RESEARCH MEMO #1

WHO WE TURN TO FOR INFORMATION AND HOW MUCH WE TRUST IT: HEALTH INFORMATION VERSUS GENERAL INFORMATION

Produced by

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About The Policy Lab

The Policy Lab is based in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne.

Our Lab has three main areas of focus:

1. We use survey experiments to understand public opinion toward some of society's most pressing public policy issues, such as fake news, political trust and artificial intelligence;

2. We do research on the Future of Women at Work to identify the barriers to achieving gender equality and inclusivity and to develop evidence based best practice for the workplace;

3. We examine the attitudes of Australians in relation to political and institutional trust, political outlooks and how these relate to attitudes towards a range of policy and societal issues.

We provide new evidence based on original data which helps governments and other public bodies develop creative solutions to pressing policy problems.

Executive Summary

As fears around Coronavirus sweep the globe we are all confronted with a vital question: who to turn to for information and how much we trust that information.

Last year the Policy Lab ran a representative survey of 1,000 Australians – as part of the Australian Cooperative Election Survey – to look at this very question. This research memo reports the findings from that survey.

In this survey we asked where people turn to get information in two areas: 1) health information and 2) general information;. We followed that up with questions about how much respondents trusted the sources they most frequently turned to.

We find very different patterns depending on what sort of information people are seeking out. As it relates to health information – and given escalating attacks on experts that have occurred in recent years – the survey presents a rare piece of good news on the role experts can play in confronting health crises like Coronavirus.

WHO WE TURN TO FOR INFORMATION AND HOW MUCH WE TRUST IT: HEALTH INFORMATION VERSUS GENERAL INFORMATION

1. WHAT SOURCES OF INFORMATION DO WE TURN TO?

We asked two questions on where people turn to get information as it relates to: 1) health information; and 2) general information. The results are presented below.

Health Information

Your local doctor — 63%

Google search — 10%

Friends/family — 8%

A 24-hour nurse phone hotline — 5%

Social media — 3%

Public hospital website — 3%

State Government website — 2%

The media — 2%

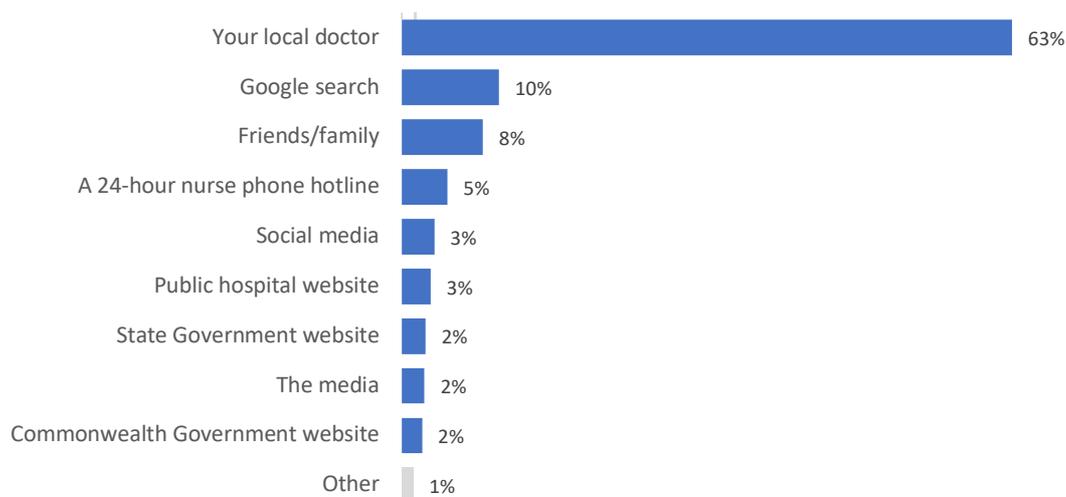Commonwealth Government website — 2%

Other — 1%

Figure 1: Most important source for health information
Q: If you are unwell and are told you need to take antibiotics, where would you turn to if you required more information?
% of respondents who ranked a given source as the most important (N = 1,046)

The data (presented in Figure 1) shows that the number one source of information people turn to when seeking information about a health problem – in our case it was taking antibiotics – is their local doctor. There is a huge margin between the first and the second source. For over 60% of respondents a doctor is their first source of information whereas the next most important source – Google search – was only nominated by 10% of respondents. Google search, is followed by friends/family, a 24-hour nurse hotline, and social media.

