

Public Trust in the Media during the Coronavirus Pandemic



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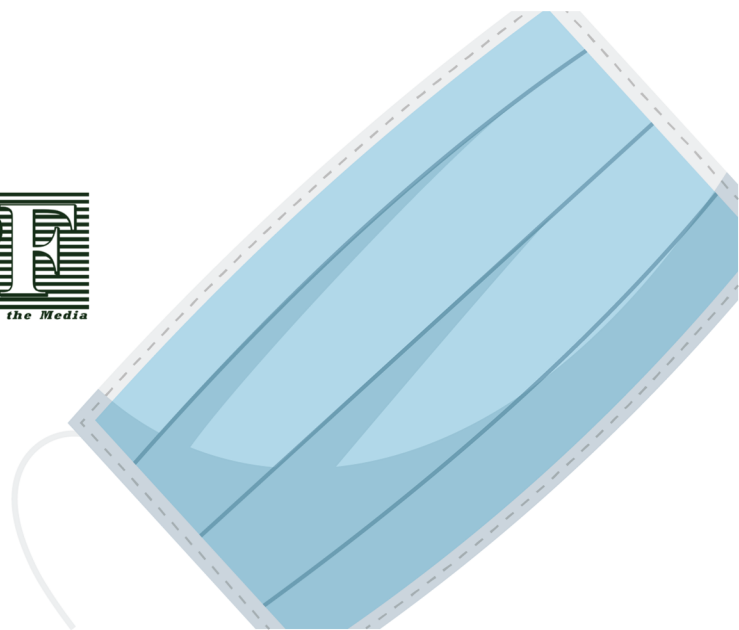


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Executive Summary

The importance of timely, accurate, and reliable information became evident during the Covid-19 pandemic as the media and the public alike felt the pressures of our vulnerable information ecosystem. The issue of trust in the media also took on a new significance. It was clear that without public trust in media, the effectiveness of awareness messages for health safety would fade away and the public health response to control the pandemic itself could be undermined.

This research study looks at the information needs and news consumption behaviour of the Pakistani public during the pandemic to see what information sources and types of media they relied on for Covid-19 updates. Its primary concern is to determine the level of trust that people assigned to the media and other information sources that provided Covid-19 coverage. The study also attempts to identify whether or not the pandemic generally affected the access to information of citizens. A nationwide survey of 345 individuals was conducted to find out their use and trust perception about media and information sources for Covid-19 news.

The main findings of the study are:

- The public generally approved of the Pakistani news media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic. A majority of the respondents agreed that the Covid news coverage had provided them the information they needed, provided largely accurate information, worked for the benefit of the public, and helped the country's image.
- People found the mainstream media the most trustworthy source of Covid-19 news and information, with 57 percent expressing their trust in it. Family-and-friends networks were the second most trusted source for coronavirus information (56 percent).
- The lowest level of credibility was associated with social media with 30 percent finding it untrustworthy for Covid-related news and information. One in five respondents also said they never used social media to access coronavirus information.
- Fifty percent of the respondents said they had never used the government's Covid web portal or smartphone app. But a majority of the respondents (52 percent) still considered official sources trustworthy for coronavirus information.
- A majority of the respondents (55 percent) used the TV medium to get news and information about Covid-19.
- People were most interested in getting information about the safety measures against the virus. Six out of 10 respondents said they wanted to know about precautions that could protect them from the spread of Covid-19.
- A vast majority of the respondents (74 percent) said the pandemic did not reduce their ability to access news and information.

The research recommends that authorities should use the TV medium for public awareness campaigns on Covid-19. They should also issue health and safety messages in regional languages so a majority of the citizens could benefit from the advice. Media organisations should continue to provide practical information about Covid-19 and supply credible news to counter any rumours or conspiracy theories spreading about the pandemic on social media.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by an almost unprecedented global crisis of information. As the medical science community struggled to catch up with the coronavirus during the early days of the outbreak, journalists and media organisations around the world found themselves grappling with physical safety risks, information gaps, and incomplete data while they tried to report on the invisible menace. Meanwhile, social media users trying to seek reliable information about Covid-19 on the Internet were soon inundated with rumours, conspiracy theories, and deliberately harmful false information that intensified health risks. The scale and potential damage of this information overload were so significant that the United Nations and the World Health Organisation were compelled to declare it an ‘infodemic’.

The extraordinary public health emergency preyed upon existing ideological divisions and inequalities in many countries around the world. In Pakistan, as elsewhere, the politicisation of the pandemic endangered the public health response as rival politicians bickered over the severity of lockdown measures, giving way to recriminations and reckless claims about the coronavirus. Local journalists were discredited or maligned, often through coordinated online attacks¹, for publishing news reports that critically examined government strategies to reduce the spread of Covid-19. Frontline medical workers were besieged. Health infrastructure teetered on the brink of collapse, and the economy crumbled.

Despite the gloom, extraordinary efforts were also under way. In Pakistan, a terrifying rise in Covid cases and deaths in June was followed by the enforcement of ‘smart lockdowns’ that slowly but surely brought the situation under control. Doctors, nurses, paramedics, and medical staff workers, who had seen so much suffering in too little time, appeared to prevail as the number of recovered patients overtook new infections. Local journalists kept up their efforts to inform and educate the public despite pay cuts, layoffs, lack of protective equipment, and many of their colleagues contracting the virus. In other parts of the world, billions of dollars were pledged by governments and regional blocs to fund Covid vaccine development. On the information front, fact-checkers from all over the globe collaborated to debunk Covid-related disinformation. Media development organisations raised emergency funds for news outlets struggling financially, developed and shared resources to help journalists everywhere improve their coronavirus coverage, and documented the challenges facing journalism through global surveys and research initiatives.

Now, as Pakistan braces itself for a second wave of Covid-19, some of the anxieties are resurfacing. Will people face more unemployment and financial challenges? Will the health sector cope up with fresh stress? Will people react responsibly? Will they trust the authorities and abide by government guidelines? These questions draw attention to the recent past. How did the Pakistani citizens react to coronavirus in the first place? Did they trust news and information about the coronavirus, especially the messages that reminded them of safety measures? Public opinion polls and news reports reveal a disturbing picture. Concern about the coronavirus in February² had turned into a disregard by the

¹ See statement against coordinated online attacks:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DD8BQ53noKO6zHy-gysGnFjeKT4ride4uYtQsNNRYoc/edit>

² Coronavirus: Opinion and Reaction -- Results from a multi-country poll Feb, 2020. IPSOS.

<https://www.ipsos.com/en-pk/coronavirus-opinion-and-reaction-results-multi-country-poll-feb-2020>

summer³. In August, a vast majority had started to believe that the Covid threat was exaggerated, not real, a foreign conspiracy or a man-made virus⁴. As the Covid cases and deaths began to climb again, in October, the minister in-charge of Pakistan's Covid response said citizens were “recklessly” ignoring government instructions⁵. The urgent need to convince the public about the severity and risks of Covid-19 has once again brought the spotlight on the news media's role.

The importance of public trust in the media cannot be ignored in a democratic society. The news media supplies essential information to the public that helps them make decisions about their sociopolitical participation: the media tries to hold governments and elected representatives accountable to the citizens, provides context to the people to make sense of their lives, and shapes their opinions and expectations. Public trust in the news media thus becomes central towards the ability of the people to trust other social actors and public institutions⁶. On the one hand, then, public trust in the media becomes an indicator of trust in societal systems, including institutions related to governance. On the other hand, the relationship between the press and the public cannot be sustained without trust. For example, if a person does not trust the media and they still want to check on the performance of their elected representative, they will need to learn about the political system and devote sufficient time and money to follow the work of that politician⁷ — a service the media outlets were providing them before.

Moreover, the global decline in trust in media in recent years has made the public more susceptible to misinformation⁸. This is the situation people all over the world, including in Pakistan, faced during the pandemic and continue to do so. The need for accurate and trustworthy information about Covid-19 is paramount and can be the difference between life and death for information consumers. But if the public is unable or unwilling to trust news outlets, timely and verified information about public health and safety concerns may become ineffective in protecting people from harm.

Not much is known about the size of the news market and the news consumption habits in Pakistan. Newspaper circulation statistics are notoriously sketchy⁹, the TV news market is estimated mostly

3 Saeed, A. Government ‘communication failure’ reason 55% Pakistanis believe virus threat exaggerated — Gallup official. Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1693796/pakistan>

4 70% of Pakistanis believe COVID-19 threat is exaggerated: survey. Geo News. <https://www.geo.tv/latest/304351-poll-shows-pakistanis-less-serious-about-coronavirus-70-think-pandemic-threat-exaggerated>

5 Pakistanis ‘recklessly’ ignoring COVID-19 guidelines, will lose lives and livelihoods — planning minister. Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1751436/pakistan>

6 For a discussion on the relationship between trust in media and trust in other social actors in a modern society, see Kohring and Matthes: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.878.1370&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

7 Some may argue that the public could consult other independent and reliable sources to get this information — alternative media, so to speak — but in order to be independent and reliable, those sources will have to perform journalistic functions and the people will inevitably have to trust them thereby leading to the same argument about the importance of trust in media.

