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Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Trusted voices

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Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report

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The Culture, Media and Sport Committee

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The current staff of the Committee are Lucy Bishop (Committee Operations Assistant), Andy Boyd (Committee Operations Manager), Dr Conor Durham (Committee Specialist), Ollie Florence (Senior Media and Communications Officer), Natalia Janiec-Janicki (Second Clerk), Lois Jeary (Committee Specialist), Duma Langton (Committee Specialist), Olivia Rose (Media and Communications Officer), and Ben Sneddon (Clerk).

Rosie Akeroyd, then Committee Specialist, also supported the Committee in its work on this inquiry.

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6188; the Committee's email address is CommonsCMS@parliament.uk.

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Summary

The pandemic has brought home just how vital it is to be able to access authoritative information. We highlighted in our 2020 report on misinformation how online hoaxes and conspiracies had been allowed to spread across social media. However, the problem is not confined to Covid-19. It impacts a range of issues, such as climate change, 5G, water fluoridation, elections and those claiming UK terror attacks have been staged. This makes it all the more important that there are prominent trustworthy actors - or "trusted voices" - who can provide evidenced accurate information and communicate it an accessible way. We wanted to see who those trusted voices are and whether, in particular, the National Academies should be more widely known by the public as one such trusted voice.

We found that, while there are many facets to what makes a voice trusted, common views did emerge, including integrity, authority and a lack of vested interests. We also heard that there is no one single voice: different communities or demographics may turn to different ones; and that, despite its many detractors, many people continue to place their trust in traditional media and that the media took its responsibility seriously.

Given the Government's role as a trusted voice during the pandemic, we were concerned to hear about the shortcomings of its communications, with limitations with both the information transmitted and the methods by which it was done. We believe that the Government could do more to utilise the vast number of experts it employs, building on the critical role played by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer during the pandemic to engage publicly in issues of national concern.

Finally, a major focus of our inquiry was examining the role of the National Academies as a trusted voice. We heard a consistent message that their public profile was low, but there was no consensus on the extent to which it should be more prominent. However, the extent of their public funding requires stringent accountability. This is an opportune moment for the Government and Academies to clarify the role that they should play in the public information landscape and ensure they have the resources to do so.

1 Introduction

1. The internet has democratised the information environment: anyone can get their message out and attempt to find an audience willing to hear it. It has given us considerable agency: we can choose for ourselves what sources we want to use for information, consume these sources when we want and block sites or users that we don't want to see. But we are not fully in control: algorithms and editors determine everything from the order in which sources are ranked on search engines to what content we are sent on social media.

2. The Covid-19 pandemic made clear just how vital it is to be able to access authoritative information. In February 2020, the World Health Organisation warned that, alongside the outbreak of COVID-19, the world faced an 'infodemic', an unprecedented overabundance of information—both accurate and false—that prevented people from accessing authoritative, reliable guidance about the virus.[1] Evidence we received in our Misinformation in the Covid-19 Infodemic inquiry in 2020 highlighted how hostile actors were using the pandemic to damage trust in institutions, leading us to taking evidence from Facebook, Google and Twitter twice on how they were tackling misinformation and disinformation.[2]

Our inquiry

3. The need to be able to access authoritative information makes it vital that there are trusted voices who can provide evidenced, accurate information and communicate it an accessible way. Wishing to complement our previous work on tackling the malign influence of misinformation, we launched this inquiry in July 2022 to seek to understand what contributes to establishing trusted voices and to examine the role of the media, the Government and public institutions in acting as, and supporting, those voices. In particular, we wanted to scrutinise the part played by the National Academies, which represent the UK's science, arts, engineering and medical research communities, in ensuring the public has easy access to good quality information.

4. During the course of our inquiry, the Online Safety Act, which includes a focus on tackling illegal misinformation and disinformation, received Royal Assent. We and our predecessor Committee have considered issues relating to the provisions of that Act in previous work and we therefore did not seek to revisit the legislation in this inquiry.[3]

5. Following the launch of this inquiry, responsibility for digital and technology policy was transferred from the then Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology in February 2023. As a result, responsibility for parliamentary scrutiny of this area of policy was largely transferred to the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee. However, the evidence we received deserves bringing to the attention of the House and the conclusions and recommendations

1 World Health Organisation, *Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report - 13* (2 February 2020), p 2

2 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Second Report of Session 2019–21, *Misinformation in the Covid-19 Infodemic*, HC 234, para 4

3 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Eighth Report of Session 2012–22, *The Draft Online Safety Bill and the legal but harmful debate*, HC 1039 and Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, First Report of Session 2022–2, *Amending the Online Safety Bill*, HC 271.

that we make in this Report go beyond the work of a single department and require cross-Government coordination to ensure that trusted voices are recognised and accessible to everyone who needs them.

6. During our inquiry we received 53 pieces of written evidence. We held six oral evidence sessions where we heard from: founder of MoneySavingExpert, Martin Lewis; the BBC's disinformation and social media correspondent, Marianna Spring; academics; fact-checkers from Full Fact and Channel 4 News; national newspapers; Sense About Science; the Science Media Centre; the National Academies; civil servants; and the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Paul Scully MP. We would like to thank everyone who contributed and gave evidence to this inquiry.

2 What is a trusted voice?

7. Trust is fundamental to a well-functioning society. The extent to which people trust a person or an institution influences their opinions and their behaviour. Its presence can lead to tangible benefits, such as increased productivity and profitability in business, and intangible ones such as a sense of security. Its absence erodes relationships and, at a national level, damages the foundations upon which a government's legitimacy is built.[4]

8. Given the importance of the relationship between patient and doctor, it is unsurprising that health workers consistently score highly in surveys about trust. The NHS is the most trusted public service in the UK, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), with 80% of the population reporting that they trusted it.[5] Meanwhile, the most recent Ipsos Veracity Index survey found that two of the three most trusted professions in the UK are nurses (88%) and doctors (85%). Politicians were the least trusted at 9% followed by advertising executives at 16%. Pollsters such as Ipsos achieved a rating of 45%.[6]

9. When asked what it is that makes one institution or individual trusted and another not, witnesses told us that motivation of the source plays a key role. Professor Rhiannon Mason, Professor of Heritage and Cultural Studies at Newcastle University, told us that one reason why people had high levels of trust in museums was that they saw them as operating for the benefit of society rather than for personal gain.[7] Research by the University of Leeds and Leeds Trinity University found that, during the pandemic, many participants particularly relied on the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, as they felt that his advice was "in their best interests and in the interests of the nation as a whole".[8] Tracey Brown, Director of Sense About Science, told us that "those perceived not to have any skin in the game do well. Those who palpably hold others to account do well too".[9]

10. Martin Lewis, founder of MoneySavingExpert, whom The Guardian once described as "the most trusted man in Britain",[10] told us the perception of trustworthiness involved a range of factors:

> Some of this is instinct; it is pure instinct and seeing the white of the eye. Some of it is noting the consistency in the way that people behave and what they say, and consistency is very important. Transparency, openness and honesty is important, too, and an attempt to be unbiased. I say an attempt because we all have biases. It is impossible not to be biased.[11]

11. We heard that the trustworthiness of a source partly came down to the quality of the evidence that that person or organisation used to back up their view. Grant Hill-Cawthorne, House of Commons Librarian and Managing Director of Research and Information, said that Commons' researchers wanted to know the basis of someone's evidence, such as how reliable the study was or the methodology used was. Patrick Vollmer, Director of Library

4 *The Neuroscience of Trust*, Hansard Business Review (January 2017)
5 Office for National Statistics, *Trust in government, UK* (13 July 2022)
6 Ipsos, *Veracity Index 2023* (14 December 2023)
7 Q37
8 Professor Carmen Clayton, Rafe Clayton, and Marie Potter MTV0034
9 Sense About Science MTV0029
10 *The Money Saving Expert: how Martin Lewis became the most trusted man in Britain*, The Guardian, 31 January 2019
11 Q2

