



# Science Under Siege

The Battle Between Viral Misinformation  
and Shared Belief in the Value of Science

Survey of 2,000+ American adults, sponsored by Bayer



## INTRODUCTION

# A Harris Poll survey of over 2,000 US adults, commissioned by Bayer, reveals a profound **“Misinformation Paradox”** around science that cuts at the heart of American life.

While Americans roundly blame social media for the spread of false health and science information, these platforms are the public’s primary source for such news. This reliance is creating a pervasive, entrenched, “headline-only” culture where the majority of those who share health information online *admit to doing so based on the headline alone*, without reading the full article. The result is a rapid, unchecked cycle of misinformation that Americans agree has worsened significantly over the last five years — leading to widespread anger, confusion, and — most of all — concern for their family’s well-being.

The survey further highlights a widening generational trust gap around experts in science, a pattern that dovetails with anxiety around the future of US scientific leadership.

Nearly half of young adults ages 18-34 now attribute misinformation about science and health in the media and online to medical doctors (48%) and scientists (43%), with about 1-in-5 (16% and 20%, respectively) expressing *distrust in these traditional experts*. This skepticism coincides with *pessimism regarding America’s global standing*: only about 1-in-5 Americans (19%) now believe the US currently leads China in scientific research, sparking fears of a lost “space race” in the 21st century.

Despite all these challenges, there’s still reason to be positive — a rare bipartisan consensus on the fundamental value of science.

*Large majorities of both Republicans and Democrats agree that rigorous science is essential for human progress and that the US must maintain its leading role in global scientific research.*

While the delivery of information is fractured and trust in experts and institutions is under pressure, the American public remains united in the belief that scientific advancement is crucial for improving quality of life and securing the nation’s future.

The following report details some of the key findings from our survey, with implications for what it means for Americans’ trust in science, and American science leadership more broadly, into the future.



# When it comes to information about health and science, **Americans regularly consume news on the same platforms they blame for misinformation.**

**Social media is the top source for information about health and science.** 3-in-4 Americans (75%) now get health and science information from social media at least monthly, and nearly 4-in-10 (38%) get this information from social media *on a daily basis*.

Using social media as a primary source for health and science news (32%) outpaces TV news (25%), newspapers and news websites (13%), AI (7%), government agencies (6%) or non-governmental organizations (2%).

**Despite social media being a heavily used source, 80% blame social media platforms for the spread of false or misleading information about science and health in the media and online.** Content creators in particular are widely blamed for spreading misinformation and undermining the experts.

**There is also a prevalent “headline only” culture when it comes to science and health news.** More than half of Americans (53%) have shared articles related to health or science with someone they know in the past month. Among those who do share this information, 75% share articles based on the headline alone *without reading the full article first*.



Believe online content creators are very much or somewhat to blame for misinformation about science and health



Are very or somewhat concerned about online content creators attacking or undermining scientific research and expertise



Believe that false and misleading information on health and science is a bigger problem now compared to five years ago

**Due to their widespread reliance on social media, Americans are regularly receiving — and spreading — health misinformation, even before they digest the facts.**



## THE EMOTIONAL TOLL OF MISINFORMATION

# The flow of misinformation about health and science is causing **anger, confusion, and insecurity.**

**False or misleading information about science and health**, encountered in the media and online, is a major concern on Americans' minds, with nearly 9-in-10 (88%) concerned about it.