8 See Fletcher & Nielsen, ‘People Don’t Trust News Media – and This is Key to the Global Misinformation Debate’ in Understanding and Addressing the Disinformation Ecosystem, page 13: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9d91/58807cbf03fff609e74ef9e0e61c2e6088d8.pdf#page=16>

9 Publications could exaggerate circulation numbers to get more advertisements. The Audit Bureau of Circulation certifies news publications to be eligible for government advertisements based on the circulation numbers submitted by the publications; it only shares the names of the certified publications but not their circulation statistics.

through ad revenue¹⁰, and the rise in online news publishing still has to contend with the issues of revenue generation and the digital divide. Similarly, the situation of trust in media in Pakistan is not well explored. At the start of the 2010s, almost a decade after private broadcast media were allowed to operate in the country, opinion polls presented a contradictory view with some suggesting that people saw the media favourably¹¹ while others indicating dissatisfaction with the predominant broadcast news industry¹². Accusations of sensationalism, unethical behaviour, and bias are regularly levelled against media organisations and journalists in the country. The issues of poor professionalism in Pakistan's media are often exacerbated by concerns such as controls of information, self-censorship due to threats, and financial pressures.

In this context, it is crucial to examine what kind of information the Pakistani public was interested in receiving about the coronavirus, the media and sources it relied on to get these updates, and the level of trust it put in its preferred media and information sources. Such research can fill the information gap about news audience behaviour in relation to a public health emergency and also provide an indication of the current state of public trust in the media. The findings may prove helpful to devise crisis communication strategies and public awareness campaigns to deal with the ongoing Covid situation and similar public health emergencies in Pakistan in the future.

10 Media Advertising Spend FY2018-19. Aurora. <https://aurora.dawn.com/news/1143705>

11 Majority (59%) believe the media is doing a good job while 27% disagree: Gilani Poll/Gallup Pakistan. https://gallup.com.pk/bb_old_site/Polls/010811.pdf

12 Online survey: 'Pakistani media is partisan, negative and sensationalist'. The Express Tribune. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/361804/online-survey-pakistani-media-is-partisan-negative-and-sensationalist>

Literature Review

Despite extensive social science research on the importance of trust, McKnight and Chervany (1996) noted that there is little consensus on the meaning of trust in scholarly studies. Trust has been diversely theorised as an individual personality trait or a property of social systems (Delhey & Newton, 2003).

Understanding Trust

As an individual trait, Ulsaner (2000) suggested that trust can be divided between “strategic” — trust in people we know; this exerts influence in the personal sphere — and “moralistic”. According to Ulsaner, moralistic trust is trust in people we do not know. It forms the basis of civil society and allows people to get involved in their communities. This type of interaction involves risk of harm, therefore “we trust when we are vulnerable to harm from others yet believe these others would not harm us even though they could” (Friedman, Kahn Jr. & Howe, 2000, p. 34). As a value, then, moralistic trust is rooted in optimism and is not contingent on reciprocity (Ulsaner, 2000).

Theories that explain trust as a property of social systems broadly propose that it is social and political institutions that encourage the development of a culture of trust in which individuals can then participate and from which they benefit dynamically (Delhey & Newton, 2003). In this sense, trust is important in social relations because it “enables people to compensate for the risk of giving up control to someone else” and reduce the complexity of future actions (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 238). This contributes to “peaceful and stable social relations” that may in turn lead to “collective behaviour and productive cooperation” (Newton, 2001, p. 202).

The societal approach to trust connects with the role of news media in society since scholars have variously described the media as a social and political institution that may influence public opinion and help the public make sense of their experiences (Cook, 1998; Sparrow, 1999; Silverblatt, 2004; Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; King, Schneer & White, 2017). Usher (2017) states that trust in journalism is crucial for social cohesion.

Trust in News Media

Kohring and Matthes (2007) notice that communication research historically preferred the term ‘credibility’ to ‘trust’ when discussing the believability of news among the public as well as media effects on news consumers. Media credibility was defined by Hovland et al. (1953) as a mix of expertise and trustworthiness of communicators. Expertise represented intelligence and trustworthiness referred to impartiality (Hovland et al., 1953). According to Kohring and Matthes (2007), the media credibility research employed three different methodological approaches: assessment of source credibility, comparative credibility of media types, and factor analyses that looked at such dimensions of credibility as fairness, bias, and accuracy, among others. More recent research has relied on the tradition of media credibility research to begin to talk specifically about ‘trust’ in the news media, including Self (1996) who suggested that media trust and media credibility may not be mutually exclusive.

However, as Fisher (2016) pointed out, research has not provided an agreed-upon definition for

trust in news media. She observes that opinion polls on media trust did not define the term for the respondents, relying on “common usage or dictionary definition” (p. 6). Kohring and Matthes (2007) have informed Fisher’s findings. They stated that past research on trustworthiness and credibility of the news media did not provide a standardised scale for measurement of trust. In order to overcome definitional issues, Kohring and Matthes (2007) presented a validated scale for trust measurement, in which the trust in news media is considered to be hierarchical and depends on trust in four factors: selectivity of topics, selectivity of facts, accuracy of depictions, and journalistic assessment. Still, the lack of consensus in defining trust in media has led to investigations of various motivations and factors that may influence people’s faith in journalism.

Lee (2010) used national election survey data of US residents to find that political ideology and partisanship, trust in government and fellow citizens, and views on the economy influence the degree to which audience members trust the news media. Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindel (2018) identified a “trust nexus”: trust in news media showed a strong link with public trust in political institutions. They suggested that the link between press trust and political trust was more pronounced in societies that demonstrated strong levels of political polarisation (p. 11).

Coleman, Anthony, and Morrison (2009), on the other hand, linked trust in news with public expectations. Their study, which relied on focus group discussions in the UK, revealed that people did not distrust the media because they thought journalists were dishonest. Rather, audiences distrusted news when they felt it imagined or approached them in “ways that ignored or devalued their everyday experiences” (p. 8).

A question that arises from the discussions of media trust is whether trust or distrust affects people’s consumption of news. With the rise of online news media, the issues of audience behaviour and media exposure had already become salient in communication research. A number of research studies conducted in the past decade have explored the link between trust and news consumption behaviour.

Trust and Media Exposure

In the case of print news, Williams (2012) found a positive relationship between a reader’s trust in a news reporter and the attention given to news by the reader. For TV news, however, the audience’s attention was found to be positively linked with trust in a media corporation rather than in an individual reporter. Using data from 44 countries, Tsfati and Ariely (2013) showed that exposure to broadcast and print news positively correlated with trust in media: the more people watched or read the news, the more they were likely to trust it. There was also a positive correlation between political interest and trust in the media.

For online news, however, exposure was likely to reduce trust in media, especially if the respondents had accessed political information online (Tsfati & Ariely, 2013). Similarly, Park et al. (2020) argued that there was a close linkage between increase in news mistrust and online news consumption generally across the world. The scholars compared survey data collected from 26 countries in 2016 and 2019 to reveal that increased social media reliance for news resulted in a decrease in media trust. The researchers indicated that this might be due to differences in the digital platforms where people get online news (including aggregator websites and social networks), a higher level of information skepticism among online users due to experience of misinformation, and the atomised nature of online news — people come across news while busy in other social and informational activities such

as scrolling through their social media feeds.

This complements the findings of Fletcher and Park (2017) who relied on survey data of over 20,000 respondents from 11 countries to show that news consumers with low levels of trust in media tend to favour non-mainstream news sources, such as blogs. The researchers suggested that the need to seek alternative views and validate mainstream news might be the reasons behind this behaviour. As earlier findings hinted, a two-way influence might be at work here: more online news exposure could lead to higher levels of mistrust in media, and mistrust in media could lead to more online news exposure.

News exposure may or may not increase public trust in media depending upon the type of news medium. But does mistrust in news media decrease news consumption in general? Tsfaty and Capella (2005) examined why people might continue to watch news sources of which they are skeptical. Relying on a uses and gratification theory-based approach, they showed that the higher the media skepticism among the public, the lower their exposure to mainstream media becomes. However, more importantly, they also discovered that “the need for cognition” — a tendency to engage in attempts to understand the world — interacts with and transforms the effect of media skepticism. For people with moderate cognitive needs, the influence of media skepticism on their exposure to news is weakened, though not completely eliminated. But as the cognitive needs increased further, the media trust or skepticism became irrelevant to motivations for news consumption. In other words, people who really enjoy thinking and deliberating might consume media simply to satisfy their need to know and critique even if they do not trust the media. These findings reveal the complexity in the relationship between media trust and audience behaviour, which may become important during a public health crisis.