Services at the House of Lords Library, said that the internet has made such interrogation even more important.[12] Librarians were rated at 86% in the Ipsos Veracity Index, below only nurses and airline pilots.[13] Will Moy, then chief executive of Full Fact, said that fact-checking was "largely about reinserting shades of grey into things that other people have presented as black and white".[14] However, the need to be thorough often meant trusted voices could be dull, according to Mr Lewis, as they are "absolutely rigidly entrapped with the need for completeness and accuracy rather than being [able] to communicate in a more colloquial and easier terminology".[15]

12. We heard that no single voice could be trusted by all demographics. Professor Rhiannon Mason, Professor of Heritage and Cultural Studies at Newcastle University, said that people came from different backgrounds and consumed information in different ways. She told us that what was needed was "an information knowledge ecosystem, which is strong, diverse and robust enough to catch people where they encounter it at multiple points".[16]

13. We were also told that a trusted voice did not need to be right all the time. Areeq Chowdhury, Head of Policy, Data and Digital Technologies at the Royal Society, told us that being trusted involved being "open to challenge and open about mistakes".[17] Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, said that the public trust people more "who are willing to admit mistakes":

> They do not trust a politician coming on and saying, "We are sticking with this policy even though patently the facts are completely different now and they do not support what we are doing". That kind of thing erodes trust, and it is understandable.[18]

Fiona Fox, chief executive of the Science Media Centre, suggested that the "relative trust deficit" that politicians had would be rectified "if they were happy to correct their errors, admit to uncertainties, see different sides and, yes, change their minds when the evidence changes".[19]

14. We also heard that there were other, less tangible factors at play in explaining which voices people choose to trust. Bob Ward argued that, in many cases, people are driven by "a desire not just to find accurate information but to be part of a particular tribe or identity, and it is less important that the information is accurate than that you are seen to agree".[20] Dr Adam Wright, Head of Public Policy at the British Academy, told us that a reason why some people were drawn towards conspiracy theories, and the voices that spread them, was "precisely because that gives them a feeling that they are in the know, and that they know something that other people do not. That gives them a voice and makes them feel empowered".[21]

12 Q66
13 Ipsos, *Veracity Index 2023* (14 December 2023)
14 Q234
15 Q16
16 Q58
17 Q259
18 Q158
19 Q236
20 Q168
21 Q282

The Role of the Media

15. Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, reports that the BBC remains the news organisation with the highest cross-platform audience reach, used by 73% of all people aged over 16. BBC One, ITV, the BBC News Channel and Sky News Channel all saw decreases in reach from 2022 to 2023, but viewer attitudes to measures such as quality, accuracy, trustworthiness and impartiality remained generally consistent with 2022. In terms of newspapers, Ofcom found that The Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday remains the most widely-read news title overall, whilst The Guardian/Observer are the most widely-read digital titles.[22]

16. Martin Lewis told that us that, although he was one of those who criticised the mainstream media, it was "a good place to start for factual information".[23] Professor Jonathan Ball, Professor of Virology and Director of the Wolfson Centre for Global Virus Research at the University of Nottingham, told us that the "vast majority of mainstream broadsheet, 'red-top' print and online science journalists seek and usually provide accurate and balanced information, irrespective of the political leaning of the parent company/publication". He noted that a lack of subject knowledge could result in "potentially misleading" science articles, but that this "isn't rife".[24]

17. Dr Maria Kyriakidou and Professor Stephen Cushion of the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University reported that the BBC was the most trusted broadcaster in their research, both in terms of its accuracy (77% of participants) and impartiality (56% of participants):[25] However, Professor Carmen Clayton, Professor of Family and Cultural Dynamics at Leeds Trinity University, told us that, while research participants from different backgrounds and diverse circumstances regarded the BBC as a trusted source during the pandemic, some felt that it had been "getting too close to the Prime Minister and the Government", leading to "a level of distrust, a level of scepticism, and they would turn to other sources."[26]

18. Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, told us that the wider media was "not taking its responsibilities seriously enough"[27] and that newspapers were part of a "mad culture" which would label a Government U-turn a bad thing, "even if they have corrected and have now introduced a policy that is better". He added that, in many newspapers, opinion columns were "outright misinformation".[28]

19. However, Alison Phillips, Editor of the Daily Mirror, told us that she thought the trustworthiness of the established news organisations had "increased hugely" compared to the mid-1980s, with content being "far more informative, responsible and well thought through".[29] She told us that she had thought "long and hard" about running the story of Dominic Cumming's potential breach of Covid-19 lockdown rules in 2020 because:

22 Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK* (20 July 2022) and Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK 2022 report* (21 July 2022)
23 Q3
24 Professor Jonathan Ball (Professor of Virology and Director of the Wolfson Centre for Global Virus Research at The University of Nottingham) (MTV0047)
25 Dr Maria Kyriakidou; Prof Stephen Cushion (MTV0017)
26 Q56
27 Q138
28 Q158, Q139
29 Q443

> [w]hat if running this story destroys trust to such an extent that the public health message completely breaks down and then people stop abiding by the lockdown rules? I felt a personal weight of responsibility at that point, but we also felt the overwhelming need that that was in the public interest and that needed to be out there. Sometimes journalists were more concerned about the importance of trust than perhaps some of the people who were making the policy.[30]

20. David Dinsmore, Chief Operating Officer at News UK and former Editor of The Sun, told us that, during the pandemic, every journalist was trying to produce "as much trusted and trustworthy information as possible, asking questions when there were questions there to be asked but also getting across the key messages when they did have to be got across".[31] Additionally, Nick Hopkins, Executive Editor of News at the Guardian, told us that there was "a thirst for the slightly more reflective pieces" enabling readers to make sense of what they have been told.[32]

21. During the pandemic, the media had to navigate the issue of how to cover disinformation that was gaining traction while not giving it credibility. Nick Hopkins told us that newspapers could not ignore it but did not wish to give conspiracy theorists a platform either, and so they chose to "interrogate where this was coming from, who was speaking the anti-vax message, what were their credentials, what was the background to them, to unwrap the issue in that kind of context".[33] Peter Wright, Editor Emeritus, DMG Media, said that covering disinformation was "worth doing when something is causing clear damage" but he told us newspapers were "always aware of the risk that by giving someone publicity, even if it is negative publicity, there will be people who believe it. It is not easy".[34] Mr Dinsmore, however, told us that he had no concerns that covering these sorts of stories gave them credence. Instead, newspapers could highlight whether there is evidence to support a view or refute a deepfake.[35]

Fact-checkers

22. Accuracy in media reporting relies on fact-checking ahead of publication. The BBC, for example, requires in its editorial standards that "[we] must check and verify information, facts and documents, where required to achieve due accuracy".[36] With many sources of information not reaching these standards, there has been a rise in the number of fact-checking services, operated either as part of existing media organisations (such as BBC Verify and the Associated Press's AP Fact Check)[37] or as standalone services (such as Snopes and Full Fact).[38]

30 Q387
31 Q376
32 Q378
33 Q357
34 Q418
35 Q426
36 BBC, *Editorial Guidelines*, Section 3.3.6
37 Associated Press, AP Fact Check and BBC, Reality Check (accessed 7 March 2024)
38 Snopes.com and Full Fact (accessed 7 March 2024)

23. We heard from both independent and media organisations' fact-checkers during our inquiry and sought to understand how they can achieve and maintain a reputation as a trusted voice. Rebecca Skippage, Disinformation Editor at the BBC, told us that its fact-checking was underpinned by the BBC's "twin pillars" of impartiality and accuracy:[39]

> People can see how we operate. People can interrogate us. People can question and there is a simple process to go through if they feel that we have not done something correctly. We also show our workings out so people can understand how we have come to the conclusions that we have.[40]

Likewise, Georgina Lee from Channel 4 News FactCheck told us that the public could "reverse engineer" what fact-checkers had done to reach the conclusions that they have:

> We link to all the relevant sources. We show you what mathematical equations we might have used to reach an analytical finding, and then we situate the evidence in the context that it exists in, which might be, "We don't know something about this," or, "This is a patchy, imperfect dataset that we are using to approximate something." […], as the reader, you should be able to retrace our footsteps and reconstitute the workings.[41]