What stands out here is the extent to which people turn to medical authorities such as their doctor, the 24-nurse phone hotline and public hospital website. These findings suggest medical experts and public authorities are still the most frequently turned to sources of information. That should be reassuring as it is where people will get the most reliable information.

Where does this leave the online sources? Unsurprisingly, our survey showed that 'Google search' and 'social media' were among the top five sources people turned to. However, as we will see below, they are also among the least trusted.

General Information

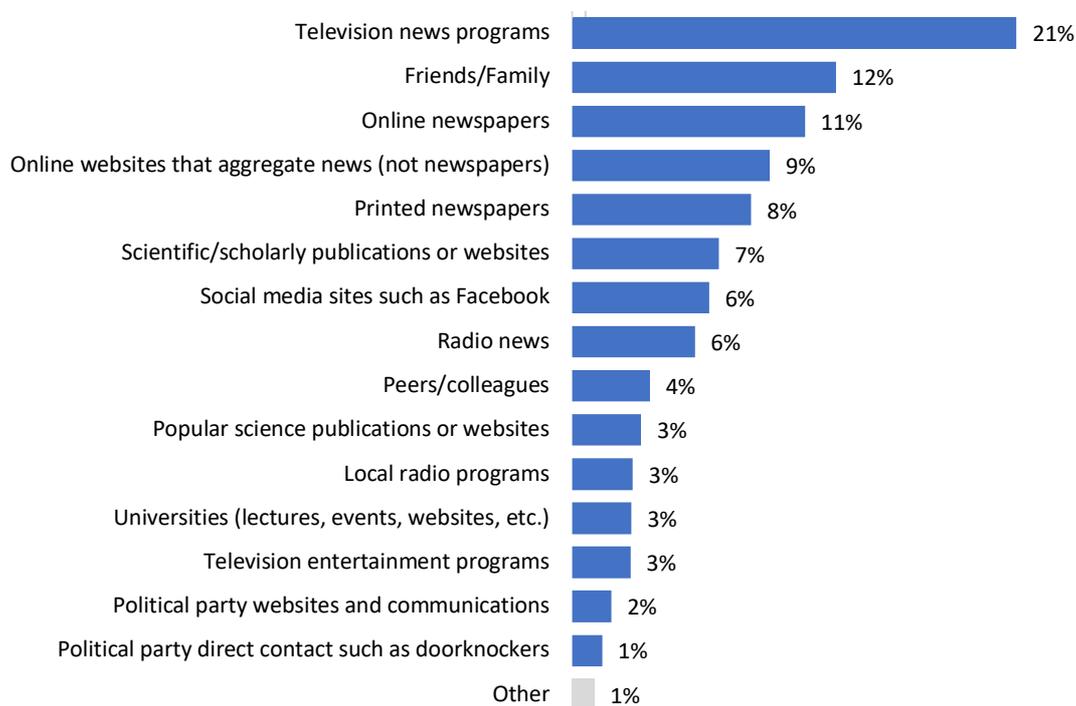| Source	%
Television news programs	21%
Friends/Family	12%
Online newspapers	11%
Online websites that aggregate news (not newspapers)	9%
Printed newspapers	8%
Scientific/scholarly publications or websites	7%
Social media sites such as Facebook	6%
Radio news	6%
Peers/colleagues	4%
Popular science publications or websites	3%
Local radio programs	3%
Universities (lectures, events, websites, etc.)	3%
Television entertainment programs	3%
Political party websites and communications	2%
Political party direct contact such as doorknockers	1%
Other	1%

Figure 2: Most important source for general information
Q: If you want to learn or stay informed about an issue or development in society, where do you go for information, generally speaking?
% of respondents who ranked a given source as the most important (N = 1,046)

When we asked respondents where they turn to get general information 'about an issue or development in society' we see a very different pattern (see Figure 2). Here television news programs are the most important source, friends/family are second, followed by online newspapers, online websites that aggregate news, and printed newspapers. Many of these sources abide by journalistic standards so viewers/readers will be likely to receive quite reliable information. However, this does of course depend on the source and the quality of reporting in the areas they are covering.

