

These parameters were used in research studies mentioned in the earlier part of this study to gauge public trust. For instance, if respondents use news to form opinions about social issues, it shows a higher level of trust in the information they are receiving. In this survey, 51 respondents said they rely on the news (mediums) to form opinions while 47 percent said they did not rely on the news (mediums).

Deconstructing this data further according to the education levels of the respondents shows an interesting picture. The only group of respondents in which there is a clear ‘majority’ view is of respondents with postgraduate level of education – 68% i.e. almost 7 in 10 said that they do rely on news media to form opinions about social and political issues. While in every other group the ratio of those who rely on the media and those who don’t is almost the same.

Education levels and reliance on news media to form political opinions



Data collected in other questions also shows that 54% feel that news is not free of political influence and 49% think that it is not free of economic influence either. The fact that almost 5 in 10 believe that news is being influenced by political and economic factors also indicates a lack of trust in news media.

Chapter 6

DEALING WITH MISINFORMATION

Highlights

- 4 in 10 respondents believe that improvement in the policies can help in dealing with online misinformation
- 3 in 10 respondents think that online misinformation can be dealt with by improving media and information literacy of citizens
- 5 in 10 respondents think the government should prioritise development of a technical tool to counter disinformation

Dealing with online misinformation

When asked how online misinformation should be dealt with, improvement in policies of social media platforms and media information literacy skills remained the most selected responses. A total of 44% of the respondents thought that better social media policies can help deal with online misinformation, while 30% felt that improvement in media information literacy skills is needed. Interestingly, there was very little burden put on the media or journalists for correcting misinformation. Only 13 percent of the respondents said that the media should disseminate fact-checked information to counter misinformation.

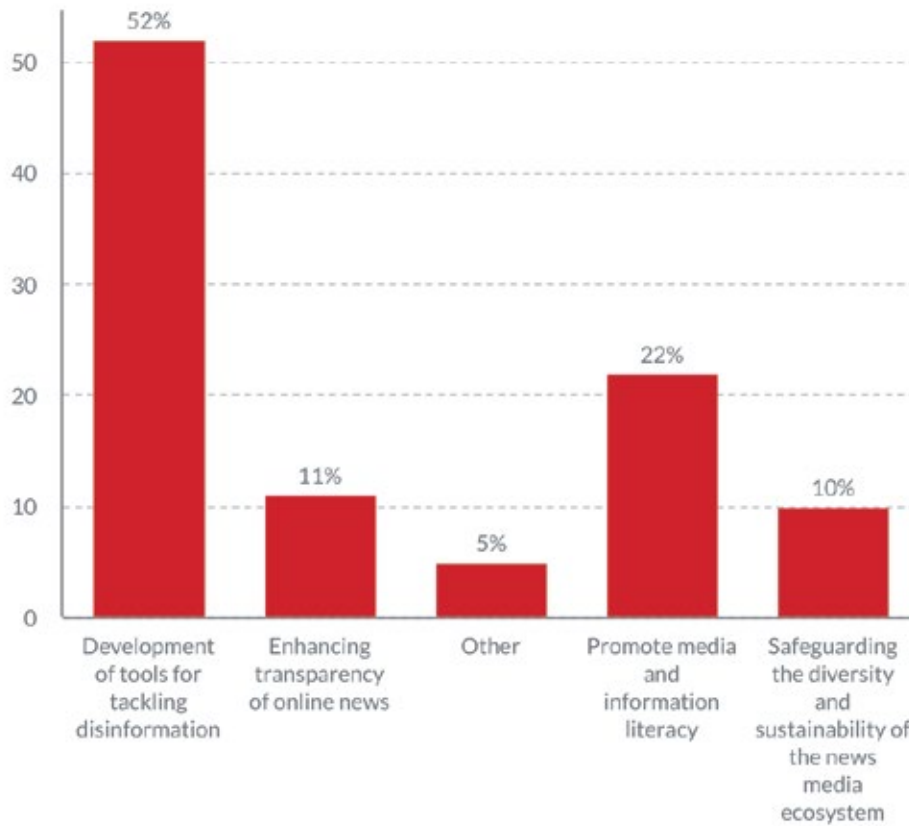
Media should fact check information and show factual news	13%
People should have better media and information literacy skill	30%
Social media platforms should have better policies	44%
There should be more social responsibility about sharing information	12%