Will Moy of Full Fact said that trustworthy fact-checking linked to all its sources, provided context and helped the public to make up their own mind.[42]

24. However, Professor Harith Alani, Director of the Knowledge Media Institute at the Open University, argued that simply providing people with trusted information was not enough to curb misinformation, as demonstrated by the "continuous circulation of misinformation online regardless of repeated debunking and publications of corrective information by multiple authoritative sources and organisations".[43] Professor Neil Levy, a philosopher at the University of Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, believed that the single most important way to combat misinformation was to highlight consensus, while identifying but not censoring dissenting voices.[44]

25. **There is no one single trusted voice: different communities or demographics may turn to different ones. That that is as it should be, but the more the media seeks to understand and reflect the diversity of the country, the more it can provide the trusted voices that are vital in providing accurate information and tackling misinformation where it arises.**

39 Q193
40 Q193
41 Q193
42 Q225
43 Professor Harith Alani (MTV0012)
44 Professor Neil Levy (MTV0006)

3 The role of the Government

26. Ipsos's 2023 Veracity Index found that trust in Government ministers was at its lowest, with one in ten members of the public trusting them to tell the truth. Civil servants fared better, with more than half (51%) of people trusting them, equal to trust in "the ordinary man/woman on the street" and lawyers, but well below professors (76%), scientists (74%), and even football referees (60%).[45] Nonetheless, there is a critical role for the Government in being a trusted voice, to tackle the spread of disinformation, and to help the public to access and discern authoritative information for themselves.

27. The Government highlighted in evidence to us that tackling misinformation and disinformation could not rely on any one single approach.[46] The then Minister at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Paul Scully MP, emphasised to us that it needed a "multifaceted approach", including a range of legislative and non-legislative actions and working in collaboration with social media platforms, the media, society, industry and academia.[47]

Communicating with young people

28. Young people are turning away from traditional print and broadcast sources of news and information and towards online sources and social media. Ofcom reports that a large majority (83%) of 16–24 year olds consume news online, with 71% using social media instead of or in addition to news websites.[48] Among 12–15 year-olds, 39% use a BBC platform, but the next three most used individual sources for news are social media platforms: TikTok (28%), YouTube (25%) and Instagram (25%). One in ten of this age-group cited TikTok as their main source of news.[49]

29. Rebecca Skippage, Disinformation Editor at the BBC, told us that broadcasters needed to "be in those [social media] spaces" if they were to help prevent the spread of disinformation on social media and learn from "the disinformation merchants, because they are extremely good at getting people's attention":[50]

> We also need to metaphorically speak the language, so be able to authentically use the style, not in a cringe-worthy way, of TikTok, of Instagram. Have young people talking to young people to explain what can be incredibly complex concepts, but in that "Newsround" way you can always distil them down and if people want to know more you give them that option of an onward journey.[51]

45 Ipsos, *Veracity Index 2023* (14 December 2023)
46 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (MTV0053)
47 Q444
48 Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK*, (20 July 2023), p 8
49 Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK*, (20 July 2023), p 8. Figures for other social media: Facebook/Messenger (18%), Snapchat (15%), WhatsApp (15%) and X (12%).
50 Q187
51 Q229

Georgina Lee from Channel 4 News FactCheck told us of the speed with which social media trends change and stressed how important it was to respond to that change because "things become passé within weeks, months. A year is a decade virtually, so we are constantly iterating how we approach it".[52]

30. TikTok is the most popular social video platform among 15–24 year-olds, with users spending an average of 58 minutes per day on it.[53] Martin Lewis, founder of MoneySavingExpert, said that he started going on TikTok in response to the large numbers of financial TikTokers "who were talking balderdash."[54]

31. During the course of our inquiry, the Government banned TikTok on government electronic devices, following a security review of government data and how some platforms accessed and used sensitive information.[55] The UK Parliament also banned it from its network.[56] Speaking to us shortly after the ban was announced, Paul Scully MP, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, told us that he did not know whether his department had a TikTok account or whether the Government would continue to use TikTok as a way of communicating with young people.[57]

32. There is still some use of TikTok by Government as a means of communication. The Ministry of Defence operates an account, as does the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, who, when Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, was reported as believing "representatives of the people should engage with the public on the platforms that they actually use."[58] The Ministry of Justice owns relevant account names but does not operate on the platform.[59]

33. In March 2024, the US House of Representatives passed the bipartisan Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, which would ban TikTok or any other apps from ByteDance Ltd., if the app is not divested from its parent company.[60] The legislation is being considered in the Senate, with President Biden confirming he would sign it into law if it is passed.[61]

34. **The recent growth of TikTok and decisions to disengage from or potentially ban the platform demonstrates how swiftly sources of information can change. New apps and platforms rapidly become major players, shifting audience habits but also fragmenting the sources the public use for information. The Government must have a clear strategy for communicating with young people and adapting to the development of new apps and platforms which appeal to this audience.**

52 Q231
53 Ofcom, UK Media Nations (3 August 2023), p 3
54 Q12
55 Cabinet Office, *TikTok banned on UK government devices as part of wider app review* (16 March 2023)
56 *TikTok banned from UK Parliament over security concerns*, BBC News, 23 March 2023
57 Qq507–508
58 PQ 169204 [on Ministry of Defence: TikTok], 28 March 2023 and PQ 171424 [on Department for Energy Security and Net Zero: TikTok], 27 March 2023
59 PQ 171424 [on Ministry of Justice: TikTok], 27 March 2023
60 United States House of Representatives H.R. 7521 (EH) - Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (accessed 18 March 2023)
61 *US House passes bill to force ByteDance to divest TikTok or face ban*, Reuters, 14 March 2024

35. ***We recommend that the Government publishes advice for Government departments and their public bodies on communication intended for young people, including guidance on the use of new apps and platforms, including TikTok.***

Media literacy

36. Ofcom has reported that people overestimate their ability to spot misinformation. It found that, when research participants were shown social media posts and profiles, 69% said that they were confident they could identify misinformation and genuine posts, but the tests showed that only 22% were able to do so. Ofcom saw a similar pattern among older children aged 12–17: 74% were confident they could identify misinformation but only 11% were again able to do so. In addition, around a quarter of adults (24%) and children (27%) who believed that they were able to spot misinformation were unable to identify a fake social media profile in Ofcom's tests.[62]

37. Professor Julian McDougall, Professor of Media and Education and Head of the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University, called for media literacy to be put on the school curriculum. He believed that media literacy was a matter of social justice, stating that the people who needed media literacy skills the most are "often disadvantaged and vulnerable".[63] Likewise, Full Fact called for a statutory media literacy strategy and argued that the Bill should more clearly reflect that "action on bad information should begin with giving people information from non-partisan, authoritative sources that help them make up their own minds about what they are seeing".[64] IREX, a non-profit organization focusing on global development and education, highlighted that research had shown that integrating media literacy into school curricula elsewhere had led to a range of positive effects, including resilience to disinformation and improved critical thinking skills.[65]

38. Rebecca Skippage, Disinformation Editor at the BBC, told us that there was "a huge amount to be done around media literacy, particularly with children".[66] Georgina Lee from Channel 4 News FactCheck said that it was not possible for fact-checkers to correct everything but that they could help give people the tools to question information for themselves by modelling critical thinking and critical analysis. She believed that it was "not so much that we are just reporting on an individual story or just debunking an individual myth but, rather, that we are hoping to set people up as more engaged readers, viewers and consumers of news".[67] Marianna Spring, Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent at the BBC, told us that trying new ways of explaining to audiences how they are being targeted and helping them spot the true from the false was a "really important part of [her] job".[68]

39. In 2021, the then Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) launched an Online Media Literacy Strategy, with the aim of coordinating and extending the reach of media literacy work by 2024.[69] Its Online Media Literacy Taskforce includes