Social media sites such as Facebook, and television entertainment programs feature much lower on the list.

RESEARCH FINDING 1: The results reported above demonstrate that when it comes to general information people turn to a number of conventional sources such as newspapers and family and friends. When it comes to health information however respondents frequently turn to public authorities such as their doctor, the nurse hotline and public hospital websites.

2. HOW MUCH TRUST DO WE HAVE IN THESE SOURCES?

An important question underpinning these findings is how trust interacts with frequency of use. In our survey we asked about trust in the sources that respondents nominated as most important We asked whether they had a great deal of trust, quite a lot of trust, not very much trust or none at all? Below we report percentages of those who said they had a 'great deal of trust' or 'quite a lot of trust' (i.e., a trusting response toward a given source).
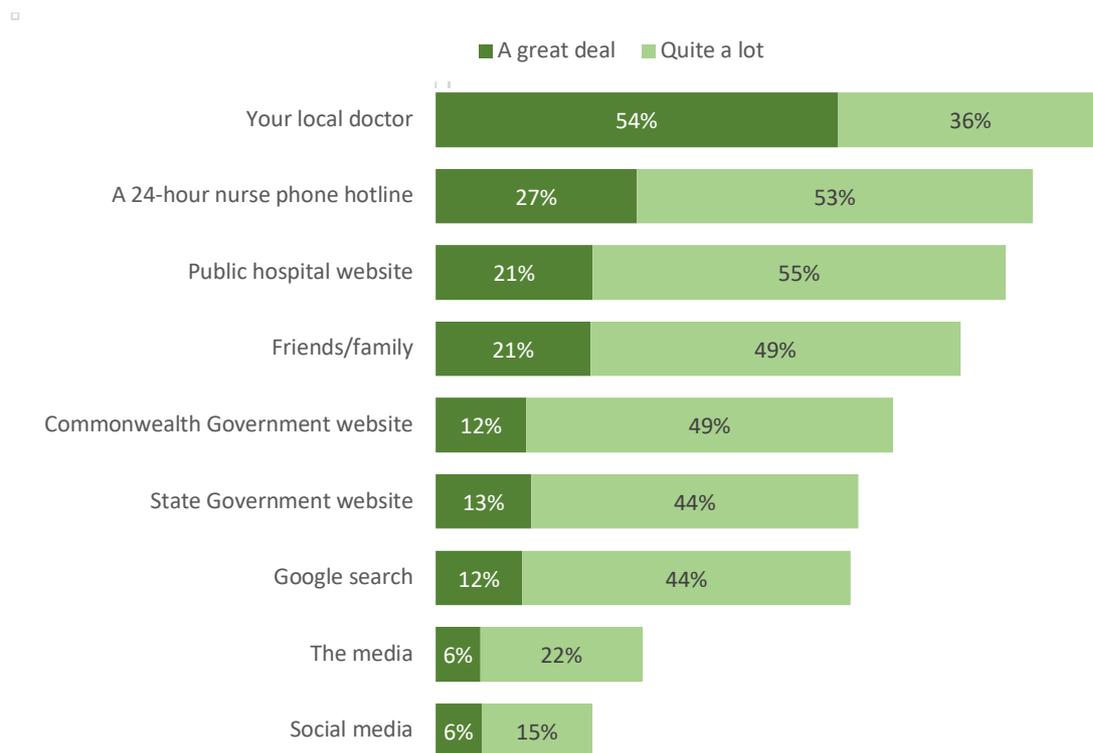
Health information

Figure 3: Trust in sources for health information
Q: How much trust do you have in these sources of health information?
% of respondents who indicated a given source among their top five sources of health information
(N = 186-926)

Figure 3 shows that an overwhelming majority (90%) trust information provided by their local doctor. This is an encouraging finding given how many people turn to their doctor for information (as seen in Figure 1 above). Large majorities also trusted information provided via a 24-hour nurse hotline and a public hospital website. At a time when government is distrusted by many it is somewhat surprising that even the Commonwealth Government and State Government websites were trusted by majorities. Health seems to be an issue where the public trusts the government not to engage in partisan fights and deliver impartial information.