While improving social media policies was the majority opinion in all other educational groups, there was a difference in the group with postgraduate level of education. Almost 5 in 10 respondents with postgraduate education felt that improved media and information literacy skills would help deal with online misinformation.

Only 1 in 10 respondents felt that more responsibility on part of citizens when sharing information would be helpful in dealing with online misinformation.

Data also shows that women are 10% more likely than men to see improvement in social media policies as a way to deal with misinformation. Almost 5 in 10 women (49%) have identified improvement in social media policies as the best way to deal with online misinformation as opposed to 4 in 10 men (40%) who said the same.

Which policy measures should the government prioritise to deal with misinformation?



When asked specifically about the kind of interventions that the government should make, 52 percent said they should develop tools to tackle misinformation and an additional 22 percent said they should promote media literacy. It is interesting to note that only 11 percent said that government policy should focus on enhancing the transparency of online news.

Section 3

ANALYSIS

Chapter 7

UNDERSTANDING THE FINDINGS

This research explores perceptions about misinformation and its spread in Pakistan. The data is largely divided into three separate sections: exploring respondents' attitudes towards misinformation, media and information mediums and solutions for countering misinformation. As this is an exploratory study based on a perceptions' survey, the findings have to be understood as self-assessment and self-perception of citizens, that may, at times, differ from the actual picture. However, when it comes to studying misinformation, it is important to recognise that perceptions of citizens play an important role in determining how citizens will respond to news and information.

Understanding misinformation

The findings show that an overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) see misinformation as a challenge to Pakistan. This result shows that the respondents are generally aware of the potentially harmful impact of misinformation on political and democratic discourse. The majority of respondents also said that they come across misinformation on a daily or weekly basis, showing that respondents are aware of the information disorder and most of them are critically analysing the information that they receive through different mediums.

The data also shows that younger people, those between 18-25 years of age, are coming across misinformation most frequently. This age group was 10% more likely to say that they are exposed to misinformation on a daily basis than all other age groups. Data also shows that this age group is more likely to depend on social media as the main source of news and information (35% of the respondents between 18 to 25 years of age identify social media as the main source of information as opposed to 16% of respondents over 40 years and 4% respondents over 50 years). Thus, it can be deduced that increase in exposure to social media is also increasing the frequency of exposure to misinformation.

Given that 'social media' is a broad term used for online platforms, on which both professionally /journalistically produced content and content by other creators is being shared, it stands to reason that misinformation would make a more frequent appearance on social media.

The only open-ended question in the survey asked the respondents about methods they used to identify misinformation. Even though it was an open-ended question, the responses were easily categorised into seven distinct clusters. Almost 3 in 10 respondents (27%) said that they cross-check information on different digital platforms and social media for verification – Twitter, YouTube, Google and Facebook were specifically mentioned as platforms to which respondents turn to for verification. This is an interesting finding as further in the survey respondents also identify Facebook as the platform that is most often used to spread misinformation. Seeing social media both as a medium that spreads misinformation and one that can be used to verify information demonstrates that there is at least some understanding about the complex information ecosystems on social media platforms.

The method of information verification that was identified by the second largest cluster was comparison of news on different news channels. Again, this practice shows that respondents, i.e. the news consumers are not passively absorbing information but are taking different measures to actively assess its credibility.

Only 10% respondents i.e. 1 in 10 said that they cannot identify misinformation. On the surface, this can be seen as a positive result but it is also important to remember that this is a self-perception survey, so the actual number of people who are deceived by misinformation may well be different.