62 Ofcom, *The genuine article? One in three internet users fail to question misinformation* (29 March 2022)
63 Bournemouth University, Centre for Excellence in Media Practice (MTV0005)
64 Full Fact (MTV0050)
65 IREX (MTV0036)
66 Q187
67 Q233
68 Q349
69 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, *Online Media Literacy Strategy* (14 July 2021), p 4

representatives from tech platforms, civil society, academia, regulators and media organisations, and during 2022/23 their work focused on "hard-to-reach" users.[70] Its work includes encouraging organisations to direct users towards authoritative sources of information, including fact-checking organisations, and also encouraging them to promote political literacy, such as understanding the significance of "high-quality journalism in democratic society, and how and where to seek it out".[71] DCMS argued that this was "especially important during periods where it is inappropriate for the Government to direct this type of learning, such as election cycles".[72]

40. **We welcome the Government's recognition of the importance of media literacy skills and the creation of its Online Media Literacy Strategy and Taskforce to deliver on this. However, it is crucial that the impact of the Strategy is assessed as it progresses, both to ensure that it is on the right track and to inform future delivery.**

41. ***We recommend that, at the conclusion of the 2021–24 Online Media Literacy Strategy, the Government publishes a detail assessment of what the impact of this work has been, alongside a refreshed strategy for the forthcoming years.***

Counter Disinformation Unit

42. The Government's Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU)leads the operational response to disinformation for the UK Government and works with a range of partners, including other Government Departments, social media platforms, civil society groups and academia.[73] DCMS told us that the CDU had led the response to events with "an acute disinformation risk such as COVID-19 pandemic; the COP-26 summit; local, devolved, and general elections, and most recently the Russian invasion of Ukraine".[74] It worked with other Government departments to respond appropriately, for example, issuing a direct rebuttal on social media or running awareness raising campaigns to promote the facts. It also worked closely with the major social media platforms "to encourage them to cooperate at speed to swiftly remove harmful disinformation and coordinated inauthentic or manipulated behaviour where it goes against their Terms of Service".[75]

43. Big Brother Watch, the privacy campaign group, described the CDU as "one of the most opaque units in government outside of the security services".[76] It claimed that elected politicians and ex-Ministers were "not exempt from the CDU's monitoring" during the pandemic, using the example of Conservative MP David Davis after he questioned the modelling around Covid-19 at the start of the pandemic. The organisation stated that other MPs, including former and current ministers, had also been "affected by CDU's activities in relation to their criticism of government policies during the pandemic" but had chosen not to be named in its report.[77]

70 DCMS defines "hard to reach" as those who are disengaged with the issue of online safety, are either overconfident in their media literacy capabilities or do not have access to literacy education, or do not regularly use technology or have limited access to the internet. See Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, *Online Media Literacy Strategy* (14 July 2021), p 84

71 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (MTV0053)

72 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (MTV0053)

73 The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was responsible for the Counter Disinformation Unit until February 2023, when it transferred to the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

74 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (MTV0053)

75 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (MTV0053)

76 Big Brother Watch, *Ministry of Truth: The secretive government units spying on your speech* (January 2023), p 6

77 Big Brother Watch, *Ministry of Truth: The secretive government units spying on your speech* (January 2023), p 12

44. However, Paul Scully MP, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, told us that that the CDU did not monitor individual social media accounts but instead looked at trends, and that he was not aware that any MPs from either of the two major parties had had any of posts taken down.[78] He said that the CDU was "not some big, shady intelligence unit. It is trying to find trends that it can then say, "This is happening. What do you want to do about it?"[79] He added that the CDU did not "drill down into individuals" or delete material.[80]

45. Talitha Rowland, Deputy Director Security & Counter Disinformation at the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, told us that the CDU identified narratives that were "gaining traction" in a particular area and passed that knowledge to Government communicators who could then build that into their messaging:[81]

> To give an example, during Covid there were some fake emails about schools being able to get omicron tests and so on. As soon as that was identified as something that was starting to permeate through the information environment that was passed on to Government communicators, who issued a rapid rebuttal.[82]

46. **We are concerned about the lack of transparency and accountability of the CDU and the appropriateness of its reach.** ***We recommend that the Government commission and lay before Parliament an independent review of the activities and strategy of Counter Disinformation Unit within the next 12 months.***

GOV.UK

47. In 2012, the Government replaced its digital brands, Directgov and Business Link, with a single platform, GOV.UK. Prior to this, government websites had grown organically, with each department, agency and arms-length body having their own website. The Government wanted its new platform to provide a "simple, joined-up and personalised experience" for the public.[83] It now has more than 500,000 pages and averages 17.8m users a week.[84] However, we heard that it was not meeting all user needs.

48. Tracey Brown, Director of Sense About Science, described it as "difficult to navigate":[85]

> GOV.UK has for some time now been structured as though people's engagement with the Government is all about getting a passport or a driving licence, and not about people who want to engage in the work and outputs of Government Departments and how policies are made.[86]

49. Georgina Lee from Channel 4 News FactCheck described the site as useful but "quite labyrinthine". However, she recognised that its shortcomings were "not unique among websites of otherwise very reputable and useful sources that they are not laid out

78 Q493 and Qq 493–494
79 Q491
80 Q492
81 Q487
82 Q524
83 Government Digital Service, *Our strategy for 2021–2024* (20 May 2021)
84 Government Digital Service, *Our plans to improve navigation* (17 May 2021)
85 Q165
86 Q165

particularly easily".[87] She wanted to see a "grab-bag" of all documents relevant to an issue, such as press releases, impact assessments and Bill documents, in one place.[88] Will Moy, then chief executive of Full Fact, said that the site had "prioritised transactional public services over democratic accountability. I think it would be good to rebalance priorities on that front".[89] Martin Lewis, founder of MoneySavingExpert, told us that GOV.UK was " not very user friendly".[90]

50. In 2021, research by the Government Digital Service (GDS), which is responsible for GOV.UK, found that some people "felt lost on GOV.UK, overwhelmed by the volume of content and number of options available to them. Equally, users looking for specialist content struggled to find this using GOV.UK's primary navigation system".[91] Paul Scully MP, then Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy, acknowledged that the Government needed to "continually monitor how we can simplify [GOV.UK]".[92]

51. GDS is now approaching the end of its 2021–24 Strategy, which aims to "champion the needs of end users above all else, as [...] ensuring things work for end users is the only way to realise the efficiencies that come with digital transformation". Mission 1 of the strategy is to ensure that GOV.UK remains the single trusted source of information, guidance and services for the public.[93]

52. **The Government Digital Service has acknowledged that some users of GOV.UK have been lost and overwhelmed by the architecture of the website and the amount of information that it contains. While it has committed itself to making improvements, three years later the site is still not meeting user needs.** ***We recommend that the Government Digital Service undertake further work better to understand user needs for accessing information on GOV.UK, and that it provides us with its plans for this work, including a timescale for improvements, as part of the response to this report.***

87 Q248
88 Q249
89 Q249
90 Q16
91 Government Digital Service, *Our plans to improve navigation* (17 May 2021)
92 Q479
93 Government Digital Service, *Our strategy for 2021–2024* (20 May 2021)

4 Lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic

53. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the extent to which the Government itself was considered by the public to be a trusted voice was of critical importance. The evidence we received suggested that there were ways in which the Government could have improved its communication with the public and used the expertise of its own scientists to a far greater degree.