Trust in Health and Science News Coverage

Kwon et al. (2015) found that people considered interpersonal channels, including health physicians, as the most trusted sources of health information. The results were based on a survey of 1,300 Korean adults. The study also showed that people with higher income levels were more likely to trust online health information.

Brewer and Ley (2013) conducted a survey of US residents to examine the factors that affected trust in scientific information. The findings showed that people trusted niche science publications more than mainstream news media sources regarding scientific information on the environment. Particularly within the US context, the results also showed that political and religious ideology predicted trust in scientists. Liberals were more likely to trust scientists than conservatives; people who attended religious services were not likely to trust scientists.

The US political partisan divide also informed the research design by Zhao et al. (2020) who looked at how trust in media sources may have affected Covid-19 mitigation behaviour among the American public. They found that behavioural responses regarding Covid-19 were divided along media bias lines. Their results showed that people who trusted right-leaning news outlet Fox News were more likely to engage in fewer preventive measures and more risky behaviour than those who trusted the news coverage of left-leaning news network CNN. Similarly, Dhanani and Franz (2020) found that US adults had greater knowledge, were less likely to endorse misinformation, and reported less bias toward Asian Americans when they had higher trust in the Centers for Disease Control and lower trust in the former US President Donald Trump. The study also found that social media use was linked with endorsement of Covid-related misinformation. The findings indicate that political polarisation

and polarised media choices could potentially hinder health literacy and jeopardise the effectiveness of health responses. The researchers recommended that public health leaders should construct politically neutral Covid-19 messages and “target the sources of media most detrimental for health literacy (e.g., social media) to provide consumers with accurate information that may help to counteract more negative messaging” (Dhanani & Franz, 2020).

Only one of the studies of trust versus media exposure discussed above — Tsfati & Ariely, 2013 — included considerable representation from countries of the global South in their data samples. Much of the significant research on trust in media and news consumption is in the context of the developed countries of Europe and North America. However, research about media trust and credibility is not non-existent in Pakistan and offers a glimpse at the way local news outlets engender trust or distrust among the public.

Trust in Pakistani News Media

Shim et al. (2015) conducted a secondary survey data of 1,108 Pakistanis to check audience perceptions of media credibility in Pakistan. They found that media reliance was a significant factor for assessments of media credibility: people were more likely to find those media sources credible to which they had more access. Overall, the survey respondents considered domestic TV to be the most credible medium for news.

However, the researchers also found that credibility of media sources varied with ethnicity: ethnic minorities (Sindhi, Pashtun, Balochi) were more likely to trust international television news over domestic television compared to their Punjabi counterparts who favoured domestic television news coverage.

While the news consumers find TV news more reliable, Pakistani journalists themselves consider print media to have more credibility than electronic media (Memon, 2014). The study was based on a survey of journalists from the Sindh province.

Bhutta and Ali (2017) showed that university students in Punjab considered TV to be the most credible news medium. Another survey of university students in Punjab showed that there was no significant relationship between TV news exposure and media credibility or between TV news exposure and political opinion (Rahman, 2014). This means that an increase in TV news consumption altered neither the level of trust the respondents had in the medium nor the political opinions of the young respondents. However, media credibility had a strong positive relationship with political opinions, which suggests that the political opinions of those respondents who trusted TV news were significantly affected by the news they consumed from the television channels (Rahman, 2014).

Finally, of some importance to the context of this study is the data set compiled by Ejaz and Ittefaq (2020) about the use and trustworthiness of information sources regarding Covid-19 by Pakistanis. A total of 537 respondents were asked to rate from 0 to 10 the trustworthiness, use, and amount of misinformation received from eight specified sources of Covid-19 information during the month prior to the survey. The identified sources of information were scientists, the government, politicians, people the respondents knew, traditional media, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The data showed that respondents perceived scientists to be the most trustworthy sources of Covid-19 information followed by the government and traditional media, based on the mean of trustworthiness scores.

However, ironically enough, the respondents also said they received the most misinformation from the same three sources, based on the mean frequency score. This indicates there might have been a flaw in the data analysis, data presentation or research design. Since only descriptive statistics of the data were published, it is difficult to independently verify the findings. Online media, traditional media, and Facebook were the most frequent sources of Covid-19 information used by the respondents.

Theoretical Considerations

The theoretical framework for this research is supplied by a combination of the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory and the concept of source credibility as described by the source credibility theory. The U&G theory assumes an active news audience that seeks out and interacts with the news media to satisfy a need or achieve a goal defined by the audience members themselves (Ruggiero, 2000). In the context of a global public health emergency such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the news “need” selected for this study is derived from a potential desire of news consumers to ensure their personal safety and the safety of their loved ones from the coronavirus. It is assumed that individuals would have sought out news sources in order to gather details about Covid-19 safety protocols and practical information that could help protect them from the coronavirus during the pandemic. This need, therefore, falls within the “cognitive needs” grouping identified by Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) who described it as “needs related to strengthening information, knowledge, and understanding”.

For this research, the source credibility theory will be used to consider trustworthiness as an indicator of the credibility of news and information sources the public relied on to satisfy their Covid-19 information needs. According to the source credibility theory presented by Hovland et al. (1953), the persuasiveness of a message is influenced by the perceived credibility of the source. The source credibility theory has been critiqued for being vague about the construct of credibility (Kioussis, 2001; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). But since this research is not concerned with the persuasive effect of Covid-related information or the behavioural change induced by it in the audience, the level of trustworthiness as a measure of media credibility provides a straightforward way to record the perceptions of the public regarding broadly grouped sources of Covid-19 news and information. Analysis of these perceptions on the basis of source credibility could therefore provide future opportunities to study effectiveness or impact of Covid-related news and information.

Research Methodology

This research attempts to find out which media types and sources the Pakistani public relied upon to seek and access news and information about the coronavirus. It intends to examine the level of trust the public had in the Covid-19 information supplied by official sources, mainstream media, social media, and personal networks. The study is also concerned with the potential effect of the pandemic on the ability of citizens to access accurate and credible information. It will check what kind of Covid-19 information the Pakistani citizens were interested in receiving and how they felt about the performance of the mainstream news media in this regard. In order to investigate these issues, the following research questions were devised for the study in light of the literature review.

Research Question (RQ) 1: Which types of media did news consumers use primarily to access news and information about the coronavirus pandemic in Pakistan?

RQ 2: What were the major sources of news and information about the coronavirus pandemic for the public in Pakistan?

RQ 3: What was the level of trust the public associated with the sources of news and information on Covid-19 during the pandemic?

RQ 4: How did the pandemic affect the ability of the public to access news and information?

A quantitative survey was selected as the appropriate method for this research because surveys offer an efficient and often low-cost way to gather representative data about public perceptions. A survey of Pakistani citizens was conducted to collect their news consumption behaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the absence of statistics about active news consumers in the country, mobile phone usage was used as an indicator of the population since Pakistan has around 80 percent teledensity¹³. The survey questionnaire was designed to reflect the research questions. The first question asked respondents about their overall news consumption frequency. It was used as a screening question. Respondents who said they never consumed news would be excluded from the study since their perception of the trustworthiness of Covid-19 coverage would be unreliable.

Questions 2 and 4 corresponded with RQ1 and aimed to explore media reliance after Shim et al. (2015) by later asking the respondents about trust in media sources. Question 7 dealt with RQ2. Questions 3, 5, 6, and 8 corresponded with RQ3 and approached trustworthiness of Covid-19 news and information after asking respondents about their view of the ethical standards of the local press, the kind of Covid-19 information they were interested in, and the general performance of the media in providing Covid-19 news coverage. Question 3 borrowed from Kohring and Matthes (2007) the idea that trust in journalistic assessment is a component of overall trust in media and framed it in terms of professional media ethics broadly. Question 5 linked with the U&G theory by asking about the type of information the respondents most needed. Question 7 was framed to cater to the source credibility theory with a single-dimensional measure of trust. Question 9 was linked with RQ4. The questionnaire is available in Annexure A.

¹³ Teledensity. Telecom Indicators. Pakistan Telecommunication Authority.
<https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/telecom-indicators/2>

The survey was conducted from 2 to 6 November through Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) by a team of trained professionals of the Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR). A phone panel of 215,384 randomly selected active mobile phone users was used as the sampling frame to draw a sample of residents in the four provinces of Pakistan. This phone panel had been prepared by IPOR through field data collection across all districts of the country.

In the first stage, allocation was made by distributing the sample to all the provinces as per their actual share in the country's total population. In the second stage, phone numbers were sorted per district, and then selection was made using Systematic Sampling with a Random Start (SSRS). The SSRS selects every *n*th value from a list of the targeted population to identify the sample.¹⁴ The interval is determined by dividing the population by the desired sample size. The starting point of the selection is determined by using a random number generator or a random number table.

