

Political ideology affected how COVID-19 news was consumed, study finds

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Jessica Myrick, the Donald P. Bellisario Professor of Health Communication, said the COVID-19 pandemic was a unique example of a global event where people were learning new things from new sources at a rapid pace. Credit: Engin Akyurt/Unsplash

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the speed with which available health

and safety information evolved was novel to most people around the world. To assess how the public handled the changing guidance, an international research team compared information consumption among citizens of Germany and the United States. They found the two countries displayed some similarities in how people consumed pandemic news, but differences emerged between German and U.S. citizens who lean right politically.

The findings were [published](#) in the journal *Health Communication* by Jessica Gall Myrick, the Donald P. Bellisario Professor of Health Communication at Penn State, and Helena Bilandzic, professor of communication research at the University of Augsburg.

Myrick was planning to join Bilandzic in Germany as a visiting professor at the University of Augsburg during the summer of 2020. The [pandemic](#) canceled their plans, but the conversations that followed sparked the idea for this project.

"There were scientists on TV and doing podcasts in both countries who were actively talking about COVID-19 and the newly developing science around it," Myrick said. "We were noticing some similarities and some differences between our countries in [media coverage](#) and public reactions to these very public conversations about medical science.

"We decided to look at the differences between the two countries and also investigate the role of political ideology motivating people to seek more information about COVID-19. While Germany has right-wing and left-wing politics, too, medicine and science are not as strongly polarized as in the United States, so it made for an interesting comparison."

Myrick said the project is a first step in comparing public health communication effects during a crisis across these two countries. While this particular study is limited to two Western countries with similar

resources, Myrick said that this type of research can help health communicators predict how citizens around the world might seek information, or avoid it, if there's another infectious disease outbreak.

The researchers evaluated how residents of the two countries gathered and processed COVID-19 news coverage during the first three months of the pandemic. Using the same questionnaire in English and translated into German, Bilandzic and Myrick surveyed more than 600 residents in each country online in late spring of 2020. Respondents were asked about their perceptions of COVID-19 and their media use during the early months of the pandemic.

"The pandemic is a great example of a very stressful time where we had a lot more people wanting [health information](#) and trying to figure out what it meant for them and their families," Myrick said. "At first everybody really wanted the information, but then it became overwhelming, or people got sick of it. We saw that many people appeared to begin avoiding new information, purposefully dodging it even when useful or relevant."

One reason for this information avoidance, the researchers proposed, was the political and cultural context in which a person received news.

"In different countries, political ideology became relevant for shaping the pandemic agenda and the presence of different types of COVID-related sources and information across media and social networks," Myrick said. "Considering the role of political ideology for information behaviors—seeking or avoiding—can help locate the deeper roots of functional and dysfunctional processes. That is, if [political ideology](#) is a limiting factor for information seeking, the problem does not lie in the availability or comprehension of information. Instead, resistance to information becomes the problem."

To investigate, the researchers asked survey respondents how seriously they took COVID-19, as well as how up to date they typically are with news events and the level of pressure they receive from family and social groups to be informed.

According to the results, ideology influenced news consumption. Left-leaning participants perceived COVID-19 as a larger threat than did right-leaning participants. In both countries, right-leaning participants had lower informational norms, which means there was less pressure from social and family groups to stay up to date on the latest COVID-19 information. However, in the United States, those with a right-leaning ideology viewed COVID as less serious than their German counterparts.

"Conservatives in the United States, in our sample, viewed COVID-19 as less of a hazard," Myrick said. "They weren't really as anxious or afraid of the pandemic. In Germany, those who leaned right felt there wasn't a need to know everything about COVID-19 right now, but they still recognized that COVID-19 could have severe ramifications and reported stronger [negative emotions](#) regarding the pandemic than did conservatives in the United States sample."

Myrick said that's important because emotional response and perceived severity are two things that drive one's behavior. In this case, such behaviors could be wearing a mask, socially distancing or getting a vaccine when available.

"COVID-19 was unique in so many ways, because we started learning about the biology and new scientific terms, and we were learning them from different spokespeople," Myrick said. "It was the same in other countries. We need to keep working as health communicators to make sure we get information to people in a way they can process and understand, even when they're stressed out and anxious."

More information: Helena Bilandzic et al, Information Seeking and Avoidance in the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Function of Political Ideology and National Context: A Survey Comparing the US and Germany, *Health Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2023.2263220](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2023.2263220)

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