1 Title: Trust in experts during an epidemic

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3 Abstract:
Trust in science and experts is extremely important in times of epidemics to ensure compliance with public health measures. Yet little is known about how this trust evolves while an epidemic is underway. Understanding these processes is vital for policy makers who face rapidly evolving situations while preventing small-scale outbreaks from escalating into large-scale emergencies. In this paper, we seek to understand the dynamics of trust in science and experts in real-time as the high-impact epidemic of Coronavirus (COVID-19) unfolds in Italy, by drawing on digital trace and survey data collected from three online platforms: Twitter, Telegram, and Facebook. Our data reveal that by the end of March 2020, scientifically-grounded beliefs related to COVID-19 were widespread in Northern Italy. Trust in science emerges as a strong predictor of scientifically-grounded beliefs about COVID-19 as well as support for containment policies. However, over time as the epidemic escalates, we detect an erosion in trust in science and scientific experts across our different data sources. Using a novel survey experiment, we find that those holding incorrect beliefs about COVID-19 give no or lower importance to information when the source of such information is known to be scientific.

4: Data description:
Online survey experiment administered through Facebook and Telegram; Twitter analysis.

5. JEL codes: I12, I20

6 Keywords: COVID-19, trust in science, experts, survey experiment, containment

Link: https://osf.io/zb9t2/