A total of 1,132 respondents were selected after the two-stage process mentioned above. With a response rate of 31 percent, the sample comprised 351 respondents. Five respondents admitted that they never watched or read the news while one did not respond to the question. Their responses were excluded from the analysis, so the total number of respondents considered for the study's findings is 345. The sample had a +/- 5 percent margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level, which is within the acceptable range and indicates the survey results are representative of the population.

The respondents were found to be distributed geographically to match the share of the provinces and federal capital in the total population of the country, according to the 2017 census¹⁵. This proportionality was influenced by the allocation of the sample according to provincial share in population at the first stage of sorting of the phone panel. However, in the final analysis, the proportional distribution was not by design because the number of 'no-responses' could have altered the provincial representation. Most of the respondents were based in Punjab, followed by Sindh. The lowest number of respondents were from Islamabad.

Six out of every 10 respondents were male. This is not reflective of the sex ratio (105 males to 100 females) in the population¹⁶. The slightly skewed male representation might be because the sample was selected from a phone panel of active mobile phone users. Women are 38 percent less likely to own a mobile phone in Pakistan¹⁷.

In terms of age and level of education, there was no clear majority. Around 45 percent of the respondents were in the age group of 25 to 34 years, and just over one-third of the sample had an intermediate degree. Over three-quarters of the respondents identified as belonging to the lower middle class, with the middle class threshold marked at Rs. 60,000 per month per household as an approximation to the World Bank definition¹⁸.

14 Siegle, D. Systematic Sampling. University of Connecticut.

<https://researchbasics.education.uconn.edu/systematic-sampling/#>

15 Province wise provisional results of Census - 2017. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/PAKISTAN%20TEHSIL%20WISE%20FOR%20WEB%20CENSUS_2017.pdf

16 Population census 2017: Men outnumber women in Pakistan.

<https://www.samaa.tv/news/2017/08/population-census-2017-men-outnumber-women-pakistan/>

17 Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020. GSMA. <https://www.gsma.com/r/gender-gap/>

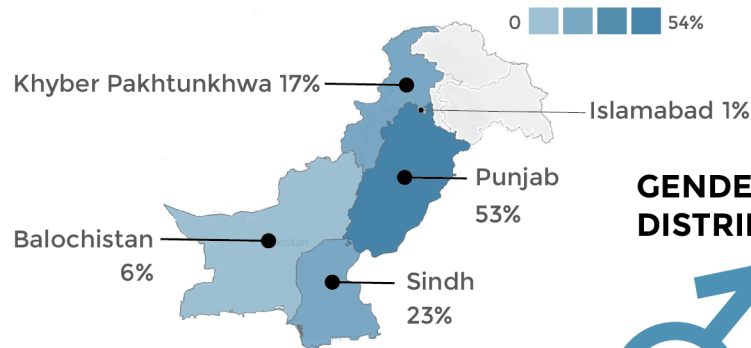
18 MIC Forum: The Rise of the Middle Class.

<https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MIC-Forum-Rise-of-the-Middle-Class-SM13.pdf>

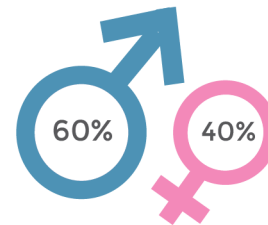
RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The majority of the respondents were male, between the ages of 25 and 44, belonged to the lower middle class, had at least an intermediate degree, and lived in the Punjab province.

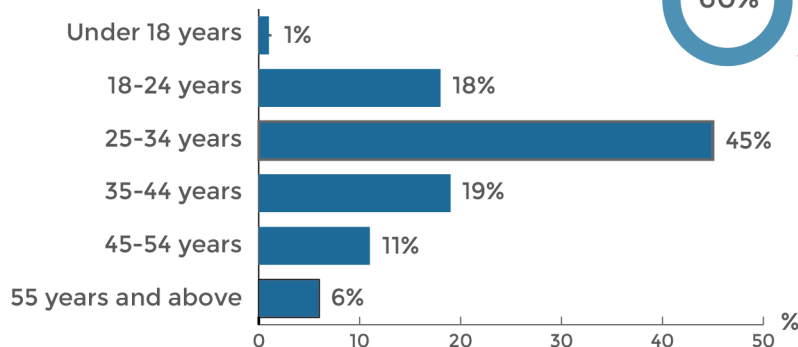
GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION



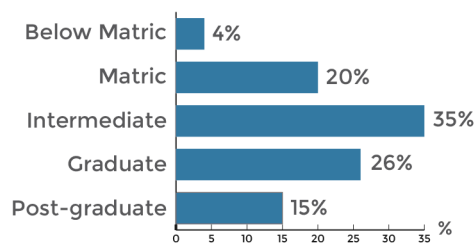
GENDER DISTRIBUTION



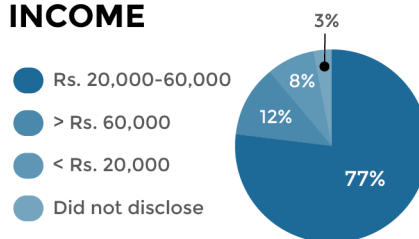
AGE GROUPS



EDUCATION



MONTHLY HOUSEHOLD INCOME



Note: All percentages are calculated from n=345

Map credit: (c) 2020 Mapbox (c) OpenStreetMap

Figure 1: Demographic details of the survey respondents

Limitations of the Research

The following are the limitations of the study:

1. The sample size was limited due to budget constraints for the survey, and even though the sample provided an acceptable margin of error for the findings to be generalisable to the population,

future research could attempt to replicate the survey results with a larger representative sample to test the validity of the study.

2. The study used one screening question but did not collect extensive additional information about news consumption in the interest of brevity. Future research on public trust in news coverage of special concerns, such as a pandemic, could collect more supplementary data to correlate public trust in the media coverage with news consumption behaviour traits.
3. For the sake of simplicity and efficiency, the study did not conduct a multi-dimensional examination of media trust. Further research can check factors of media trust and distrust among Pakistani news audiences.

Analysis

Many of the respondents were occasional news consumers (47 percent) while one in every three individuals admitted to watching or reading the news on a regular basis. Out of those who always or frequently consumed news, two in every three respondents were men. The share of respondents who rarely consumed news decreased with education, from 14 percent at the below-secondary education level to 4 percent at the postgraduate level.

NEWS CONSUMPTION FREQUENCY

One-third of the respondents claimed they read or watched the news without fail and nearly five out of every 10 respondents consumed news occasionally.

Q1. How frequently do you read or watch the news?

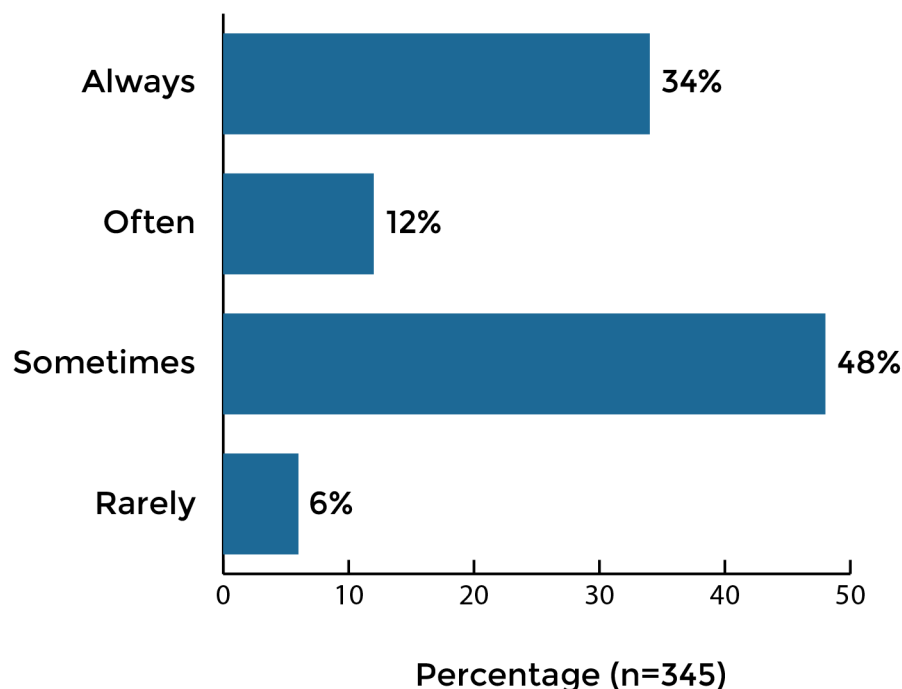


Figure 2: News consumption frequency

Television was the most popular medium for news consumption among the survey respondents, with a majority (56 percent) saying they mostly got their news from TV. Roughly one-third of the respondents accessed news online. The online media, for the purpose of the poll, included social