Sources of misinformation

Findings in this section show that the majority of people believe that ‘anonymous social media accounts’ are responsible for spreading misinformation. Among actors who can be identified, the majority seems to put the blame on politicians and political parties. A total of 29% of the respondents i.e. almost 3 in 10 believe that politicians and political parties are responsible for spreading misinformation in Pakistan. On the other hand, 1 in 10 respondents (9%) believes that media and journalists are responsible for the spreading of misinformation. This is a significant finding – in Pakistan, much like other countries, political powers have been involved in weaponising the term ‘fake news’ against media and independent journalists. A number of statements issued by women journalists against the involvement of political parties in online harassment of women journalists also highlights the fact that journalists are often labelled as ‘fake’ by political representatives and supporters and discredited online. This finding shows that despite this attempt to constantly discredit and demoralise journalists, the number of people who see politicians as sources of misinformation is three times as many as those who put the same blame on journalists – thus, it can be said that news consumers are not particularly gullible to the rhetoric of ‘fake news’, and most of them are able to make decisions about credibility of media despite the attacks by politicians and political parties.

Platforms being used to spread misinformation

Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Pakistan, so it is not surprising to see the majority of respondents saying that Facebook is the platform that is used most often to spread misinformation. It is also important to note here that while only 2 percent of the respondents in this survey have identified WhatsApp as the main source of misinformation, the platform is known to have contributed to the spread of misinformation that caused fatal violence in a number of cases, including in India.^{20,21}

Similarly, only 20 percent of the respondents felt that YouTube and Twitter also contributed to the spread of misinformation in online spaces. It is important to point out that the question asked the respondents to identify *one* platform that they felt was most often used to spread misinformation. This means that even though the majority pointed towards Facebook and related applications, it doesn't necessarily absolve other platforms – it is likely that respondents also recognise misinformation on other platforms but believe that the frequency of appearance of misinformation on Facebook is simply more.

Regardless, the fact that Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram are seen as the worst culprits by collectively three quarters of the respondents is concerning. Further research on social media platforms is required to better understand the factors that affect usage and perceptions around information being shared on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.

Trust in media

When it comes to trust in news vis-à-vis misinformation, by far, the highest number of respondents placed their trust in television, newspapers, and news websites. Thirty nine percent of respondents believe that social media platforms are always used to share misinformation, and 22 percent believe that WhatsApp is a culprit in this regard. It is also interesting to note that while only 15 percent of people said they consume news through newspapers, the highest levels of trust were also shown in newspapers. Twenty eight percent of the respondents said that newspapers were never the source of misinformation, compared to 19 percent for television and 10 percent for social media.

20. Samuels, E. (2021). How misinformation on WhatsApp led to a mob killing in India. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/21/how-misinformation-whatsapp-led-deadly-mob-lynching-india/>

21. Dwoskin, E., & Gowen, A. (2018). n WhatsApp, fake news is fast — and can be fatal. Retrieved 19 January 2021, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/on-whatsapp-fake-news-is-fast--and-can-be-fatal/2018/07/23/a2dd7112-8ebf-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38_story.html

About 3 in 10 respondents talk of a 'low' level of trust in the media and the majority has an average level of trust. Only 50% of the respondents depend on the media to form opinions about important political and social issues. This does not show a high level of trust in news media, and is something that journalists and media organisations need to pay attention to. Newspapers, even though consumed by a small number of people as the main source of news and information, continue to enjoy most trust possibly due to the presence of better editorial controls and checks.

Dealing with misinformation

When responding to questions about dealing with misinformation, the majority of respondents appear to want technical solutions. Four in ten respondents think improving policies of social media platforms can help deal with misinformation, while three in ten think media and information literacy should be improved. Only 13% respondents talked about the media's role in dealing with misinformation. However, while this should not absolve mainstream media and journalists of their responsibility regarding fact-checking and verification — even otherwise essential for the integrity of journalism as a whole — it should serve as a reminder of how crucial this function is, and how critically the public's trust is linked to it.