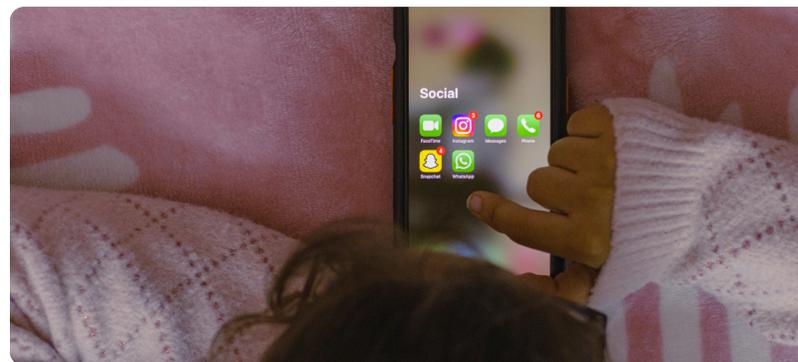
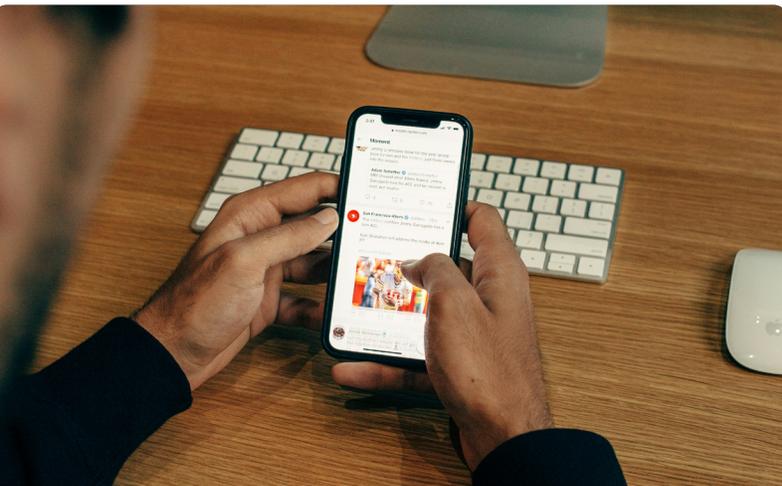
**They're feeling the impact in more ways than one.** Not only does encountering this misinformation leave them feeling angry and confused, it is causing them stress. Large majorities say that misinformation leaves them feeling worried about their own, or their family's, well-being.

# 83%

feel angry when encountering false or misleading information about science and health

# 82%

worry about the well-being of themselves and their families due to misinformation



*The challenges involved in discerning what's real are putting a strain on American households. Rampant misinformation about health and science is more than annoying — it's become a mental health and safety issue.*



## THE GENERATIONAL TRUST GAP

# 1-in-5 young adults distrust doctors and scientists as sources of information about health and science.

**It's no surprise that 18-34 year olds are now relying on social media to keep in touch.** But they're relying on social media for information on their health too. And in fact, social media is a primary source of information about science and health for about half of 18-34 year olds today.

**This reliance on social media may be impacting trust in the experts.** Nearly half of 18-34-year-olds blame doctors and scientists for providing false or misleading information; and roughly 1-in-5 18-34-year-olds somewhat or completely distrust medical doctors (16%) and scientists (20%) as sources of information on health and science.

In fact, more 18-34-year-olds would trust a friend or family member with first-hand experience (80%) as a source of information on science and health than they would trust scientists (75%).



### 48%

of 18-34-year-olds blame medical doctors for false or misleading information about science and health in the media and online

### 51%

of 18-34-year-olds say social media is their primary source for science and health information; yet only 12% of 55+ Americans say the same

### 43%

of 18-34-year-olds blame scientists for providing false or misleading information about science and health in the media and online

### **Younger Americans are also more desensitized to the effects of health and science**

**misinformation.** While more than 9-in-10 (92%) older Americans age 65+ report being angry about misinformation in health and science, less than 3-in-4 (74%) younger Americans age 18-34 feel the same way.