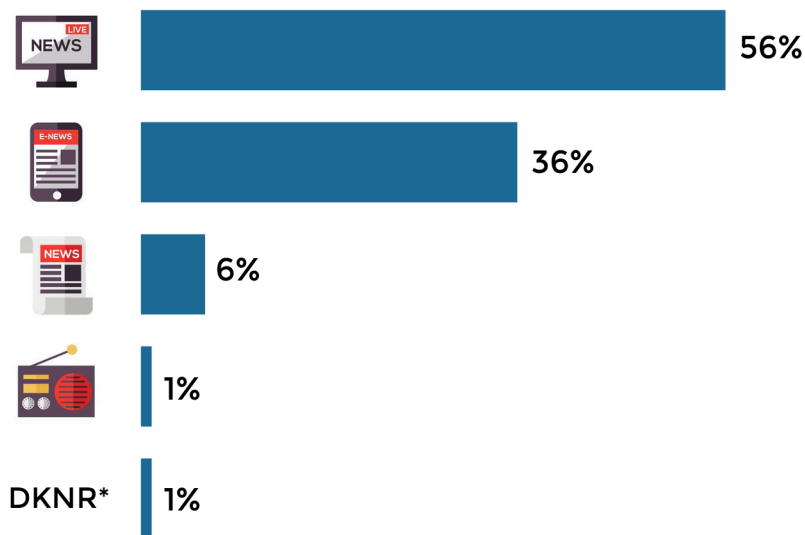
Note about the charts: All percentages were rounded off to the nearest integer value. Respondents were allowed to not respond to all questions in the survey except the screening question. They were also given an “I don’t know” option for the multiple-choice questions. These responses were lumped together to form a Don’t-Know/No-Response (DKNR) category that is plotted separately in the charts in this section.

media networks and messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, along with actual news websites. Print and radio did poorly with only six and one percent of the respondents respectively suggesting that they read newspapers or heard news on the radio.

PREFERRED NEWS MEDIUM

The majority of the respondents got their news from TV. Online media, which included social networks, was used by a third of the respondents to access news.

Q2. Which type of media do you mostly use to get news?



Percentage calculated with n=345

*DKNR = Don't Know/No Response

Figure 3: Type of media mostly used to get news

The choice of news medium did not change considerably when the respondents were asked which media they had used the most during the pandemic to get news and information related to Covid-19. TV and online media still stood first and second respectively as the most popular choices albeit TV lost one percentage point and online media gained two percentage points in the results for Covid-related news and information. For media type both in general and specifically for Covid-19 information, one percent of respondents altogether either did not respond about their most used media or said they were not sure.

Respondents in the 18-24 years age group used TV and online media to get news almost equally. However, for older age groups, the use of TV news increased. Two in every three respondents with ages between 45 and 54 watched news on TV. The reliance of television increased further in people older than 55 years, 75 percent of whom said they mostly got news from TV channels. In these two

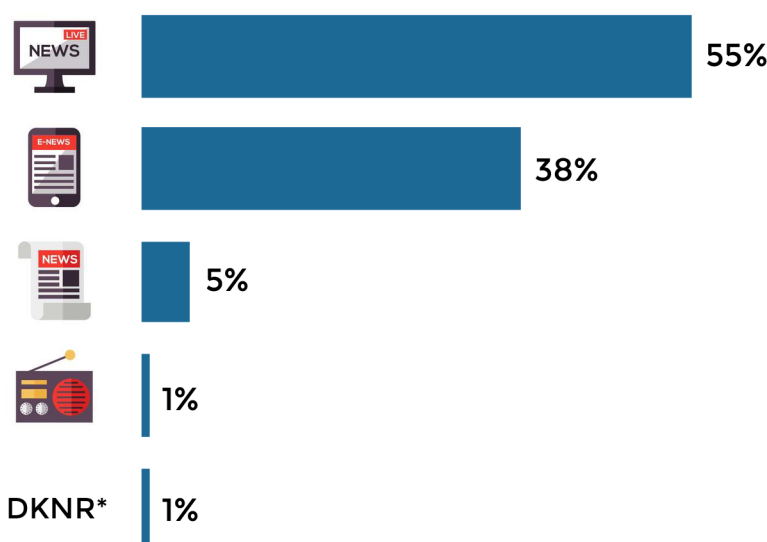
age groups, the same pattern of behaviour held for Covid-19 related news and information. However, almost half of the younger respondents claimed they also turned to TV more frequently to access information on the coronavirus.

People with graduate or postgraduate degrees relied equally on digital media and TV broadcasts for regular news and also to find out about Covid-19 developments. But respondents with a higher secondary education or less turned mostly to TV channels for information on the coronavirus developments and for regular news.

COVID-19 NEWS

The preferred media type for Covid-19 news coverage did not vary from people's overall preferred media type for news, with only a slight increase in online media.

Q4. Which type of media did you use the most to get news and information about the coronavirus?



Percentage calculated with n=345

*DKNR = Don't Know/No Response

Figure 4: Type of media used mostly to get Covid-19 news

Around a third of the respondents each from Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) relied on online news coverage generally, but only one in five Balochistan respondents did the same. For Covid-19 news, the reliance on online coverage at the provincial level ranged from 30 to 40 percent, with Balochistan respondents at the low end of the range and KP residents with the highest share per provincial respondents.

A majority of the respondents (60 percent) said they were most interested in getting information about safety precautions against Covid-19. Nearly one in five respondents was interested in details

COVID-19 INFORMATION DEMAND

People were least interested in how the government was responding to the pandemic.

Q5. What kind of information about the coronavirus were you most interested in getting?

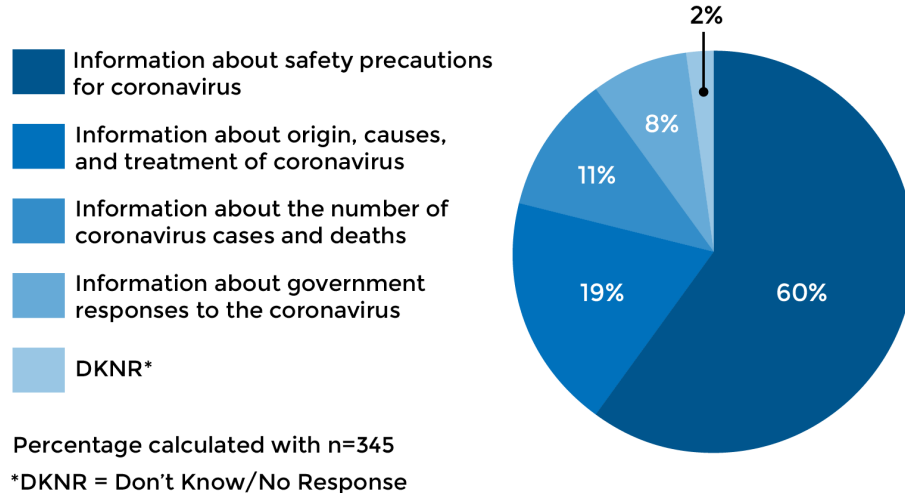


Figure 5: Public interest in kinds of Covid-related information

JOURNALISM ETHICS PERCEPTION

Most respondents felt the professional ethical standards of journalists were average, suggesting a neutral response. The opinion about low and high ethical standards was evenly split.

Q3. What do you think about the ethical standards of professional journalists in Pakistan?

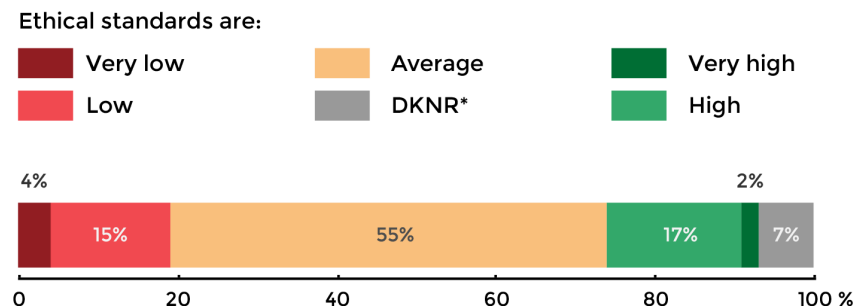


Figure 6: Public perception of journalism ethics

about the origin, causes or treatment of the coronavirus. There was also mild interest in the human impact of the pandemic in Pakistan. A paltry eight percent said they wanted to get information about the way the government was responding to reduce the spread of the virus (See Figure 5).

