

Graphic detail

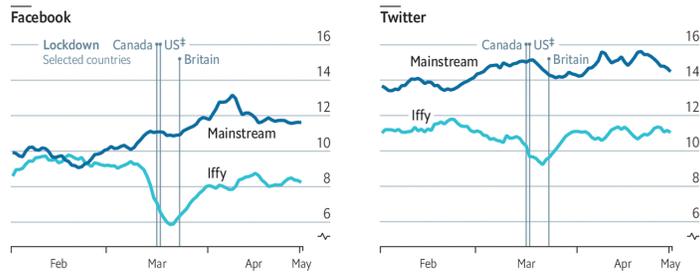
Daily chart

Pandemic fears are boosting demand for trustworthy news

Activity on dodgier news sites has fallen

Old news

Proportion of popular links on Facebook/Twitter from "mainstream*" and "iffy*" sources, 2020, %



Source: University of Michigan Centre for Social Media Responsibility
*Traditional/established media outlets *Sites that frequently publish misinformation
†No official lockdown, but Donald Trump asks labour force to work from home
The Economist

Jul 29th 2020

ONE OF THE key features of the web is its ability to turn regular people into citizen journalists. The cost of publishing text on the web is almost nil. The barriers to entry in the media industry are low,



too. And many readers are not picky about where their news comes from: the stories that go viral can come from amateur scribes or veteran ones, media startups or established outfits. But this is not always the case. [New research](#) suggests that when a crisis hits, readers turn to reliable sources.

In 2018 Paul Resnick and James Park, two researchers at the University of Michigan, devised a pair of tools for measuring the popularity of English-language news stories on Facebook and Twitter. The first, dubbed the “Mainstream Quotient”, measured the proportion of highly-shared links that came from mainstream news sources, such as the *New York Times*, the BBC and, yes, *The Economist*. The second, the “Iffy Quotient”, measured the share originating from less trustworthy sources, based on ratings provided by NewsGuard, a company that tracks misinformation published online.



Both indices have shifted significantly during the pandemic. Beginning in February, when the coronavirus started to spread outside China, traffic to traditional media outlets and news sites surged, whereas dodgier sites attracted fewer readers. The Mainstream Quotient rose steadily during this period, a phenomenon Messrs Resnick and Park call a “flight to quality”. The Iffy Quotient, meanwhile, tumbled. The drop was particularly steep during March, when many countries **instituted lockdown measures (see chart)**

Illustrated lockdown measures (see chart).

The researchers argue that consumers seek out reliable news sources during times of uncertainty, in the same way that fearful investors turn to gold. Whether these patterns will last remains unclear. The Iffy Quotient has already started to creep back up, for both Facebook and Twitter. And recent efforts by social-media platforms to crack down on fake news may prove only temporary. Once the pandemic subsides, demand for unreliable news may return to pre-covid levels. For now, at least, the flight to quality has taken off.

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The Trust Project

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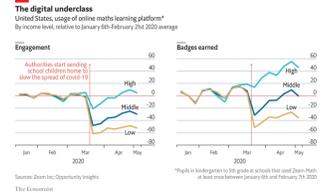


Daily chart

Americans are getting more nervous about what they say in public

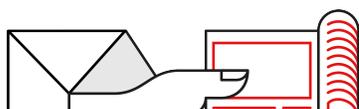
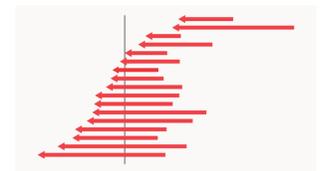
Daily chart

The pandemic is widening educational inequality

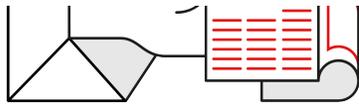


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