

# Concerns with misinformation online, 2023

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Misinformation refers to news or information that is verifiably false, inaccurate, or misleading. Misinformation can quickly spread across the Internet, when it is shared by readers and amplified through social media algorithms. The spreading of false or misleading information has the potential to negatively impact Canadians' wellbeing and confidence in public institutions. While not a new phenomenon, concerns about misinformation and its impacts on society have grown in recent years, with the accelerating pace and volume of digital information-sharing.

Released today, new data from the Survey Series on People and their Communities (SSPC) sheds light on Canadians' concerns about misinformation, steps taken by Canadians to counter misinformation and overall trust in media. In 2023, 59% of Canadians said they were very or extremely concerned about any type of misinformation online, and 43% felt it was getting harder to decipher online truth from fiction compared with three years earlier. Variations in levels of concern could potentially be associated with media literacy, as well as the ability to determine accuracy of information.

## Concern with misinformation increases with age, education level and income

Women and men are equally concerned about misinformation online, with 59% of both women and men having high levels of concern in 2023. For both men and women, the level of concern varies with age. Canadians aged 15 to 19, who are among the largest consumers of online social media content, were the least worried about misinformation. Less than half of teens (41%) said they were very or extremely concerned with false information online. This proportion climbs to 60% by the age of 30, and then somewhat stabilizes until the age of 55, where concern increases to 66%.

Levels of concern about misinformation also differ by level of education and income. Canadians with higher levels of educational attainment were most concerned about online misinformation. Specifically, 66% of Canadians with a college diploma or higher expressed concern. This compares to 52% of Canadians with a trade certificate or diploma, high school diploma or education below high school.

Results further show that concern about misinformation rises by personal income. In 2023, 56% of Canadians who earned less than \$30,000 a year said that they were extremely or very concerned about misinformation online, compared with 67% for Canadians who earned more than \$60,000 a year.

## Many Canadians say that it is getting more difficult to distinguish between true and false information

Assessing the accuracy of online information does not appear to be getting any easier. In 2023, 43% of Canadians said it was becoming more difficult than it was three years earlier to distinguish between true and false information. Another 46% said that it was about the same as it was three years ago, while 10% said that they found it easier to decipher truth from fiction.

Fact-checking is one way to determine the credibility of online information. At some point, nearly all Canadians (96%) have verified information they encountered. Some Canadians regularly fact-check, with about 17% saying that they always use at least one additional source to verify the accuracy of news stories. Another 36% stated that they often fact-check, and 32% said that they sometimes do.

Canadians who identified an increasing challenge in separating fact from fiction were more likely to verify the accuracy of news stories they encountered. Among Canadians who said it was getting harder to assess the accuracy of online information, 59% regularly fact checked. This compares to a fact-checking rate of about 50% for Canadians who felt that determining the credibility of information has either stayed the same or has become easier over time.

It is important to note that it is not possible to measure whether additional sources used for fact-checking are accurate, and whether individuals have some level of confirmation bias—a tendency to seek secondary sources that support their original thinking or beliefs.



## Almost 1 in 10 Canadians do not know how to fact-check information

Media consumption habits may also play a role in fact-checking. For instance, while adults aged 55 and older are most concerned with misinformation online, they are the least likely to say that they regularly fact-check (46%) compared with Canadians aged 35 to 54 (58%) and Canadians aged 15 to 34 (56%). This could reflect the finding that older adults prefer to get their news from legacy sources, such as television, radio and newspapers, and as such, rely on these sources over online information.

Canadians have various reasons for not fact-checking information. The top reasons were a lack of interest or motivation (50%) and a lack of time (37%). Some, however, felt it was often too challenging to verify content, with 8% saying they did not know how to fact-check information and 15% indicating that it was too difficult to verify.

## Canadians who mistrust media are more likely to fact-check content

Overall, just over half (53%) of Canadians aged 15 and older had low levels of trust in media. This level of trust, however, varied by media type, with findings from earlier in 2023 showing that [trust in traditional media sources \(television, print media\) was much higher than trust in online content](#). This may help to explain why in 2023, the overall level of trust in media is not related to the level of concern with online content. That is, trust levels are the same among people who are concerned about misinformation online and those who are not.

However, fact-checking was somewhat higher among Canadians with low levels of trust in media. In 2023, 55% of Canadians with low levels of trust in media always or often verified information, compared to 51% with a high level of trust in media.

## Feelings of hopelessness linked to higher rates of fact-checking

It is difficult, if not impossible, to rely on self-reported surveys to identify differences in Canadians' susceptibility to misinformation—that is, who is most vulnerable to fake news and information. This is because surveys rely on Canadians' self-reported exposure, which is inherently underreported, given that the inability to recognize fake information is the crux of the misinformation issue. There is some research, however, to suggest that [certain psychosocial conditions, such as loneliness and despair, increase the likelihood of people believing in misinformation](#).

This relationship between loneliness, engagement in online activities and susceptibility to misinformation is complex and possibly cyclical. Increased use of social media has been linked to [poorer mental health outcomes](#), and at the same time, people may turn to social media in times of isolation and despair. These mentally vulnerable Canadians may be especially susceptible to persuading and misleading online content, and have a reduced tendency to debunk false information.

While fact-checking, in itself, does not guarantee that false information is debunked (as the credibility of secondary sources is unknown), findings from SSPC show the fact-checking was higher among Canadians who had a sense of hopelessness about the future. In 2023, 59% who felt feelings of hopelessness regularly verified news and information. This compared to a fact-checking rate of 50% for people who were sometimes hopeful, and 54% for people who always or often had a hopeful outlook of the future.

Fact-checking did not vary much by feelings of loneliness. That is, Canadians who were either always or often lonely were just as likely to verify news and information (55%) as Canadians who were rarely or never lonely (53%).

### Note to readers

*This release is based on wave 3 of the Survey Series on People and their Communities (SSPC): Quality of Life, Source of Information and Trust, collected from October 2 to October 22, 2023. The SSPC gathers information from individuals on life satisfaction, sources of information and trust in media. Results from this survey will provide important information on the social and cultural environment of individuals and families in Canada and will help decision makers develop programs and policies to better serve all people living in Canada.*

*The target population for the SSPC are those aged 15 years and older living in the 10 provinces of Canada, with a focus on ensuring coverage of racialized groups and immigration status through oversampling. This means that it is possible to disaggregate by specific population groups.*

*In the SSPC, misinformation is defined as "news or information that is verifiably false or inaccurate. The sharer of misinformation may or may not be aware that it is misinformation. When they are aware, it is often referred to as disinformation."*

*Trust in media in the SSPC is asked via the following question: "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means 'Not at all' and 10 means 'Completely', to what extent do you generally trust the news or information you receive from the media?" To highlight those with a lower level of trust, individuals who state that their level of trust is 5 or less are considered to have a low level of trust in news or information from the media.*

*In this release, the term "Canadians" refers to residents of Canada, regardless of citizenship status.*

### Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5378](#).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; [infostats@statcan.gc.ca](mailto:infostats@statcan.gc.ca)) or Media Relations ([statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca](mailto:statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca)).