Government communications

54. Martin Lewis, founder of MoneySavingExpert, told us that the Government should have presented the "pros and cons" of policies because "an oversimplification of message made those people who were sceptical more and more angry all the way through it".[94] We heard concerns that the public lacked the information they needed to make informed decisions during the pandemic. Tracey Brown, Director of Sense About Science, told us that:

> Thousands upon thousands of people were trying to get answers from Government Departments about the reasoning, the scale of risk and how to trade one risk off through another […] As a bus driver, do I leave a teenager on the bus stop on a rural road because she has no mask on and make her walk home without a pavement? How do I trade those risks?[95]

Likewise, Full Fact stated that there had been "information vacuums" during the pandemic, with, for example, pregnant women receiving mixed messages about the impact of vaccination on them and their child.[96]

55. Others told us that Government messaging did not always work with particular communities. Dr Ozge Ozduzen, lecturer in digital media and society at the University of Sheffield, and Dr Billur Aslan Ozgul, lecturer in political communication, and Dr Nelli Ferenczi, senior lecturer in psychology, both at Brunel University London, told us that the public health messaging which linked vaccine uptake with a return to social and economic norms from prior to Covid-19 "did not fully resonate with those who had no stake in the pre-pandemic world".[97] Dr Rachel Quinn, Director of Medical Science Policy at the Academy of Medical Sciences, said that the Academy had worked with patients on its messaging during the "Covid winter", as patients had concerns they were not being engaged by the Government and as a result the health messages "were not getting home".[98] Dr Adam Wright, Head of Public Policy at the British Academy, said that children and young people had "felt very much left out of the public communications".[99] This led them to use other forms of information and they "lose trust in certain institutions as a result of that".[100]

94 Q21
95 Q137
96 Full Fact (MTV0050)
97 Dr Ozge Ozduzen (Lecturer in Digital Media & Society at University of Sheffield); Dr Billur Aslan Ozgul (Lecturer in Political Communication at Brunel University London); Dr Nelli Ferenczi (Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Brunel University London) (MTV0044)
98 Q293
99 Q277
100 Q277

56. Talitha Rowland, Deputy Director Security & Counter Disinformation at the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, told us that Government communication officials were "learning the lessons" from the pandemic:[101]

> Bringing in community leaders and faith leaders and understanding for each different audience who their trusted voices are is important in working with them. I know that a lot of that work was done during Covid, but I am sure that there are lessons that can be learnt and more that can be done to utilise those sources and to understand particular communities and where those sources of trust come from.[102]

Paul Scully MP, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, defended the Government's simplification of the message during the pandemic as "[t]here are clearly some facts that are just incontrovertible and you do not want that to be misrepresented, especially in a time of national emergency like the pandemic".[103]

57. Following our evidence sessions, we asked the Minister for the Cabinet Office whether the Government Communications Service had conducted a formal systematic review into the public communications of all Government departments during the Covid-19 outbreak. Cabinet Office Parliamentary Secretary Alex Burghart MP responded that:

> Communications during the pandemic response were regularly reviewed and we adopted an agile approach to keep up with the evolving scientific understanding of the virus and the unpredictable nature of the spread. This iterative approach ensured that our communications were regularly evaluated and always relevant to the pandemic.
>
> Lessons learned have been shared across all of our subsequent communication campaigns.[104]

58. **The pandemic highlighted the importance of the public being well-informed; yet there were gaps and inconsistencies in the information offered to the public by the Government, with limitations in respect of both the information transmitted and the methods by which it was communicated. We welcome the fact that the Government says it has learned lessons and is using these to inform its subsequent communication campaigns. We are however concerned that there is no evidence that the Government has conducted a full evaluation of its communications or formally sought feedback from its intended audiences following the pandemic.**

59. ***The Government Communication Service should conduct and publish an evaluation of the effectiveness of Government communications during the pandemic by the end of 2024, ensuring that this takes into account the views of the public and frontline organisations, such as those working with patients and carers.***

101 Q456
102 Q455
103 Q470
104 PQ 184867, [on Coronavirus: Communication], 18 May 2023

Transparency of evidence

60. Transparency and open communication are core elements of research of the highest integrity, according to the UK Committee on Research Integrity, along with honesty, rigour, care and respect, and accountability.[105] Fellows of the Royal Statistical Society, Professor Kevin McConway and Thomas King, stated that trustworthy organisations "must demonstrate their trustworthiness, being honest, competent and reliable, by intelligent transparency of their work".[106] Truepic, a co-founder of the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), argued that the ease with which digital content can be "fabricated and weaponized" highlighted just how critical transparency was.

61. The Office for Statistics Regulation told us that transparency needed to be "intelligent", which they explain as being built in from the start of policy development, with data and statistics provided to "support thinking and decisions on an issue, supporting the wider public need for information and presenting the data and statistics in a way that aids understanding and prevents misinterpretation".[107] The Archives and Records Association argued that the media, individuals and organisations "should not need to resort to Freedom of Information requests in order to procure information on national issues" and believed that this would help to address the low level of trust in Government.[108]

62. However, some witnesses told us that during the pandemic the Government had not been as transparent with its evidence base for decisions as it could have been. Tracey Brown, Director of Sense About Science, told us that the Government had improved its transparency prior to the pandemic but Covid-19 had led to "retrenchment".[109] She suggested that the Government itself would benefit from being more open as the public want to know what evidence is being used because "it would give us confidence to say, 'Yes, I really think this has been a very sound piece of research. This is something based on a very good review.' You can't do that if it is not published."[110] Similarly, Georgina Lee from Channel 4 News FactCheck told us that the Government could make more evidence for policy available. She described impact assessments, traditionally used by Government to investigate what impact a particular policy could have, as "very useful" and called for them to be published much more frequently.[111]

63. **While we recognise the need for free and frank discussions within Government, and the political, security and commercial sensitivities of some Government business, increased transparency for the evidence underpinning policy decisions has the potential to increase the level of trust in government.** ***We recommend that the Government increase its proactive publication of evidence used in policy making, especially in policy areas that are frequently subject to misinformation.***

105 UK Committee on Research Integrity (MTV0046)
106 Professor Kevin McConway; Thomas King (MTV0009)
107 Office for Statistics Regulation (MTV0028)
108 Archives and Records Association (UK and Ireland) (MTV0021)
109 Q147
110 Q147
111 Q249

Role of Government scientists

64. During the pandemic, the Government held daily press conferences, attended by a minister and senior Government-employed experts, most frequently the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, and the Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance.[112] We heard that this practice had demonstrated the value of allowing such experts to field media questions. Fiona Fox, chief executive of the Science Media Centre, which provides journalists with access to scientists, told us that Government-employed scientists are "some of the trustworthy" but noted that they are not generally allowed to speak to the media:

> They do not have an axe to grind, they are not some wild university academic who is trying to get grants and pursue their career. They would never comment on policy because they have been trained not to, but they are not free to speak.[113]

She told us that No. 10 and the Cabinet Office were "trying to manage and control the message" and, by restraining Government scientists from speaking, journalists were more likely to end up speaking to outliers instead.[114]

> There is such a high gain here for public benefit—for public good. We need to be hearing from all these fantastic scientists who have this experience. I think it is something in Government that is restraining them.[115]

65. Will Moy, then chief executive of Full Fact, told us that the issue was not just related to the pandemic. He gave the example of when there had been a "crisis of trust in crime statistics" and the Government had sent its statisticians out to press conferences which had "made a very big difference".[116] He told us that Government experts could "communicate their expertise very well which was of significant value.[117] Martin Lewis, told us he thought that the public were "sophisticated enough to understand what the limits that somebody in authority can and cannot say are".[118]

66. When we asked the Minister whether it was a wasted opportunity preventing Government experts from conducting media interviews, he responded:

> It is a good point. I think anybody who can communicate that clear, positive, simple message should be [doing so] because we have a difficult enough job to get across some complicated things across Government.[119]

67. **Some of the country's best scientists work in government departments and agencies. It is a wasted opportunity not to allow them to play a larger public role. The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer played a critical role in public communications during the pandemic and proved the value of scientific experts engaging in issues of national concern and demonstrated their ability to navigate**

112 10 Downing Street, *Collection: Slides, datasets and transcripts to accompany coronavirus press conferences*, last updated 21 February 2022
113 Q240
114 Q241, Q251
115 Q251
116 Q243
117 Q243
118 Q21
119 Q523

the boundaries of what Government scientists can and cannot comment upon. ***The Government should allow and encourage its scientists to respond directly to the media to counter misinformation.***

5 The role of academia and the National Academies

Academia

68. In 2022, a global survey of 3,000 academic and corporate researchers by Economist Impact reported that half (51%) felt a responsibility to engage in online discussions and nearly a quarter (23%) saw publicly countering misinformation as one of their primary roles in society. This compared with a figure of only 16% before the pandemic.[120] However, Dr Adam Wright, Head of Public Policy at the British Academy, told us that he did not think academics had a specific role to play in providing the public with accurate information and addressing misinformation. Instead, he said that it was important that they "get their research out into the public domain so that it can override other false information that might be out there".[121] Dr Rachel Quinn, Director of Medical Science Policy at the Academy of Medical Sciences, said that academics' primary role was "to get good evidence out there. Part of that might be countering misinformation".[122]

