

# Racism, election overtake COVID-19 as 'iffy' news on popular social sites

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As election rhetoric and social issues heated up over the summer, the amount of popular "iffy" social media content on key themes rose as well, but less so on the topic that has dominated much of the national

discussion this year, say University of Michigan researchers.

Researchers from the Center for Social Media Responsibility at the U-M School of Information and partners at NewsWhip were anxious to see what would follow the temporary "flight to quality" in [news](#) that they observed in their last analysis, and how much iffy content would be present amid the ongoing pandemic and other issues of racism, protests and riots, and the election overall.

Using the [Iffy Quotient](#)—a metric used to measure the progress of social media sites to limit the spread of misinformation—the researchers found that content about racism, protests and riots published by iffy websites appeared on Facebook and Twitter nearly three times as much as COVID-19. They also found that U.S. presidential election-themed URLs also outpaced the pandemic.

At the same time, the pandemic was the lead topic on the two platforms among [news stories](#) from "OK" news sites—those that adhere to basic standards of credibility and transparency.

"You might think that COVID-19 would be the topic of the most popular iffy news URLs on Facebook and Twitter while the pandemic marches on," said Paul Resnick, director of the center and the Michael D. Cohen Collegiate Professor of Information. "But those stories, while popular, were actually overshadowed by iffy [site](#) content on other timely topics."

The Iffy Quotient measures the fraction of the most popular URLs on Facebook and Twitter that come from iffy sites that often publish misinformation. NewsWhip determines the most popular URLs each day, while NewsGuard provides website ratings, with Media Bias/Fact Check providing ratings for sites unrated by NewsGuard.

A little more than 11% of the most popular iffy URLs on Facebook and

Twitter were related to COVID-19, while nearly 33% were stories about racism, protests and riots, and roughly 14% covered the U.S. presidential election overall. Race-related issues not only comprised almost a third of all stories but also were the most represented topic, and the three major topics combined accounted for almost 59% of the popular stories.

This comes just four months after the researchers found a temporary flight to quality in [news content](#) in the early stages of COVID-19, suggesting that during turbulent times people wanted to hear from tried-and-true news sources, as evidenced by an increase in the most popular URLs on Facebook and Twitter that were coming from a specific list of 30 mainstream [news sites](#) that includes the New York Times, Washington Post, CNN, FOX News, NPR, PBS, Bloomberg, The Economist, Newsweek and others.

"The observed flight to quality in popular social media URLs was encouraging, but unfortunately the spread of misinformation and other iffy content has certainly continued to proliferate on both Facebook and Twitter," said James Park, assistant director of the center.

Using the Iffy Quotient's daily details pages ([one example from June 11, 2020](#)), researchers analyzed a sample of the most popular URLs on Facebook and Twitter from May 1 to July 16, 2020.

While the Iffy Quotient is designed to express the flow of iffy content, it tracks content from sites that are considered by NewsGuard or Media Bias/Fact Check to be "OK" as well—sites that may include, but are not limited to, mainstream news sources.

Over that same period, about 37% of popular URLs from OK sites were related to COVID-19, roughly 29% were about U.S. race-related issues, and about 10% were U.S. presidential election-themed. Here the percentage of COVID-19 stories was the single largest percentage by

topic and also over a third of all stories.

Provided by University of Michigan

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