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DCMS Call for Evidence: Misinformation and trusted voices written evidence

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The most (and least) trusted sources of information in the UK

1. As with other countries in the globe, the UK is experiencing long term downwards trends in trust, which are exacerbated by the difficulties in determining between truth and falsehood online.¹ Recent poll results and academic research have shown contradictory patterns in the information sources that people in the UK trust. Journalists as a group are one of the least trusted professions in UK society.² Mid-market and tabloid journalists are the least trusted (and continuing to trend downwards), whereas trust in broadsheet journalists ranks a little higher, and is trending upwards.³ Television news readers are also more trusted to tell the truth than journalists in general,⁴ with the BBC being the most trusted news brand in the UK. This was particularly the case when it came to identifying the most trustworthy sources of information about the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ The BBC and other public service broadcasters (like DW) also received significant boosts in engagement on social media in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, with people trusting them to make sense of a complicated situation subject to many conflicting reports.⁶

Demographic patterns to trust and mistrust in the UK

2. As with other public service broadcasters globally, trust in the BBC has declined considerably in recent years alongside social divisions surrounding Brexit and COVID-19.

¹ Toff B, Badrinathan S, Mont'Alverne C, Ross Arguedas A, Fletcher R and Nielsen RK (2021) 'Depth and breadth: how news organisations navigate trade-offs around building trust in news', Reuters Institute website, 2 December 2021. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/depth-and-breadth-how-news-organisations-navigate-trade-offs-around-building-trust-news>

² Ipsos (2021) 'Ipsos Veracity Index: trust in the police drops for the second year in a row', Ipsos website, 7 December 2021, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row>

³ Ibbetson C (2020) 'Do people trust journalists?', YouGov website, 26 March 2020.

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/03/26/trust-newspaper-journalists>

⁴ Ipsos (2021) Veracity Index

⁵ YouGov (2020) 'YouGov survey results'.

https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/d4iq9gv8ev/Internal_CoronavirusTrust_200428.pdf

⁶ Chatterje-Doody P N and Crilley, R (2022) Three lessons for the future of public service broadcasting, IPPR Progressive Review 29 (1), 28-36; Reuters Institute (2022) *Digital News Report*, Reuters Institute. [Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022 \(ox.ac.uk\)](https://www.reutersinstitute.org/digital-news-report-2022)

There are significant demographic and partisan patterns to this mistrust: it is more likely to be expressed by men; those with low levels of interest in news; those with low levels of education; those who only use social media as a source of news; those who voted Conservative in 2019 and those who voted for Brexit.⁷

3. These UK trends also reflect broader global patterns. Specifically, whilst centrist and left-wing media tend to interact with and cross-reference one another in a very broad media ecosystem, right wing media tend to interact primarily with one another in a self-perpetuating standalone ecosystem. Audiences that are invested in this restricted media ecosystem are more likely to disregard information that contradicts their political assumptions, and to dismiss those who articulate such positions, than audiences of the more politically-varied mainstream media ecosystem.⁸
4. On aggregate, the UK public feels that journalists should stick to the facts, rather than expressing their own opinions. However, there is again a clear demographic aspect to this belief, with younger cohorts most in favour of journalists expressing their own opinions.⁹ This is also reflected in demographic differences in preferred news sources: older groups gravitate towards print, radio and TV, whereas younger cohorts are more likely to consult online and social media for news. Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are the three most-consulted news sources for teenagers, with a strong preference towards individual accounts rather than news organisations.¹⁰

The role of the national academies

1. The UK's national academies support primary research on many of the global issues that are subject to contemporary informational challenges, and they are in a good position to be trusted, since Engineers, Scientists, Professors and Academics all benefit from high levels of trust amongst the UK population, despite the public having little concrete knowledge of what academics actually do.¹¹ The UK Academies have been active in setting up online information hubs (eg on COVID) to consolidate and make accessible their information base as it develops over time,¹² as well as publishing lists of trusted

⁷ Reuters Institute (2022) *Digital News Report*

⁸ Benkler, Y, Faris, R, Roberts, H (2018) *Network Propaganda*. Oxford University Press

⁹ Reuters Institute (2022) *Digital News Report*

¹⁰ Ofcom (2022) [News Consumption in the UK Overview of findings 2022 \(ofcom.org.uk\)](https://www.ofcom.gov.uk/news/news-consumption-in-the-uk-overview-of-findings-2022)

¹¹ Ipsos (2021) *Veracity Index*; The British Academy (2022) Academics top 'trust' list in British Academy poll, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/academics-top-trust-list-in-british-academy-poll/>

experts available for media commentary.¹³ There has also been a proactive approach to funding research in such crucial areas. Nonetheless, these resources are more oriented to the press than the public, the majority of whom access information from the national academies via other media sources or platforms, and subject to the secondary trust concerns surrounding those outlets. The hosting of public events, whilst positive, speaks to particular subsets of the public rather than the public as a whole.