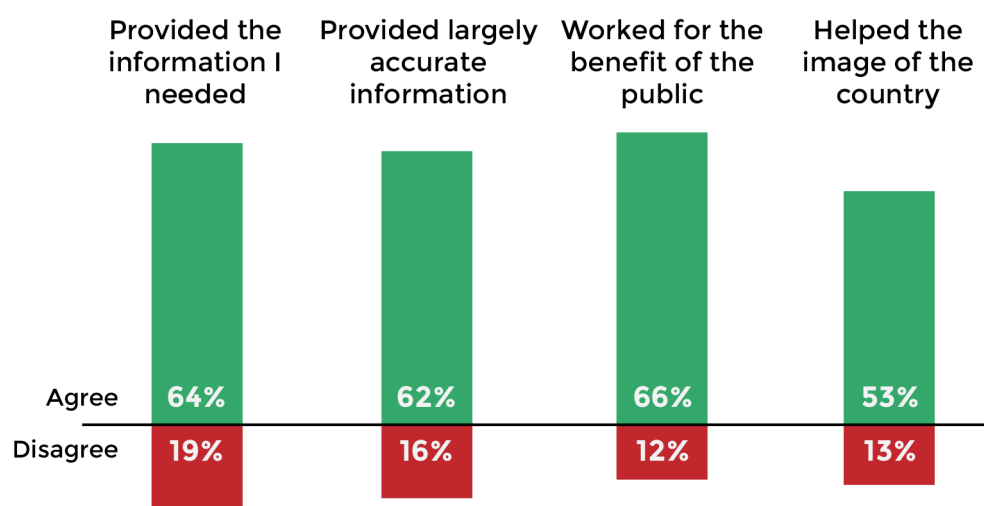
The respondents were also asked about their perception of professional ethics among Pakistani journalists. A majority (55 percent) chose the neutral option and said they believed the ethical standards of local journalists were “average”. Around one in five respondents opted for the extremes: 19 percent saying they thought the ethical standards of local journalists were either low or very low, and a similar share suggesting they appreciated the ethics of Pakistani journalists (See Figure 6).

The survey asked respondents to evaluate the overall performance of the news media in covering the Covid-19 pandemic. They were told to state their level of agreement with four statements: The news media provided them information they needed about Covid; the news media provided largely accurate information on Covid; the news media coverage helped the public during the pandemic, and the news coverage helped Pakistan’s image. In all four categories, a majority of the respondents said they agreed. However, roughly a third of the respondents were uncertain about whether or not the media coverage during the pandemic helped the image of the country. The share of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (53 percent) was less than the support for the other three statements (64, 62, and 66 percent respectively).

COVID-19 NEWS COVERAGE

Pakistanis were mostly positive about the news media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Q6. The Pakistani news media coverage of the coronavirus...



Note: Percentages out of n=345. Agree and disagree shares also include 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree' responses respectively. Chart does not show 'neither agree nor disagree', 'don't know' and 'no response' responses.

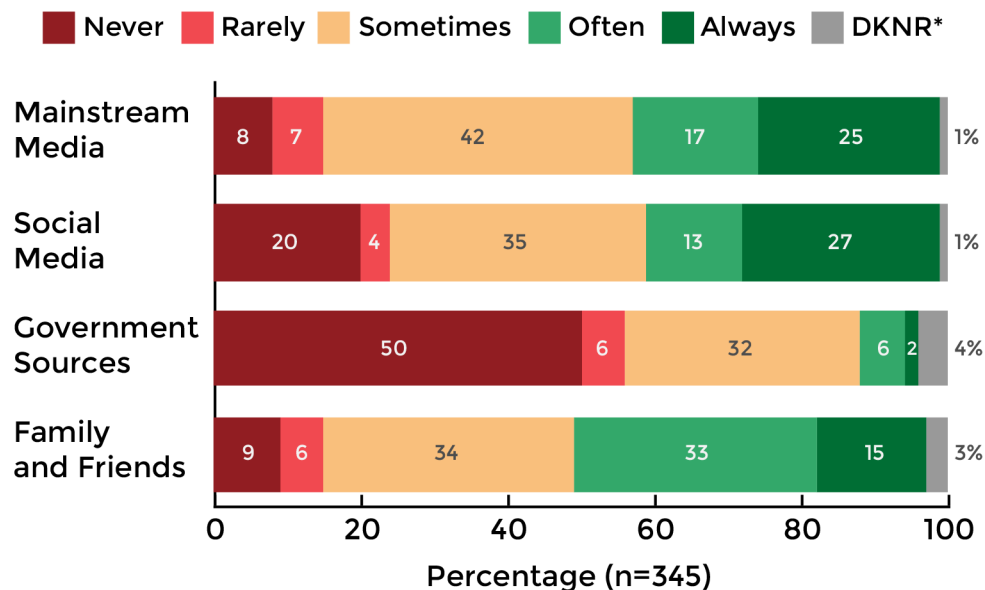
Figure 7: Public perception about Covid-19 news coverage

For Covid-19 news and information, the respondents were asked to identify the frequency with which they used different sources. Their options were: mainstream media, social media, government sources, and family and friends. The respondents were told that mainstream media meant traditional news outlets such as news channels and newspapers. Social media were defined to include major social networks such as Facebook and Twitter but also instant messaging apps, such as WhatsApp. By government sources, the survey referred to the websites, apps and other online information distribution mechanisms developed by the federal government to share updates about the Covid-19 situation with the public. Family and friends referred to respondents' personal networks which they could communicate with online or offline.

COVID-19 INFORMATION SOURCES

Respondents relied more on news outlets, social media, and their loved ones than the government sources of Covid-19 information.

Q7. How frequently did you use the following sources to get news and information about the coronavirus?



*DKNR = Don't Know/No Response

Figure 8: Information sources most used for Covid-19 updates

Around one in four respondents said they had always consulted the mainstream media or social media to get information about the coronavirus. Roughly one-third of the respondents said they occasionally used social media to learn about the coronavirus. For mainstream media, the share of occasional users was slightly greater: One in four said they sometimes used the news media to receive updates. But 20 percent of the respondents also said they had never used social media for the same purpose. Reliance on friends and family seemed strong, with a third of the respondents frequently checking with friends

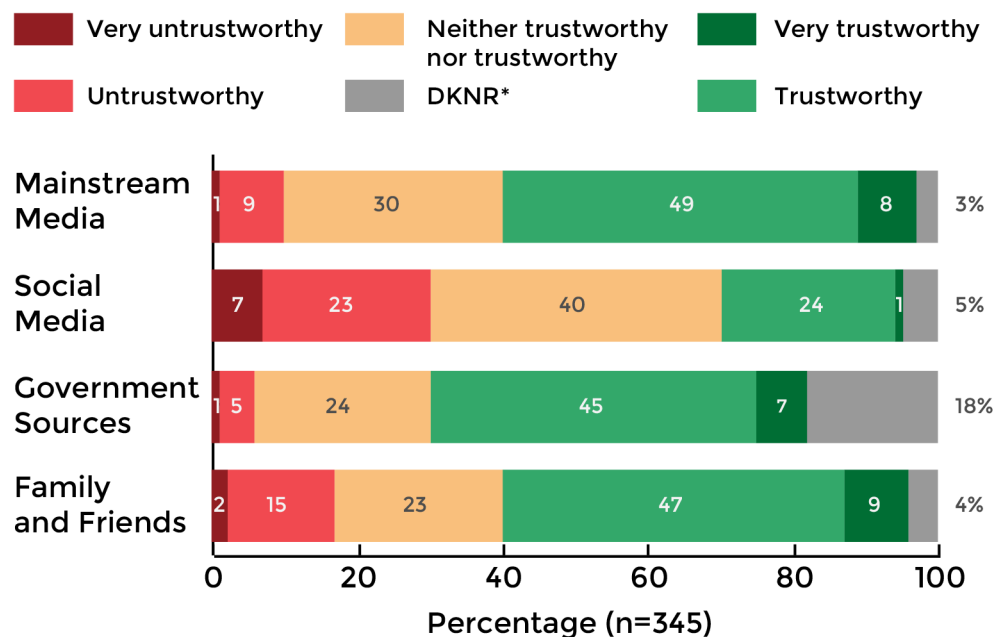
and family for Covid information and another 15 percent getting coronavirus updates from their loved ones all the time.

The poorest response was for the Government-led information sources on Covid-19. Half of the survey respondents said they had never used the official sources to seek coronavirus information. One in three respondents said they had occasionally checked the government portals, but only two percent — the lowest share for this option — said they always got their Covid-19 news and information from the official sources.

TRUST IN COVID-19 INFORMATION

The respondents considered social media the least trustworthy source of information about the coronavirus.

Q7. What is your level of trust in the following sources for providing news and information about the coronavirus?



*DKNR = Don't Know/No Response

Figure 9: Level of public trust in Covid-19 information sources

Despite half of the respondents admitting to having never used the Government sources for Covid-19 information, a majority (52 percent) claimed they still trusted the government to provide accurate information on the virus. To be more specific, of the 50 percent who had never used the government's Covid-19 app or website, nearly half of them still thought official sources were worthy of their trust. One in four respondents were neutral about the official sources of information, but only six percent said they were untrusting of the government's information on the pandemic.