69. Fact-checkers told us that they talked to academics in their work combatting misinformation, but that academics were not always able to respond quickly enough. Georgina Lee from Channel 4 News FactCheck said that, although they were "very keen" to talk to journalists, their own workload could prevent this,[123] while Rebecca Skippage, Disinformation Editor at the BBC, said that it could be "very difficult" to get hold of academics, particularly outside of termtime.[124]

70. Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, wanted to see more scientists engage with the media. He did not agree that appearing on, for example, GB News—which Ofcom has twice ruled breached the broadcasting code with its reporting of Covid vaccines—conferred credibility on climate change deniers.[125] He told us that scientists needed to engage with such broadcasters as they were reaching "a specific constituency that they do not feel is being served by Sky News and BBC and other constituencies".[126]

71. Fiona Fox, chief executive of the science Media Centre, believed that it was for politicians, not scientists, to win arguments. She told us that scientists should inform discussion rather than become part of political debate. She said that the Centre had a database of 3,000 scientists to approach in a "watercooler moment" where misinformation is cutting through, providing an opportunity for scientists to engage with media.[127] However, she also told us that scientists faced online abuse for doing so. This put some off but that many "take the abuse and carry on because they know what they are doing is important."[128] Similarly, Dr Hannah Yelin of Oxford Brookes University and Dr Laura

120 Economist Impact, Confidence in Research (8 November 2022), p 42
121 Q284
122 Q284
123 Q250
124 Q250
125 Ofcom, *Mark Steyn - GB News Decision* (9 May 2023), p 1. Ofcom ruled that GB News had breached Section 2, requiring that the public is adequately protected from harmful material.
126 Q135
127 Q191, Q176
128 Q251

Clancy of Lancaster University reported that academics were "frequently subject to abuse, threats, and hostility at the point of sharing their research, robbing public discourse of the opportunity to engage with credible, evidenced contributions". Academics from minority backgrounds were more likely to face abuse.[129]

72. Will Moy, then chief executive of Full Fact, identified that, in academia, "obfuscated, overcomplicated language is actively rewarded and the taxpayers' money paying for academic research is in some ways wasted because it is then communicated in such an unhelpful way".[130] He wanted those academics who engaged in "public service" to receive more recognition and to be better supported.[131] Likewise, Science Feedback suggested that academics engaging in public-facing work should receive more recognition, and suggested that organisations such as the National Academies could use their influence to widen the criteria for academic career advancement.[132]

National Academies

73. The four National Academies—the Royal Society, the British Academy, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Academy of Medical Sciences—receive Government funding to finance independent research and innovation. In addition to their research role, all deliver some degree of public-facing work and seek to inform Government policy. While our terms of reference for the inquiry included asking what role the National Academies should have in being a source of authoritative, trustworthy information, and whether they were prominent enough voices in engaging with the variety of debates on the internet, fewer than half of the submissions to our inquiry responded to these questions.

74. Some responses raised concerns about the National Academies' public profile. The Patient Information Forum reported that the Academies were "remote to many in the population" and described the work that they produced as "not always accessible […] or based on the information needs of the public".[133] Professor Tom Solomon of the Pandemic Institute argued that the Academies had a "critical role in conveying important reliable and trustworthy information to the public, but are only partially succeeding".[134] He wanted the Academies to "put more effort" into ensuring important messages were distilled into social media formats such as TikTok, Instagram and Twitter (now X).[135]

75. We also heard that the Academies had a limited profile among researchers who are responsible for providing factual, impartial briefings to politicians. Callum Thomson, Group Head for Scrutiny at the Scottish Parliament, told us that their profile was too low and that that was part of the reason that they did not get used as much as they might otherwise be.[136] Patrick Vollmer, Director of Library Services at the House of Lords, agreed with the suggestion that the Academies required a more swift response mechanism.[137] Likewise, Grant Hill-Cawthorne, Managing Director of Research and Information at the House of Commons, reported that it was difficult for staff to use the expertise of the National

129 Dr Hannah Yelin; Dr Laura Clancy (MTV0022)
130 Q186
131 Q250
132 Science Feedback (MTV0052)
133 Patient Information Forum MTV0026
134 Pandemic Institute MTV0015
135 Pandemic Institute MTV0015
136 Q106
137 Q110

Academies due to the speed with which queries needed to be answered. However, he noted that the Academies worked "very closely" with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, which sources scientific research evidence for Parliament.[138]

76. Science Feedback, a group of scientists who review the credibility of science-related claims, reported that its editors "rarely come across National Academies' material" in their work. It estimated that "just a few dozen" narratives account for the majority of misinformation around health and climate change and suggested the Academies could publish "general public-friendly" articles on these narratives.[139] Professor Patrick Barwise, Emeritus professor of management and marketing at London Business School, said that the Academies could be helpful as a source of authoritative, trustworthy information as they represented large numbers of experts, and he suggested that Academies should engage in debates through the "most trusted media, especially broadcasters and newspapers", rather than through social media as this was "too polluted by trolls and disinformation and could also take up a lot of resource".[140]

77. Some witnesses praised the Academies' public engagement initiatives. Professor Tom Solomon of the Pandemic Institute believed that the Academies had "excelled with innovative and brilliant approaches to public engagement", giving the example of the Academy of Medical Science's initiative on understanding death and dying, The Departure Lounge.[141] This initiative in a shopping centre in Lewisham brought experts in end-of-life care to engage with individuals and local groups about death and dying.[142] The BBC highlighted its partnership with the Royal Academy of Engineering on creating expert data science research and with the Royal Society on sharing ideas and science initiatives, with the Society co-funding short form video explainers on BBC Ideas.[143]

78. The Academies' own submission highlighted some of their initiatives.[144] Examples they referred to included the British Academy's Summer Showcase, featuring talks and performances bringing research to life, and their publication of child-friendly versions of some of its policy reports. The Royal Society runs a Summer Science exhibition, an interactive exhibition where researchers give talks about their work and the Royal Academy of Engineering provides education resources for science, technology, engineering and maths.[145] The submission did not detail the impact of these initiatives or an assessment of the extent to which they had achieved their aims.

79. Fiona Fox, chief executive of the Science Media Centre, said that she did not believe their main focus should be on public-facing work, and that their role is "to facilitate and give a lead to scientists" rather than be a trusted voice for the public.[146] Areeq Chowdhury,

138 Q107
139 Science Feedback (MTV0052)
140 Professor Patrick Barwise (MTV0008)
141 Pandemic Institute MTV0015
142 The Royal Society, The British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering, Academy of Medical Sciences (MTV0035)
143 BBC (MTV0016)
144 Each Academy was invited to submit separate written evidence but they instead chose to send a joint submission. The Royal Society, British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering, and Academy of Medical Sciences MTV0035
145 The Royal Society, British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering, and Academy of Medical Sciences MTV0035
146 Q257

Head of Policy, Data and Digital Technologies at the Royal Society, told us that he was "not particularly concerned" that the majority of the submissions we received did not respond to questions about the Academies:[147]

> For us, our primary audience, at least as a policy arm of the organisation, is decision makers: Governments, research councils and companies. I think that awareness of us is pretty good among them […] People who are interested in science will have some awareness of us. In the anti-disinformation sector, there is perhaps little recognition of the role of the academies, but I think that is because our role is to put out good information; it is not necessarily to firefight particular types of disinformation.[148]

80. Dr Natasha McCarthy, Associate Director at the National Engineering Policy Centre at the Royal Academy of Engineering, believed that by academies doing "deeper" work, especially on those emerging and complex areas, they were able to support others, "either by directly putting people out there or by creating sources and resources that those doing fact-checking can easily use because they know that they are robust, they have been checked and they are peer reviewed".[149] Dr Adam Wright, Head of Public Policy at the British Academy, told us that the academies, and many of its fellows and funded researchers, engaged in controversial issues such as 5G misinformation and, vaccine misinformation, but that there were limited resources for policy and public engagement.[150] Dr Rachel Quinn, Director of Medical Science Policy at the Academy of Medical Sciences, told us that one of the Academy's main roles was to promote high-quality evidence rather than to raise their own profile.[151] She said that the Academy was exploring what presence it should have on platforms such as TikTok but told us the Academy would only go on TikTok "if we think we can have an impact there".[152]