*As misinformation becomes more rampant, especially on social media, a whole generation may be less likely to trust the experts on important topics like science and health.*



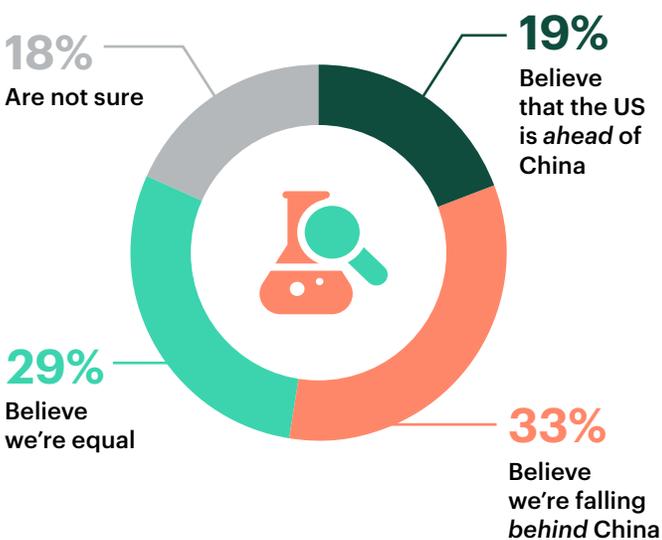
## ANXIETY ABOUT US SCIENCE LEADERSHIP

# More Americans feel we're **falling behind** rather than staying ahead.

**Americans want to lead on science.** 9-in-10 Americans agree (90%) that the US *should* play a leading role in global scientific research.

**But far fewer think we actually are leading.** Only 1-in-5 believe that the US is ahead of China when it comes to scientific research — *while nearly twice as many believe we're falling behind China.*

### WHEN IT COMES TO SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH...



**If the government funds can't help us lead, who do Americans think should step in?**

**When asked who should fund scientific research if the government was not able to, Americans primarily pointed to:**

- Businesses (23%)
- Nonprofits/NGOs (19%)
- Universities/educational institutions (12%)

**Americans are pessimistic about the future of scientific leadership.** Although 9-in-10 Americans believe that we should play a leading role, far fewer (69%) believe that the US *will* be a world leader in scientific research a decade from now.



*The competition to be the world leader in scientific research has become the new "space race," and many Americans believe the US is losing it.*



## THE GOOD NEWS

# The data points to a **rare bipartisan consensus** on the perceived value of science.

**Both Republicans and Democrats hold very positive views of science.** A large majority of both Democrats and Republicans, across all ages, believe that scientific advances over the past 50 years have had a *positive effect on society*. Both sides also agree that rigorous science is necessary *for continued human progress*.

**Both Republicans and Democrats agree that science is necessary to stay on top.** 9-out-of-10 Democrats *and* Republicans believe that the US should play a leading role in global scientific research.



**Both sides of the aisle respect and admire scientists.** There's overwhelming agreement that *today's US scientists are smart* (87% of Republicans and 94% of Democrats) and that *they improve people's quality of life* (80% of Republicans and 90% of Democrats).

71% + 82%  
of Republicans of Democrats

believe that scientific advances over the past 50 years have had a positive effect on society

88% + 92%  
of Republicans of Democrats

agree that rigorous science is necessary for continued human progress

90% + 92%  
of Republicans of Democrats

agree that the US should play a leading role in global scientific research

**Despite stories of deep political divides on the topic, Americans across both parties agree that science is necessary and important for the country's future.**



## WHAT IT ALL MEANS

Despite a public that is emotionally exhausted by misinformation and becoming more suspicious of uncredible opinions they encounter online, Americans remain remarkably united in the belief that science has a positive impact on their lives and that US scientific leadership on the global stage is a necessity.

Navigating today's volatile information environment is a challenge, but countering misinformation and championing scientific research is a mission worth the effort. By supporting both the science, the scientific process, and the experts who conduct it, we ensure that innovation continues to drive human progress. Americans want credible science.

## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The research was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bayer among 2,023 US adults. The survey was conducted February 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>, 2026.

Raw data were weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, household income, employment status, and political party affiliation, to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Poll surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within  $\pm 2.5$  percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

## ABOUT THE HARRIS POLL

For more than 60 years, The Harris Poll has been a leader in social and market research, helping organizations navigate complexity and understand cultural change. From emerging technologies to generational values, Harris insights help leaders make data-driven decisions that build stronger brands and deeper connections.

