

**DAILY COVID-19 Misinformation and Scam Report****Date:** 04/15/2020

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**Executive Summary**

As of April 15, 2020, COSMOS has 344 COVID-19 misinformation items in the database, reflecting a 2.4% increase in content over the past 24 hours. Critical to this report would be input from Arkansas consumers; to date, zero reports have been received from the website. Focus for the near term is the disbursement of stimulus checks to consumers and how fraudulent schemes and/or misinformation extorts consumers. Websites are the top source of misinformation about COVID-19 being used for cross-media campaigns into social media.

**Key Insights**

American consumers want to secure 'deals' and speed up delivery of their stimulus checks; they are in reception mode for ways to obtain income quickly. Smishing is on the rise.<sup>1</sup> Consumers are receiving fake offers and claims via text messaging. One scam that is currently circulating in Arkansas and other US regions is a text message stating "Walmart is giving away free groceries worth \$250 to everyone this week to support the nation." The text features a link to an external website that is used to collect sensitive information from anyone who clicks on it. This shortened link has been customized to look authentic. In the aforementioned scam, the link is <http://bit.ly/WALMART-Groceries>. Clicking on this link may result in malware infection and/or requests for sensitive information in order to claim the offer. Similar scams are circulating, some with different amounts, store names and malicious motives.

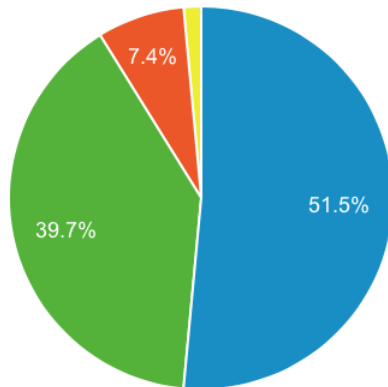
Social media platforms are still used to spread the messaging from websites and links to misinformation articles and posts.

Overall, the top sources being used to spread COVID-19 misinformation are: Websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

**Website Traffic:** Since the creation of the COVID-19 misinformation website, 277 users have visited the website. A traffic increase of 6.5% was registered for April 14. Out of these 19 users, 17 were from the US, eight from Arkansas, six of which visited the website from the greater Little Rock area. The majority of the overall traffic has been through the direct input of the website address, clicking on links in social media, clicking on referral links from sites other than social media and organic search engine result clicks. Paid traffic options through pay-per-click services, display advertisements, media buying or social have not been utilized.

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<sup>1</sup> the fraudulent practice of sending text messages purporting to be from reputable companies in order to induce individuals to reveal personal information, such as passwords or credit card numbers.



- Direct
- Social
- Referral
- Organic Search

Overall Traffic Sources April 6 - April 14, 2020.

## Recommendations -

Consumers remain gullible<sup>2</sup> and when shown misleading articles in reference to COVID-19, only 30% of people are able to recognize that information is untrue.<sup>3</sup> People are less likely to share COVID-19 misinformation after being “nudged” to consider the accuracy of an unrelated headline.<sup>4</sup>

In order to support this ‘nudge’ - the following two proposals should be considered:

1. Initiate a coordinated social media campaign via the two offices’ public affairs teams - with emphasis placed on the website.
2. Create short attention grabbing infographics to be distributed via social media. An example (pictured to the right) is the Federal Trade Commission’s infographic about COVID-19 also located at the following link: [Infographic for Keep Calm and Avoid Coronavirus Scams](https://www.ftc.gov/infographic/keep-calm-and-avoid-coronavirus-scams)



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/07/its-not-easy-ordinary-citizens-identify-fake-news/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-avoid-misinformation-about-covid-19-180974615/>