

Written evidence submitted by Professor Rhiannon Mason

DCMS Call for Evidence: Misinformation and Trusted Voices Written Evidence

15.08.22, Professor Rhiannon Mason, Newcastle University

1. Which organisations are the most trusted sources of information in the UK?

My name is Rhiannon Mason and I am a Professor of Heritage and Cultural Studies at Newcastle University. I am currently writing a monograph called 'Museums and Public Trust in Democratic Societies: Challenges and Opportunities'. For this book I have analysed the relevant studies on public trust and museums which have been published in English in recent decades. Based on my research, the answer to the question above is that museums and museum curators consistently rank as amongst the most highly trusted sources of information in democratic societies like the UK, Australia, Canada, and the US.

For example, research into this question by Ipsos MORI from 2021 shows that when people in the UK are asked which professions the public would trust to tell them the truth, those with the highest scores are as follows: nurses (94%), librarians (93%), doctors (91%), teachers (86%) and museum curators (86%).ⁱ

According to the same study, the least trusted professions in 2021 were business leaders (31%), journalists (28%), government ministers (19%), and advertising executives (16%).

These groupings and levels of trust are extremely comparable with various studies from the US which similarly rank researchers, scientists, the military, the police, teachers and religious leaders above journalists, business leaders and elected officials.ⁱⁱ In several studies, social media is placed at the bottom of these scales of public trust, despite being an increasingly popular form of information and news for many people.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are important qualifications to the headline data above. For example, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) research shows that the expression of public trust in museums in countries like the US is reported to be lower for some ethnic groups than others.^{iv} This is likely to be because of a range of historic and contemporary reasons. The UK and US reports show that levels of trust also tend to differ in certain categories by political affiliation, age, and education, although not so much by gender. For example, the Ipsos MORI UK data shows that if a respondent has a degree qualification, they report higher levels of trust towards almost all professions and particularly in relation to museums (93% with a degree compared to 76% without). This is probably because visitor studies consistently show that the higher level of educational qualification someone has, the more likely they are to visit museums.^v If we combine this knowledge with the insight from AAM's US study that those who visit museums tend to attribute higher levels of trust to them, the higher education qualification variable makes sense.^{vi} Perhaps unexpectedly, the Ipsos MORI UK data from 2021 shows that trust in museum curators is almost identical amongst those who identify as Labour and Conservative (87% compared to 88%).

Having analysed a range of international studies, I have identified that there are a consistent number of common attributes which underpin these high levels of public trust in museums and museum curators.^{vii} To summarise, the public trusts museums because they:

1. Have high credibility which derives from being experts in their subject and basing their presentation of knowledge on research and evidence
2. Are perceived to be fact-based and to show the actual evidence of the past which the public can see for themselves. The public perception is that museums contain a significant proportion of what they perceive to be 'primary' as opposed to 'secondary' sources
3. Are understood to be working in the public interest, not being self-serving, not working for personal benefit or gain
4. Are judged to be honest, truthful, reliable, and for there to be no gain to be had from misleading the public
5. Generally speaking, and where relevant, are understood to be committed to the principle of showing different perspectives, different sides of the story, and presenting different points of view for people to make up their own minds
6. Are perceived by the public to be 'neutral' in the sense of being non-partisan and not driven by what is often described by respondents as an overtly political agenda. This is often directly contrasted by the public in their responses with their perceptions of politicians or journalists who the public believe will be more inclined to present a one-sided perspective which favours their self-interest

It is important to recognise that there have been significant debates within the museum field (both in research and practice) about some of these attributes of trust. For example, in recent decades the idea of neutrality has been robustly critiqued by researchers and within sections of the museum profession in countries like the UK and the US. It has also been critiqued by members of various communities or groups who argue that some museums have never been neutral in their past dealings on several fronts and, indeed, that such positioning is impossible. From this perspective, supposed impartiality is viewed as a convenient means of maintaining the status quo.^{viii} While this is undoubtedly the case in certain situations, my research suggests that sometimes the public and the museum profession may also be using certain words and concepts like 'neutral' and 'impartial' to mean quite different things and this therefore requires us to develop more nuanced terminology in order to take this collective conversation forward.