Above we reported that Google and social media are quite important sources for many people when it comes to health information. Yet, when we asked how much individuals trusted these sources, they nominated Google and social media as the *least* trusted sources.

General information

A great deal ■ **Quite a lot** ■

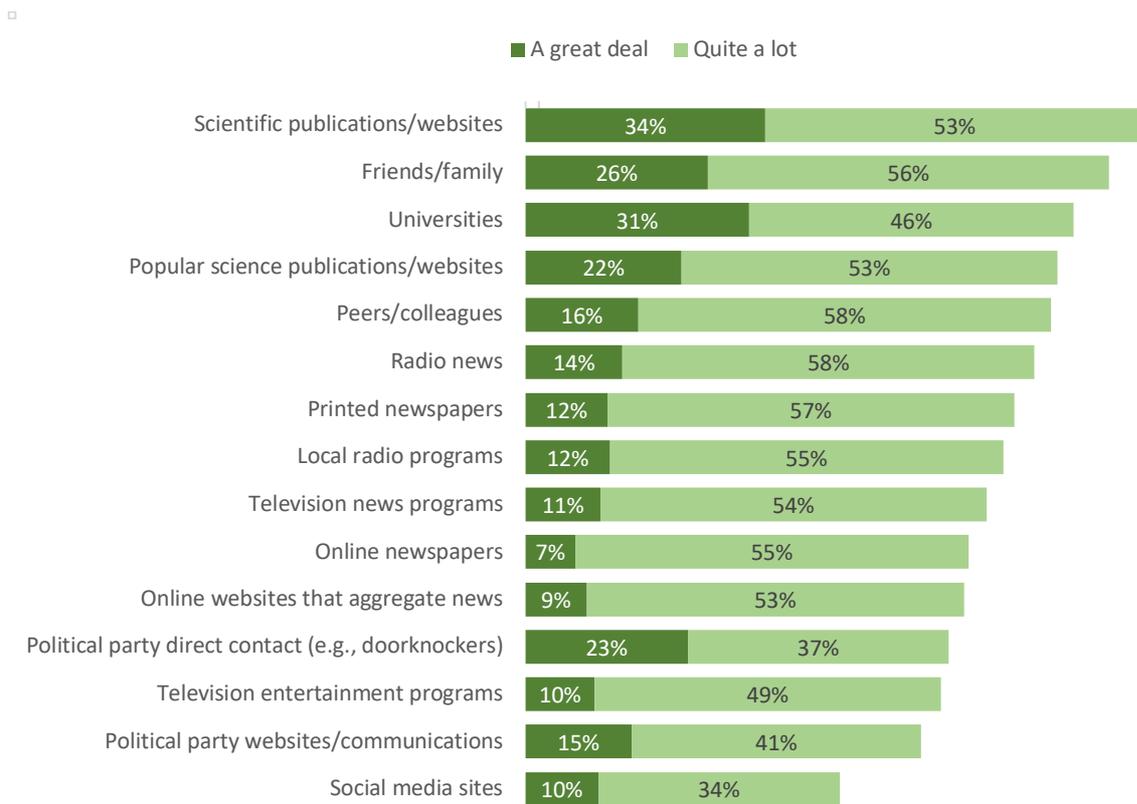| Source	A great deal	Quite a lot
Scientific publications/websites	34%	53%
Friends/family	26%	56%
Universities	31%	46%
Popular science publications/websites	22%	53%
Peers/colleagues	16%	58%
Radio news	14%	58%
Printed newspapers	12%	57%
Local radio programs	12%	55%
Television news programs	11%	54%
Online newspapers	7%	55%
Online websites that aggregate news	9%	53%
Political party direct contact (e.g., doorknockers)	23%	37%
Television entertainment programs	10%	49%
Political party websites/communications	15%	41%
Social media sites	10%	34%