The most trustworthy sources of Covid-related information were, however, the mainstream media (57 percent; sum of ‘trustworthy’ and ‘highly trustworthy’ responses) followed by family and friends (56 percent; sum of ‘trustworthy’ and ‘highly trustworthy’ responses). Only one in 10 respondents did not trust the news media and some 17 percent doubted their families and friends.

Social media had the most chequered trust record among the respondents. More people found Covid-related information circulating on social networks suspicious (30 percent) than those who found it trustworthy (25 percent). Four out of every 10 respondents thought social media was neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy when it came to updates about the coronavirus pandemic.

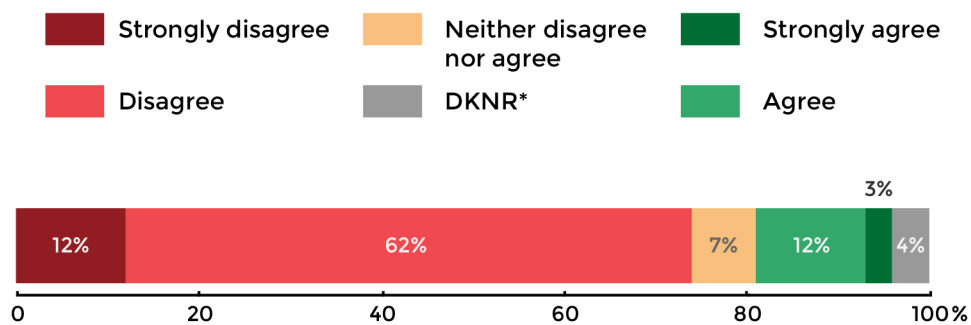
The respondents were also asked about the effects of the pandemic on their ability to access news and information in general.

A vast majority (74 percent) said they either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that their access to information had been adversely affected by the pandemic and its associated lockdown in Pakistan. Only 15 percent of the people surveyed felt they were unable to access news and information in the manner they had been accustomed to before the coronavirus outbreak. A fraction of these respondents said they had a strong opinion in this matter. A meagre 7 percent said they were neutral about Covid impact on access to information.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

A majority of the respondents felt the pandemic had not affected their ability to access news and information. Only 15 percent admitted to reduced access.

Q9. The coronavirus pandemic reduced my ability to access news and information.



Percentage calculated with n=345

*DKNR = Don't Know/No Response

Figure 10: Covid impact on ability to access information

Discussion

The survey findings revealed that TV was the most popular news medium. This is hardly surprising given that the print news has been in decline with the rise of the Internet in Pakistan as elsewhere in the world and owing to the fact that an estimated 78 percent of urban households in Pakistan have access to cable networks, which deliver over three dozen TV channels to the public¹⁹. Even though a third of the respondents claimed they use online media to access news, the top position for TV news for regular news and Covid-19 coverage might also have been influenced by the class dynamics of the sample, which was predominantly lower-income individuals. Even though mobile Internet access has increased in Pakistan over the past few years and mobile data costs for the subscribers have gone down, the purchasing power of the sample might be a factor in discouraging the use of Internet for news consumption in favour of news on communal or household TV. The share of people who got their news about Covid from digital media was ever so slightly more than those who said they mostly consulted digital sources for news in general. This is also understandable because the scale and rapid spread of the pandemic could have pushed people to look for instant updates, which might have been more easily available on the Internet. During the pandemic, there was in fact a surge in Internet usage in Pakistan but, according to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, most of the Internet bandwidth was utilised for accessing social media networks²⁰. On social media, news is often overpowered by entertainment sources and interpersonal communication in getting the attention of the users. This is reflected in the survey findings which showed that 35 percent of the respondents only occasionally got their coronavirus information from the social networks and exactly 20 percent share of respondents had never used social media to get news about Covid-19.

The study attempted to get a glimpse into the way the public thinks about the ethical standards of local journalists. However, the most common option chosen by the respondents was the non-committal neutral response that the journalists had average ethical standards. It is difficult to characterise this as an example of neutral response bias because this was the only survey question where a majority of the respondents opted for a neutral option. The questions on frequency of use of, and trust in, news sources for Covid-19 information show a healthy variation in responses to dispel the notion that the sample was affected by extreme or neutral response biases. However, the phrasing of the question about media ethics — it referred to ethical standards without explaining the term any further, leaving it to the respondents to interpret the ethical behaviour of journalists — might have made it difficult to answer. In any case, the finding that most respondents found Pakistani journalists with middling ethical standards contradicts more extreme views about news media practices. The public has previously found faults with the Pakistani broadcast media²¹, and media scholars have reported evidence of unethical practices in news coverage (Arshad & Ashraf, 2014; Yasmin, Sohail & Mangrio, 2015; Zafar & Shahzad, 2017; Yousaf, Yasmeen & Ali, 2019). As Mulla (2020) has pointed out with respect to sensationalism in the Pakistani news media, the stresses imposed by the political economy dynamics of the Pakistani media, class hierarchies, news routines, and job security concerns affect the practice of journalism in the country and, therefore, the discussion of media ethics in Pakistan cannot

19 See Khan, A. (2010). Digital Television Age: A Policy Perspective from Pakistan. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1657768> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1657768>

20 Jahangir, R. (2020). Social media outlets see surge in number of Pakistani users. Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1548993>

21 Online Survey: 'Pakistani media is partisan, negative, and sensationalist' (2012). The Express Tribune. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/361804/online-survey-pakistani-media-is-partisan-negative-and-sensationalist>

be as black-and-white as it may seem in a textbook. However, it is unlikely that the public is privy to these industry constraints. Instead, it is evident that the polarisation within the media²² has occurred in parallel with political polarisation in society²³. Selective exposure to partisan news media might, therefore, explain why an almost equal number of respondents felt the ethical standards of journalists were high and low (Bilal, Ali & Ullah, 2019).

Most respondents were interested in finding out information about safety precautions regarding Covid-19. This satisfies the assumption about the goal-oriented use of media for Covid-related information based on cognitive needs set in the literature review. This is understandable given the international health emergency caused by the virus. Fear and anxiety about the personal safety and the safety of loved ones was a global pattern of behaviour during the pandemic. Experts who studied the spread of Covid-19 misinformation also noticed that some of the harmful false messages about coronavirus cures and treatment were shared simply because unwitting social media users thought these might help their friends and family²⁴.

The lack of interest in government response to the pandemic might be due to several factors. The decline in the number of Covid cases in Pakistan from the end of July onwards up until late October might have given people a false sense of security. They might have felt they did not need to keep up with government responses to the pandemic any longer. Opinion polls conducted at the time of the virus outbreak in the country in March suggested that people did see the virus as dangerous but were optimistic that it would be overcome²⁵. However, by August, opinion polls were presenting a different picture. The number of people who believed the threat of coronavirus was being exaggerated had increased²⁶. At the time the survey for this study was conducted people appeared to have stopped taking Covid-19 seriously despite rise in cases²⁷. The measures taken by the federal and provincial governments to communicate the threat of the coronavirus have received criticism for being insufficient and ineffective²⁸, even though the lockdown strategies appeared to have tackled the first wave of the virus with a relatively small death toll. The communication gaps might also be a reason why only a small number of the respondents in this study were interested in information about the government response.

The general positive attitude about the media coverage of Covid-19 in terms of provision of accurate information for the benefit of the public corresponds with the earlier indication by the respondents about the kind of information in which they were interested. The news media has consistently supplied

22 Pakistan's polarized media. (2014). The Listening Post. Al Jazeera.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-listening-post/2014/9/6/pakistans-polarised-media/>

23 Lodhi, M. (2020). Politics of Polarisation. Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1552552>

24 Carmicheal, F., & Spring, M. (2020). Coronavirus: Here's how you can stop bad information from going viral. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-51967889>

25 Coronavirus: Opinion and Reaction -- Results from a multi-country poll Feb, 2020. IPSOS. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-pk/coronavirus-opinion-and-reaction-results-multi-country-poll-feb-2020>

26 70% Pakistanis believe Covid-19 threat is exaggerated: survey. (2020). Geo. <https://www.geo.tv/latest/304351-poll-shows-pakistanis-less-serious-about-coronavirus-70-think-pandemic-threat-exaggerated>

27 People not taking fast spread of the Covid-19 seriously, says PIMA President. (2020). Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1589850/people-not-taking-fast-spread-of-covid-19-seriously-says-pima-president>

28 Saeed, A. (2020). Government 'communication failure' reason 55% Pakistanis believe virus threat exaggerated — Gallup official. Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1693796/pakistan>

information about safety precautions in a bid to raise awareness about the severity of the novel virus²⁹. Messages about hand washing, physical distancing, and wearing face masks were supplied by the press and private actors even if the government was not actively running public awareness campaigns during the first lockdown in March. Along with that, news outlets also shared statistics about the Covid-19 cases and fatalities in the country despite challenges in accessing and interpreting data. Some media outlets, such as Dawn's news website, started a live updates section dedicated to Covid coverage³⁰. Despite grievances about professional news practices in the Pakistani media, the overall satisfaction with Covid coverage in this study is also in line with public opinion surveys conducted in the past that showed people generally approved of the role and influence of the media (Pew Research Center, 2010; Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2018).