The ideas that there are 'primary' and 'secondary' evidence, and that there can be a clear separation between fact and interpretation are similarly also cited by the public as positive attributes of museums. Both precepts have also been extensively problematised by professional historians, museum researchers and museum practitioners over many decades. Since the 1980s, the 'new museology' movement as understood within the Anglophone literature has been about precisely showing how museums construct as well as reflect a society's understandings of its pasts.^{ix}

While it is essential to take seriously the implications of these conceptual discrepancies between the understanding of many sector professionals and the public, it undoubtedly remains a positive finding that museums and their staff are held in such high regard in terms of public trust. It is equally positive to note that these levels of trust have remained extremely consistent over recent decades even when international evidence points to declining public trust in other public-facing organisations and professionals.^x There is also much in these common attributes which museum professionals and the public can agree and build upon.

In conclusion, it is evident from various studies in different countries including the UK that museums continue to be some of the most trusted sources of information in democratic societies. Given their highly trusted status, the three important questions for the future are:

7. How can museums best use their trusted position for the benefit of contemporary society, especially in a context of disinformation and a general decline in public trust?
8. How can museums maintain – or, for some, rebuild – high levels of public trust given some of the recent challenges some of them have faced around the ethics of their sponsorship, the provenance

of some of their collections, and the historic marginalisation experienced by certain groups in terms of the histories and cultures that some museums represent?

9. How can museums maintain high levels of public trust while simultaneously representing the complexity, nuance and sometimes contested aspects of the histories and cultures which they represent on behalf of the public?

My forthcoming book is based on interviews with museum staff and case studies, and will examine these contemporary challenges to public trust in museums. It will also explore the opportunities for museums to use their highly trusted status to positive effective in democratic societies. In the current context where public trust is under significant pressure, these are timely and important issues and it is positive to see that DCMS is collecting evidence on this topic.

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ⁱ Ipsos MORI (2021). 'Veracity Index 2021: Trust in Professions Survey.' <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row> (accessed 11.08.22). See also BritainThinks (2013) 'Public Perceptions of – and attitudes to – the purposes of museums in society: A report prepared by BritainThinks for [UK's] Museums Association.' <https://archive-media.museumsassociation.org/08052013-stakeholder-research-museums2020.pdf> (accessed 11.08.22)

ⁱⁱ Pew Research Center. (2022), 'Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines' <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/02/15/americans-trust-in-scientists-other-groups-declines/> (accessed 11.08.22); AAM (2021), 'Museums and Trust 2021 – American Alliance of Museums' <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/> (accessed 11.08.22)

ⁱⁱⁱ Pew Research Center. (2021) 'Social Media Use in 2021 | Pew Research Center' <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/> (accessed 11.08.22); Pew Research Center (2019) 'People say they regularly see false and misleading content on social media – but also new ideas' <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/05/13/users-say-they-regularly-encounter-false-and-misleading-content-on-social-media-but-also-new-ideas/> (accessed 11.08.21)

^{iv} AAM. (2021) 'Museums and Trust 2021 – American Alliance of Museums' <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/> (accessed 11.08.22)

^v O'Neill, M. (2001) 'Are museums failing those who need support most? - Museums Association' 23 April 2001 <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2021/04/are-museums-failing-those-who-need-support-most/> (accessed 11.08.22); Black, G. (2005) *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge.

^{vi} AAM. (2021) 'Museums and Trust 2021 – American Alliance of Museums' <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/> (accessed 11.08.22)

^{vii} The various studies each identify several of these attributes as this is a common aspect of such studies but they focus primarily on their own country's data.

^{viii} Autry, La Tanya S. and M. Murawski, (n.d.) 'Museums are not neutral' <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/learn-more> (accessed on 11.08.22)

^{ix} Mason, R. ed. (2019) *Museum Studies: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies. Vols. 1-5*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.

^x Jones, J. (2022) [Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low \(gallup.com\)](https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-at-new-low) <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-at-new-low.aspx> (accessed 11.08.22)