81. Dr McCarthy and Dr Quinn said that they would welcome the Government doing more to promote their organisations, but Dr Wright emphasised that it was important that the Academies maintained their independence from Government.[153] However, Mr Chowdhury was more circumspect about the Government promoting the academies:[154]

> It depends on what it is for, I think. If it was to promote us as a way to counter misinformation, I would probably hesitate about that, but it would just depend on the nature of that promotion.[155]

82. Other organisations with similar roles to the National Academies also told us about problems they had with resourcing. The Learned Society of Wales, Wales's national academy for arts, humanities and sciences, argued that it had "limited capacity to engage with or respond to debates on the internet". Instead, it focused its contribution on providing free public events, providing open access publications and shorter policy papers. However, it acknowledged that its policy work could be better used as a resource by the media and that it was "actively considering how [it] can improve the visibility and reach of [its] work".

147 Q285
148 Q285
149 Q297
150 Q290 and Q302
151 Q300
152 Q299
153 Q324
154 Q324
155 Q324

work".[156] The British Society for Immunology highlighted that most learned societies are small charities and "not equipped with either the resources or the workforce to take a full time lead in tackling the vast swathes of misinformation around their topics of expertise that permeate online".[157]

83. In our ministerial session, Cathy Alexander, Deputy Director, Research Talent and European Programmes at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, told us that the Department had been "encouraging and supporting them to do more" in terms of public-facing work as part of their Government funding.[158] She emphasised that the Academies were independent from Government and said that it was for Academy fellows to determine each Academy's priorities.[159] However, she said that the department would be strengthening its monitoring of the Academies' work.[160]

84. **All National Academies have provided us with some excellent examples of public engagement but we remain unclear about their strategic aims for public engagement. Without clear aims, it is not possible to judge the efficacy of their public engagement and, consequently, whether they are spending public money appropriately.** ***As part of its renewed focus on assessing the National Academies, the Government should review what role the National Academies should play in the public information landscape and work with them to publish objectives and benchmarks to deliver that role.***

156 The Learned Society of Wales (MTV0019)
157 British Society for Immunology (MTV0039)
158 Q465
159 Q521
160 Q521

Conclusions and recommendations

What is a trusted voice?

1. There is no one single trusted voice: different communities or demographics may turn to different ones. That that is as it should be, but the more the media seeks to understand and reflect the diversity of the country, the more it can provide the trusted voices that are vital in providing accurate information and tackling misinformation where it arises. (Paragraph 25)

The role of the Government

2. The recent growth of TikTok and decisions to disengage from or potentially ban the platform demonstrates how swiftly sources of information can change. New apps and platforms rapidly become major players, shifting audience habits but also fragmenting the sources the public use for information. The Government must have a clear strategy for communicating with young people and adapting to the development of new apps and platforms which appeal to this audience. (Paragraph 34)

3. *We recommend that the Government publishes advice for Government departments and their public bodies on communication intended for young people, including guidance on the use of new apps and platforms, including TikTok.* (Paragraph 35)

4. We welcome the Government's recognition of the importance of media literacy skills and the creation of its Online Media Literacy Strategy and Taskforce to deliver on this. However, it is crucial that the impact of the Strategy is assessed as it progresses, both to ensure that it is on the right track and to inform future delivery. (Paragraph 40)

5. *We recommend that, at the conclusion of the 2021–24 Online Media Literacy Strategy, the Government publishes a detail assessment of what the impact of this work has been, alongside a refreshed strategy for the forthcoming years.* (Paragraph 41)

6. We are concerned about the lack of transparency and accountability of the CDU and the appropriateness of its reach. *We recommend that the Government commission and lay before Parliament an independent review of the activities and strategy of Counter Disinformation Unit within the next 12 months.* (Paragraph 46)

7. The Government Digital Service has acknowledged that some users of GOV.UK have been lost and overwhelmed by the architecture of the website and the amount of information that it contains. While it has committed itself to making improvements, three years later the site is still not meeting user needs. *We recommend that the Government Digital Service undertake further work better to understand user needs for accessing information on GOV.UK, and that it provides us with its plans for this work, including a timescale for improvements, as part of the response to this report.* (Paragraph 52)

Lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic

8. The pandemic highlighted the importance of the public being well-informed; yet there were gaps and inconsistencies in the information offered to the public by the Government, with limitations in respect of both the information transmitted and the methods by which it was communicated. We welcome the fact that the Government says it has learned lessons and is using these to inform its subsequent communication campaigns. We are however concerned that there is no evidence that the Government has conducted a full evaluation of its communications or formally sought feedback from its intended audiences following the pandemic. (Paragraph 58)

9. *The Government Communication Service should conduct and publish an evaluation of the effectiveness of Government communications during the pandemic by the end of 2024, ensuring that this takes into account the views of the public and frontline organisations, such as those working with patients and carers.* (Paragraph 59)

10. While we recognise the need for free and frank discussions within Government, and the political, security and commercial sensitivities of some Government business, increased transparency for the evidence underpinning policy decisions has the potential to increase the level of trust in government. *We recommend that the Government increase its proactive publication of evidence used in policy making, especially in policy areas that are frequently subject to misinformation.* (Paragraph 63)

11. Some of the country's best scientists work in government departments and agencies. It is a wasted opportunity not to allow them to play a larger public role. The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer played a critical role in public communications during the pandemic and proved the value of scientific experts engaging in issues of national concern and demonstrated their ability to navigate the boundaries of what Government scientists can and cannot comment upon. *The Government should allow and encourage its scientists to respond directly to the media to counter misinformation.* (Paragraph 67)

The role of academia and the National Academies

12. All National Academies have provided us with some excellent examples of public engagement but we remain unclear about their strategic aims for public engagement. Without clear aims, it is not possible to judge the efficacy of their public engagement and, consequently, whether they are spending public money appropriately. *As part of its renewed focus on assessing the National Academies, the Government should review what role the National Academies should play in the public information landscape and work with them to publish objectives and benchmarks to deliver that role.* (Paragraph 84)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 26 March 2024

Members present:

Dame Caroline Dinenage, in the Chair

Clive Efford

Julie Elliott

Rt Hon Damian Green

Dr Rupa Huq

Simon Jupp

Giles Watling

Trusted voices

Draft Report (*Trusted voices*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 84 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Sixth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No.134.

Adjournment

Adjourned till Tuesday 16 April at 9.30 am.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 29 November 2022

Martin Lewis CBE, Financial journalist and broadcaster — Q1–32

Professor Paul Bernal, Professor of Information Technology Law; **Professor Carmen Clayton**, Professor of Family and Cultural Dynamics; **Professor Rhiannon Mason**, Professor of Heritage and Cultural Studies — Q33–63

Tuesday 10 January 2023

Grant Hill-Cawthorne, Librarian, House of Commons Library; **Callum Thomson**, Group Head for Scrutiny, Scottish Parliament; **Patrick Vollmer**, Director of Library Services, House of Lords Library — Q64–123

Tracey Brown OBE, Director, Sense about Science; **Dr Chris Smith**, Clinical Director in Virology, University of Cambridge; **Bob Ward**, Policy and Communications Director, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment — Q124–168

Tuesday 24 January 2023

Fiona Fox OBE, Chief Executive, Science Media Centre; **Georgina Lee**, Channel 4 News Factcheck, ITN; **Will Moy**, Chief Executive, Full Fact; **Rebecca Skippage**, Disinformation Editor, BBC — Q169–258

Tuesday 21 February 2023

Areeq Chowdhury, Head of Policy, Data and Digital Technologies, The Royal Society; **Dr Natasha McCarthy**, Associate Director, National Engineering Policy Centre, Royal Academy of Engineering; **Dr Rachel Quinn**, Director of Medical Science Policy, Academy of Medical Sciences; **Dr Adam Wright**, Head of Public Policy, The British Academy — Q259–325

Marianna Spring, Disinformation correspondent, BBC — Q326–353

Tuesday 7 March 2023

David Dinsmore, Chief Operating Officer, News UK; **Nick Hopkins**, Executive Editor of News, The Guardian; **Alison Phillips**, Editor, Daily Mirror; **Peter Wright**, Editor Emeritus, DMG Media — Q354–443

Tuesday 21 March 2023

Paul Scully MP, Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology; **Cathy Alexander**, Deputy Director, Research Talent & European Programmes, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology; **Talitha Rowland**, Deputy Director, Security & Counter Disinformation, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology — Q444–526

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website.