The development of technical tools by the governments is seen as another way that can help deal with online misinformation. It appears that while the respondents do want some sort of government action on misinformation, the action is limited in its ability by giving people the skills or tools to recognise misinformation. The government interventions chosen by the respondents did not propose any sort of controls on the information being shared through any of the mediums or on the mediums themselves.

Chapter 8

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Since this is an exploratory study it cannot offer concrete recommendations for implementation by different stakeholders. The following recommendations are simply for identification of areas for further research that in turn can help create a deeper understanding of the subject.

- A baseline about understanding of and attitudes towards misinformation conducted with a larger sample would help map trends that are generalisable to a larger population
- Experimental research, assessing any differences in perceptions about skills and ability to identify misinformation versus actual ability will help highlight gaps of perception
- Further research is needed to understand the flow of information through different social media platforms and messaging applications like WhatsApp. This research has to be designed to understand the decision making process that people employ to judge the credibility and authenticity of information
- One of the research findings shows that respondents think that politicians and political parties are also responsible for spreading misinformation. This phenomena, along with the implications of this distrust on political decision making and democratic processes, needs to be studied

ANNEXURES

Annex 1

Questionnaire Fake News, Misinformation & Public Perceptions RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Age

Less than 20
20 - 25
25 - 30
30 - 35
Above 35

Gender

Man
Woman
Other

Education

Intermediate
Bachelors
Masters
Above Masters

Professional Experience

None
Less than 2 years
2 - 5 years
6 - 10 years
More than 10 years

Region

Sindh
Punjab
Balochistan
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
Islamabad Federal Capital

Which language do you prefer to consume news in?

Urdu
English
Regional language
All of the above

SECTION 1 - PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MISINFORMATION

1. Do you think fake news and misinformation is a challenge for Pakistan?

Yes No

2. Do you think you can identify and recognise fake news and misinformation?

Always Sometimes Never

3. How do you identify misinformation and fake news? [Descriptive]

4. Do you think the majority of people in Pakistan can identify and recognise fake news and misinformation?

Yes No

5. How often do you come across fake news and misinformation?

Every Day
At least once a week
Every Month

6. Who do you think spreads fake news most often?

Anonymous social media accounts
Politicians and Political parties
Journalists
NGOs
Corporations and business
Foreign actors

7. In your opinion, which social media and communication platforms is used most often to spread fake news and misinformation?

Facebook
Twitter
Instagram
TikTok
WhatsApp
YouTube

SECTION 2 - TRUST ON NEWS AND MEDIA

8. What is your main source of news?

Television Channels

Newspaper

Websites

Radio

Social media

9. What is your level of trust on the news media?

Trust level is low

Trust level is average

Trust level is high

10. How often do you think the following mediums are used to share fake news and misinformation?

TV

Never

Usually

Always

Newspapers

Never

Usually

Always

News websites

Never

Usually

Always

Social Media

Never

Usually

Always

WhatsApp

Never

Usually

Always

11. Do you rely on the news to form opinions about important political and social issues?

Yes

No

12. Do you think the news is free of political influence?

Yes

No

13. Do you think the news is free of economic influence?

Yes

No

SECTION THREE - DEALING WITH FAKE NEWS AND MISINFORMATION

14. How should online fake news and misinformation be dealt with?

- People should have better media and information literacy skills
- Social media platforms should have better policies
- There should be more social responsibility about sharing information
- Media should fact check information and show factual news

15. Which policy measures should the government prioritise to deal with misinformation?

- Promote media and information literacy
- Development of tools for tackling disinformation
- Safeguarding the diversity and sustainability of the news media ecosystem
- Enhancing transparency of online news
- Making public data easily available