2. Given the time pressures on contemporary journalists, the national academies' repositories of findings and expertise can be an efficient way of disseminating authoritative information. Their efficacy can be maximised with summary sheets and briefs that translate findings into an easily-replicable format that can be publicised beyond specialist audiences. The emphasis should be on simplicity and clarity, to encourage take-up across the range of media outlets.
3. There is also potential for more active liaison between the UK national academies and the media. My own work has revealed concerns amongst journalists about the potential to serve as unwitting sources of misinformation, as well as appetite for best practice guidelines for newsrooms on how to avoid this. More active liaison between the UK national academies and newsrooms would likely be welcomed by journalism professionals. This could include (but not be limited to) creating primers and training resources to help journalist navigate the scholarship behind contemporary challenges; the proactive dissemination of ready reference data releases to accompany important news developments; and the active targeting of tabloid press with very short, scholarship-informed analysis pieces.

Provision versus delivery of authoritative information

4. There are also questions about how the format of authoritative information influences its reception, and these factors are particularly salient for the direct dissemination of academy findings. If purely factual accounts can appear dry or unstimulating to the general public, outputs that stimulate an emotive or affective response sometimes resonate more. This does not have to undermine their accuracy.

¹² See <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/uk-policy/coronavirus>; <https://royalsociety.org/whats-new/covid-19/related-content/>

¹³ [Russia-Ukraine conflict: experts available for media commentary | The British Academy](#)

5. The British Academy, for example, has published evidence not only on the long-term health impacts of COVID-19¹⁴ but also about frontline NHS experiences of the pandemic.¹⁵ In an overarching environment of deteriorating trust, this kind of first-hand account can be more impactful than statistical information alone, especially when it comes directly from some of the most trusted professionals in the UK. The publication of findings-as-stories therefore offers significant potential to expand the reach of authoritative information and it has been successfully applied in informational videos fronted by the BBC's Ros Atkins over the course of the war on Ukraine.¹⁶ Key to the communicative success of such videos is the way in which they actively frame the issue being discussed, rather than purely refuting or responding to false information. This is important because research demonstrates how fact checking can extend the reach of falsehoods to audience who later misremember the debunked story as fact, whilst simultaneously shifting fringe discussions into the mainstream.¹⁷ *Active* agenda-setting and storytelling is therefore crucial for the UK national academies to effectively disseminate authoritative information.
6. Reflecting the overarching trends in the UK informational environment, there are demographic aspects to the most effective packaging of authoritative information, depending on the specific target group. The endorsement of a source or story on social media can improve reception of the message,¹⁸ whilst its ease of sharing by platform naturally influences its reach. This is important to consider when targeting younger cohorts, for whom social media are a go-to information source, but official information providers remain less consulted. More traditional PR routes for the academies' information (press releases, interview spots etc) are likely to be more influential for the older cohorts who prefer print, radio and TV. The success of the Atkins videos referenced above is likely due in part to how they incorporated both aspects to their messaging.

¹⁴ [The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19 | The British Academy](#)

¹⁵ [NHS voices of COVID-19 | The British Academy](#)

¹⁶ Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2022) *Three lessons*

¹⁷ Scoboria, A. Wade, K, Lindsay, DS, Azad, T, Strange, D, Ost, J and Hyman I (2017) A mega-analysis of memory reports from eight peer-reviewed false memory implantation studies, *Memory*, 25:2; Vargo, C. J., Guo, L. and Amazeen, M. A. (2018) 'The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016', *New Media & Society*, 20(5), pp. 2028–2049.

¹⁸ Luo, M., Hancock, J. T. and Markowitz, D. M. (2022) 'Credibility Perceptions and Detection Accuracy of Fake News Headlines on Social Media: Effects of Truth-Bias and Endorsement Cues', *Communication Research*, 49(2), pp. 171–195; Shin, I, Wang, L, LU, Y (2022) Twitter and Endorsed (Fake) News: The Influence of Endorsement by Strong Ties, Celebrities, and a User Majority on Credibility of Fake News During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Communication*, [S.I.], v. 16, p. 23