Figure 4: Trust in sources for general information
Q: How much do your trust do you have in these sources of general information?
% of respondents who indicated a given source among their top five sources of general information
(N = 68-635)

When respondents were asked about how much they trusted sources they turned to for general information about society, scientific/scholarly publications were the most trusted source, followed by friends and family, universities, and popular science publications (see Figure 4). It should however be noted that these are among the least used sources.

For more frequently used sources such as printed newspapers, television news programs and online newspapers majorities expressed a somewhat less positive but still trusting attitude.

Social media sites such as Facebook, and political party websites were the least trusted sources.

RESEARCH FINDING 2: In regards to general information the sources people frequently turn to are trusted to a moderate degree but the most trusted sources are turned to infrequently. We see a very different pattern for health information. The most widely used sources (such as a doctor or nurse hotline) are also the most trusted.

3. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings presented above have various policy implications.

1. Data collected in our Lab – as well as other international studies – suggest that doctors and other medical professionals are among the most trusted of all public authorities. Universities are also among the most trusted of all public organisations. This is consistent with international trends.

2. Given that for general information authoritative sources are turned to less frequently than for health information it is worth thinking creatively about how these experts can help inform public discussion and inject themselves into public debate. Expert-led third party fact checking may be one avenue to do so and the Lab is pursuing research on the efficacy of fact checking.

3. When it comes to health information, it is clear that many of us turn to experts and trust the information they provide us with. Despite phenomena such as the anti-vaxxer movement, health seems in many ways protected from the erosion in trust that has affected many other areas of society. There is a deep and ongoing debate about the bases of medical authority, but generally speaking, the health professions – and medicine in particular – are known to have relatively high impact on policies and choices related to their field. Our research supports that a part of this impact is due to public trust.

4. This is also corroborated by our previous findings. A survey the Lab conducted last year showed that Australians are much more likely to support a policy intervention to deal with anti-microbial resistance when it is put forward by 'medical scientists' as opposed to 'the government in Canberra.'[i]

5. But health and other authorities do not act in a vacuum. They need to communicate in an environment where there is a lot of swirling background noise produced by the media and social media (a frequently turned to source) in particular. Government and health authorities can play an important role in communicating correct information, but they no longer have the stage to themselves as they did in the past. This requires of them a delicate balancing act whereby they try to communicate risk while mitigating the harm that such information may cause when communicated through various platforms.

6. Tech companies such as Google and Facebook will have to make decisions about when to censor information that is harmful to public health. Mark Zuckerberg has warned about the danger of his company becoming the 'arbiter of truth.' But the unambiguous fact is that Zuckerberg and others have important responsibilities. How information circulates on their platforms is now, quite literally, a matter of life or death. Expert advice should be leveraged to help them make decisions and increase the rate at which expert advice is seen by users.

POLICY IMPLICATION: The expertise of public authorities is drawn on quite frequently by members of the public when it comes to health information. This is less true for general information. Given this, we should think of ways that trusted authorities (such as scientists and experts from universities) can inject themselves into public debate to improve the quality of public discussion—in ways that they have been quite successfully doing in regards to health. Future research from the Lab will explore some potential mechanisms to achieve this including a current study exploring the efficacy of expert-based independent third-party fact checking.

METHODOLOGY

This research memo reports on findings from a representative survey of 1,046 Australians – conducted as part of the broader Australian Cooperative Election Survey. The data was collected by polling company YouGov in March 2019. The sample was balanced on key demographic characteristics including age, gender, education and location to be broadly representative of the general population.

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[i] Martin, A., Gravelle, T.B., Baekkeskov, E., Lewis, J., Kashima, Y. 2019. Enlisting the support of trusted sources to tackle policy problems: The case of antimicrobial resistance. *PLoS ONE* 14(3): e0212993: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0212993