Fifty percent of the respondents stated they had never used the Government Covid-19 app or web portal to get news or information about the coronavirus. The website, app, and other 'chatbot' services were especially developed by the government to supply accurate and reliable data and guidance to the public to prepare and protect themselves during the health emergency. The survey finding that these official sources were the least used by the respondents indicates these services might not be as appropriate or suitable to the needs of the public as they ought to have been. First of all, the services are digital and, as the findings suggest, people appear to have consumed news about Covid mostly through TV. Secondly, people might have not been inclined to visit government sources directly when they had access to other information sources, such as the mainstream media, which routinely quotes officials in its coverage. Finally, except the chatbots, most of these services appear to be available in the English language only, which could be why their use might not have extended beyond the urban centres of the country. The disuse did not prevent people from considering the government sources as trustworthy. Around half of those who had not used official sources for Covid updates vouched for them. This finding can be explained on the basis of source credibility theory. One possible explanation is their general trust in the federal or provincial government as an authoritative source. Eighty percent of those who did not use the government sources but still considered them trustworthy were from the Punjab province. Their political allegiance or sentiment for the government could have influenced their responses. However, since the survey did not collect such qualifying information, it is difficult to definitively comment on this aspect. Further research can explore public trust in government and whether or not government credibility played any part in persuading citizens to act upon Covid-related precautionary measures.

A significant majority (57 percent) found the mainstream coverage of Covid-19 worthy of their trust, with only one in 10 saying they considered it untrustworthy. This faith in Covid-related news supplied by the media upholds earlier findings about the overall positive evaluation of the media's Covid coverage. Since most respondents got their news via TV, this subsequent finding can be interpreted as a vote of confidence for broadcast news. Despite accusations of partisanship, it appears that the TV news channels might be doing enough to provide coverage on issues of public importance to retain the loyalty of their news audiences. This supports previous literature about the popularity and media reliance on TV news in Pakistan (Shim et al., 2015, Bhutta & Ali, 2017). Since TV coverage was not disrupted in any discernible way for the public, it is likely that this also contributed to the respondents' majority perception that the pandemic did not reduce their ability to access news and information.

29 Shaukat, A. (2020). Reporting Covid-19. The News on Sunday.
<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/635359-reporting-covid-19>

30 Rehmat, A. (2020). Pakistan: Responding to Covid-19 challenges with innovation. International Media Support.
<https://www.mediasupport.org/media-in-pakistan-responding-to-covid-19-challenges-with-innovation/>

The trustworthiness of the news media's coverage of the coronavirus pandemic also makes sense when seen in the context of the public opinion shared in this study about social media. Only one in four respondents found Covid-19 information on social media to be reliable — the lowest level of trust among the four information sources the respondents were asked about. Similarly, 30 percent of the respondents said they did not trust Covid-19 news on social media — the highest level of untrustworthiness among the four sources of information identified. The massive scale of disinformation and misinformation about the coronavirus that spread on the Internet during the pandemic might be why the respondents felt unwilling to trust the conversations on social networks and instead felt comfortable with the news offered by TV channels and other mainstream media sources. Exactly what kind of information about Covid-19 or other factors alienated some respondents from social media could be the subject of another research study. Since the respondents felt comfortable with the Covid-19 information they got from friends and family, with whom they consulted frequently based on their responses, it is likely that the respondents discounted their online interactions with friends and family when commenting on their trust on social media sources for coronavirus information. Future research will be required to examine and analyse these links better.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study attempted to find out the level of trust the public had in the news media and sources of information that they relied on for Covid-19 news and updates. The research revealed that people mostly used TV and online media to get information about the coronavirus. They were interested in information about safety precautions. The public found the overall news media coverage of Covid-19 to be satisfactory and the majority of respondents who took part in the opinion survey considered mainstream media to be a trustworthy source of coronavirus information.

Based on the findings of the analysis and the discussion in this study, the following recommendations are presented for the government, media organisations, and researchers.

Recommendations for Government

1. **Use TV for Covid-19 messaging:** The federal and provincial governments should focus their public awareness efforts regarding Covid-19 to TV media to maximise outreach especially in rural and remote areas of the country. As the study clearly showed most people rely on TV news for information, so Covid-19 public awareness campaigns on the airwaves might be more effective than digital messaging.
2. **Share official guidance and public awareness messages in local languages:** The use of English for designing interventions for public safety and mass campaigns of public awareness about Covid-19 is not likely to benefit a majority of the citizens. Some authorities have already started sharing advice and information in the national and regional languages. Other administrations must follow suit. The federal and provincial governments should try their best to issue official public health guidance about Covid-19 and awareness messages in local languages to ensure these are received and understood by the public.

Recommendations for Media Organisations

1. **Continue to provide practical information about Covid-19 response:** The public is interested in receiving information about the coronavirus that could help them ensure their protection from the virus. The media organisations should therefore continue to supply information that would help people in the time of need. People might need to know where they can get tested for Covid-19, what they should do if they or someone they know contracts the virus, what sort of medical help is available, how are the authorities implementing contact tracing, and other such important questions that a person may ask when faced with the threat of Covid-19. Such news and information could help to further strengthen the public's trust in the news media.
2. **Counter disinformation with facts and accurate information:** The spread of Covid-related false information will continue to occur with the onset of the second wave of the virus and the progress on vaccine development. News organisations should monitor social media networks for potentially harmful false information and rumours that might put the lives of Pakistanis at risk of Covid-19. Wherever possible, without amplifying the rumours and falsehoods, media outlets should provide the public with accurate and reliable information to counter and debunk the disinformation.

Recommendations for Researchers

1. **Impact of Covid-19 disinformation in Pakistan:** Since the study showed that people did not trust social media for information as much as they did other sources, researchers could examine whether exposure to Covid-related disinformation has led to a distrust of social networks among the public for updates on the coronavirus.
2. **Supplement perception surveys with qualitative research:** In order to understand the factors and motivations that drive the public's engagement with news coverage of Covid-19 as well its general or event-specific trust in the news media, researchers could look to conduct qualitative studies of the behaviour of news consumers to elaborate and explain the results of opinion polls.

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Annexure A: Survey Questionnaire

Public Trust in the Media Coverage of Coronavirus

This survey will attempt to identify the media sources the Pakistani public is relying on to get news and information on the coronavirus, and the level of public trust in the Covid-19 coverage of traditional and digital media.

Covid-19 News and Information

Consumption of news and information about the coronavirus and trust in the reliability of that information

1. How frequently do you read or watch the news?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

2. Which type of media do you mostly use to get your news?

- TV
- Print
- Radio
- Online

3. What do you think about the ethical standards of professional journalists in Pakistan?

- Very low
- Low
- Average
- High
- Very High

4. Which type of media did you use the most to get news and information about the coronavirus?

- TV
- Print

- Radio
- Online

5. What kind of information about the coronavirus were you most interested in getting?

- Information about safety precautions for coronavirus
- Information about origin, causes, and treatment of coronavirus
- Information about the number of coronavirus cases and deaths
- Information about government responses to the coronavirus

6. The Pakistani news media coverage of the coronavirus...

(News media here refers to TV channels, newspapers, and websites of news organizations.)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Provided me the information I needed					
Provided largely accurate information					
Worked for the benefit of the public					
Helped the image of the country					

7. How frequently did you use the following sources to get news and information about the coronavirus?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Mainstream media (News channels, newspapers)					
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc.)					
Government sources (Covid-19 web portal or app)					
Family and friends					

8. What is your level of trust in the following sources for providing news and information about the coronavirus?

	Very untrustworthy	Untrustworthy	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	Trustworthy	Very trustworthy
Mainstream media (news channels, newspapers)					
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc.)					
Government sources (Covid-19 web portal or app)					
Family and friends					

9. The coronavirus pandemic and lockdown reduced my ability to access news and information.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Respondent Demographic Details

City: _____

Age

- Under 18
- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 and above

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Education

- Under matriculation
- Matriculation
- Intermediate
- Graduate
- Post-graduate

Monthly Household Income

- Less than Rs. 20,000
- Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 60,000
- Rs. 60,000 to Rs. 100,000
- More than Rs. 100,000

About MMFD:

Media Matters for Democracy works to defend the freedom of expression, media, Internet, and communications in Pakistan. The main premise of our work is to push for a truly independent and 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 undertake various initiatives including but not limited to training, policy research, advocacy, movement building and strategic litigation to further our organizational goals. We also work on acceptance and integration of digital media and journalism technologies and towards creating sustainable 'media-tech' initiatives in the country.

MMfD recognises diversity and inclusion as a core value of democracy and thus all our programs have a strong focus on fostering values and skills that enable and empower women, minority communities, and other marginalized groups.