MTV numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1 Alani, Professor Harith (MTV0012)

2 Alcohol Health Alliance UK (MTV0042)

3 Archives and Records Association (UK and Ireland) (MTV0021)

4 BBC (MTV0016)

5 Baker, Dr Stephanie Alice (MTV0020)

6 Bakir, Professor Vian and McStay, Professor Andrew (MTV0014)

7 Ball, Professor Jonathan (Professor of Virology and Director of the Wolfson Centre for Global Virus Research, The University of Nottingham) (MTV0047)

8 Barwise, Professor Patrick (MTV0008)

9 Bernal, Professor Paul (MTV0004)

10 Bournemouth University, Centre for Excellence in Media Practice (MTV0005)

11 British Science Association (MTV0045)

12 British Society for Immunology (MTV0039)

13 Chatterje-Doody, Dr Precious (MTV0013)

14 Clayton, Professor Carmen; Clayton, Rafe; and Potter, Marie (MTV0034)

15 Cogito Epistemology Research Centre, University of Glasgow (MTV0025)

16 DISARM Foundation (MTV0024)

17 Democracy and Technology Programme, University of Oxford (MTV0010)

18 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (MTV0053)

19 Full Fact (MTV0050)

20 Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (MTV0038)

21 Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (MTV0054)

22 Hardaker, Dr Claire (MTV0002)

23 IREX (MTV0036)

24 ITV (MTV0018)

25 Kyriakidou, Dr Maria and Cushion, Professor Stephen (MTV0017)

26 Levy, Professor Neil (MTV0006)

27 Logue, Mr Conor (MTV0023)

28 Mason, Professor Rhiannon (MTV0003)

29 McConway, Professor Kevin and King, Thomas (MTV0009)

30 Meta (MTV0051)

31 Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy, University of Cambridge (MTV0040)

32 More in Common (MTV0041)

33 National Museum Directors' Council (MTV0030)

34 Ofcom (MTV0048)

35 Office for National Statistics (MTV0037)

36 Office for Statistics Regulation (MTV0028)

37 Ozduzen, Dr Ozge (Lecturer in Digital Media & Society, University of Sheffield); Ozgul, Dr Billur Aslan (Lecturer in Political Communication, Brunel University London); and Ferenczi, Dr Nelli (Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Brunel University London) (MTV0044)

38 Patient Information Forum (MTV0026)

39 REPHRAIN - the National Research Centre on Privacy, Harm Reduction and Adversarial Influence Online (MTV0049)

40 Royal Society of Edinburgh (MTV0032)

41 SWGfL (MTV0007)

42 Science Feedback (MTV0052)

43 Science Media Centre (MTV0055)

44 Sense about Science (MTV0029)

45 The Learned Society of Wales (MTV0019)

46 The Library Campaign (MTV0027)

47 The Pandemic Institute (MTV0015)

48 The Publishers Association (MTV0031)

49 The Royal Society; The British Academy; Royal Academy of Engineering; and Academy of Medical Sciences (MTV0035)

50 Truepic (MTV0033)

51 UK Committee on Research Integrity (MTV0046)

52 Woolley, David (MTV0001)

53 Yelin, Dr Hannah and Clancy, Dr Laura (MTV0022)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

Session 2023–24

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Safety at major sporting events	HC 174
2nd	Gambling regulation	HC 176
3rd	Pre-appointment hearing for Chair of the BBC Board	HC 383
4th	Equity in Cricket	HC 526
5th	Creator remuneration	HC 156
1st Special Report	Draft Media Bill: Government Responses to the Committee's Twelfth and Thirteenth Reports of Session 2022–23	HC 155
2nd Special Report	Connected tech: smart or sinister?: Government and the Information Commissioner's Office Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2022–23	HC 302
3rd Special Report	Connected tech: AI and creative technology: Government Response to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2022–23	HC 441
4th Special Report	NFTs and the Blockchain: the risks to sport and culture: Government Response to the Committee's Fourteenth Report of Session 2022–23	HC 461
5th Special Report	Safety at major sporting events: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 617

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2nd	Promoting Britain abroad	HC 156
3rd	Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda	HC 155
4th	What next for the National Lottery?	HC 154
5th	Economics of music streaming: follow-up	HC 874
6th	Current issues in rugby union	HC 1018
7th	Sustainability of local journalism	HC 153
8th	Appointment of Richard Sharp as Chair of the BBC	HC 1147
9th	Football governance	HC 1288
10th	Connected tech: smart or sinister?	HC 157

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12th	Draft Media Bill: Radio Measures	HC 1287
13th	Draft Media Bill: Final Report	HC 1807
14th	NFTs and the Blockchain: the risks to sport and culture	HC 598
1st Special	Major cultural and sporting events: Government Response to Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2021–22	HC 452
2nd Special	Influencer Culture: Lights, camera, inaction?: ASA System and CMA Responses to the Committee's Twelfth Report of Session 2021–22	HC 610
3rd Special	Influencer Culture: Lights, camera, inaction?: Government Response to the Committee's Twelfth Report of Session 2021–22	HC 687
4th Special	Rt Hon Nadine Dorries MP	HC 801
5th Special	Promoting Britain abroad	HC 1103
6th Special	Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda	HC 1104
7th Special	What next for the National Lottery?: Government and Gambling Commission Responses to the Committee's Fourth Report	HC 1208
8th Special	Economics of music streaming: follow-up: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report	HC 1245
9th Special	The sustainability of local journalism: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report	HC 1378
10th Special	Appointment of Richard Sharp as Chair of the BBC: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report	HC 1641
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12th	What next for the National Lottery?: National Lottery Distributors' Response to the Committee's Fourth Report	HC 1913

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1st	The future of UK music festivals	HC 49
2nd	Economics of music streaming	HC 50
3rd	Concussion in sport	HC 46
4th	Sport in our communities	HC 45
5th	Pre-appointment hearing for Information Commissioner	HC 260
6th	Pre-appointment hearing for Chair of the Charity Commission	HC 261

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7th	Racism in cricket	HC 1001
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9th	Major cultural and sporting events	HC 259
10th	Another pre-appointment hearing for Chair of the Charity Commission	HC 1200
11th	Pre-appointment hearing for Chair of Ofcom	HC 48
12th	Influencer culture: Lights, camera, inaction?	HC 258
1st Special Report	The future of public service broadcasting: Government Response to Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2019–21	HC 273
2nd Special Report	Economics of music streaming: Government and Competition and Markets Authority Responses to Committee's Second Report	HC 719
3rd Special Report	Sport in our communities: Government Response to Committee's Fourth Report	HC 761
4th Special Report	The future of public service broadcasting: Ofcom Response to Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2019–21	HC 832
5th Special Report	The Draft Online Safety Bill and the legal but harmful debate: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report	HC 1039

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3rd	Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors: First Report	HC 291
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5th	Pre-appointment hearing for Chair of the BBC	HC 1119
6th	The future of public service broadcasting	HC 156
1st Special Report	BBC Annual Report and Accounts 2018–19: TV licences for over 75s Government and the BBC's Responses to the Committee's Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 98
2nd Special Report	The Covid-19 crisis and charities: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2019–21	HC 438
3rd Special Report	Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors: First Report: Government Response to Committee's Third Report of Session 2019–21	HC 885
4th Special Report	Misinformation in the COVID-19 Infodemic: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report	HC 894