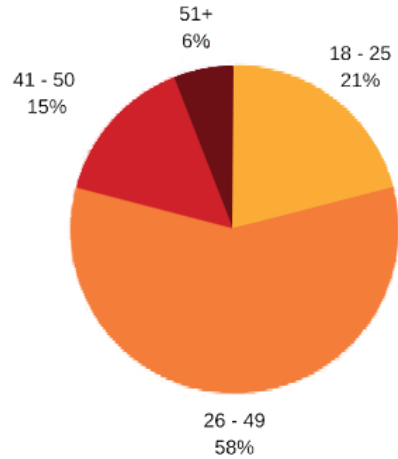
Annex 2

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

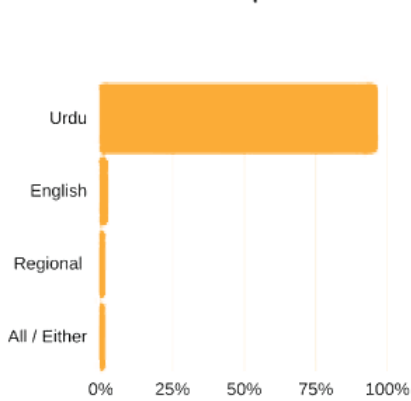
Gender Distribution



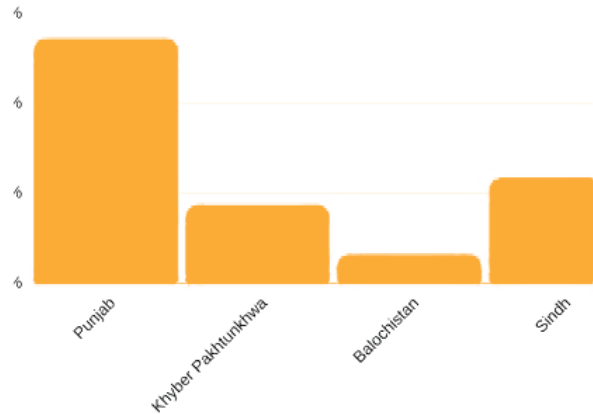
Age groups of respondents



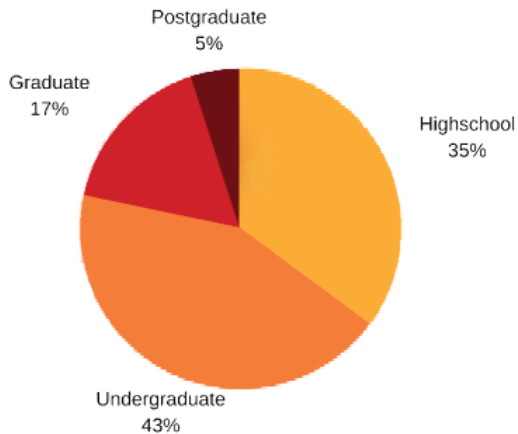
Preferred Language of News Consumption



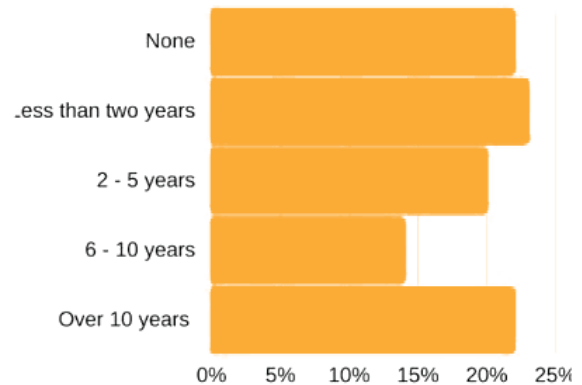
Regional Representation



Education



Professional Experience



About MMFD:

Media Matters for Democracy (MMFD) is Pakistan's leading media development organisation, with a focus on digital democracy, Internet rights and governance, and Media and Information Literacy (MIL).

The main premise of our work is push for a truly independent, inclusive media and cyberspace, where the citizens in general, and journalists in specific, can exercise their fundamental rights and professional duties safely and without the fear of persecution or physical harm.

We also work on acceptance and integration of digital media and journalism technologies and towards creating sustainable 'media-tech' initiatives in the country.

MediaMatters
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Policy Research & Advocacy Initiative