

## **Professor Sarah Pedersen<sup>1</sup> and Professor Simon Burnett<sup>2</sup>—written evidence (FON0010)**

### **House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry: The future of news: impartiality, trust and technology**

#### **Context**

Previous studies on news consumption have suggested women consume less news than men, and that one of the key drivers of this gender gap is the dual burden of paid and household work (Benesch 2012). However, recent studies suggest that women around the world equal or exceed men in news consumption via social media and that they are likely to access news information on sites not usually identified as offering news, such as those related to family responsibilities, where other women act as trusted news informants (Gottfried and Shearer 2017; Graham et al. 2016; Kalogeropoulos et al. 2017).

Our evidence relates to our work on the discussion of news sources by members of the UK online discussion forum Mumsnet. Mumsnet has 8 million unique visitors per month. While the website states that it is aimed at parents, less than 5% of its active users are fathers. However, the site does not only attract mothers: the wide range of topics tackled on its talk boards mean that many of its female users are neither mothers nor looking to conceive.

#### **A safer space**

Women are less likely to comment directly on general news websites or social media such as X because of the way they are treated when they venture into public debate (Selva and Andi 2020). Instead, our research demonstrates that women use trusted 'third spaces' such as Mumsnet to access and discuss news. Through Mumsnet, users are able to avoid the aggression and misogynistic abuse women face when they attempt to discuss news in the wider public sphere of the Internet. They are able to purposefully detach debate from the mainstream news media and move that debate into what is perceived to be a safer space, where other users and Mumsnet moderators work to enforce boundaries.

For some, this third space can also act as a 'trusted friend', meaning that women do not have to source news items themselves, but still have access to what are deemed to be important news stories via Mumsnet. This allows even those who tend to avoid news to access necessary news via a third party.

#### **Collaborative spaces**

We argue that participants in news-related discussions on Mumsnet often engage in what we term 'citizen curation' – the collaborative collection and somewhat subjective assessment and criticism of news information sources for

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of Communication and Media at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

<sup>2</sup> Professor at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

the benefit of the group. Participants demonstrate a clear awareness of the veracity and potential subjectivity of their sources, work collaboratively to verify news items, and are proud of their ability to 'scoop' mainstream news media on occasion.

### **Mainstream news sources**

We found that Mumsnetters use mainly digital journalism sources, sourced either directly from mainstream news media or indirectly via social media such as X. Thus they are participating in a hybrid media system where old and new media coexist (Chadwick 2017). News items are therefore removed from their original context and re-presented on Mumsnet in a new context, albeit usually with links back to their original source. Their use of social media is largely as a conduit to information content in the mainstream media, such as the BBC news website or online versions of broadsheet newspapers, although internet-based media sources (for example BuzzFeed or HuffPost) can be used to supplement content from mainstream news media. Participants do not confine themselves to UK news media sources: the discussion of international stories is often supported by reference to international news media. Tabloid sources tend to be used only where new information from more trusted news media is sparse.

### **Trust and mistrust**

While the majority of Mumsnet discussion participants demonstrate trust in these news sources, some demonstrate hostility and distrust towards mainstream news sources, even suggesting collusion between the news media and the UK government. This has implications for clear dissemination of government messages on issues such as public health.

Casero-Ripollés (2020) suggests that one impact of COVID-19 on the news system in the US has included the resurgence of the role of legacy media, including television, as a news source and a general reconnection with the news amongst the public. Our findings support his suggestion that, in critical situations of high complexity and risk to human life, citizens consider the search for information and the following of news as key activities. However, our findings demonstrate that this renewed engagement with mainstream news frequently comes *through* social media, whether that is Twitter or sites such as Mumsnet.

## Further reading

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