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

Introduction

1. I am a Lecturer in Journalism and Global Communication and co-lead of the Disinformation Research Cluster at the University of Sheffield’s School of Journalism, Media and Communication. I am also co-founder of the Africa Disinformation Network. My work focuses on studying how and why audiences engage/disengage with inaccurate information, and on testing the efficacy of a range of interventions to build resilience against the spread of false information.
2. This submission offers answers to a selection of questions related to trust in the news media, and to mis- and dis-information formulated in the Committee’s Call for Evidence. These answers draw primarily on my own research findings, but also on publicly available sources of information. I would be happy to be contacted to provide further evidence and for this document to be made available to the wider public in full.

4b) What impact do concerns around disinformation have on trust in the information environment? (And to what extent does this differ between difference sections of society?)

3. Evidence shows that there’s a link between trust in the media (broadly understood) and perceptions around the ubiquity of disinformation.¹ This erosion of trust in news media and politics is a key factor in the spread and belief of disinformation, ultimately influencing vote choice and potentially disrupting democracy.² This is particularly evident among segments of society that have high levels of perceived exposure to disinformation and existing low levels of trust in the news media.³
4. Scholarship on trust in the news media is extensive. There’s consistent evidence that individual-level factors like political interest, interpersonal trust, and exposure to certain types of media (e.g., television news and newspapers) can positively correlate with trust in media in general, while education and news exposure online may correlate negatively.⁴ However,

¹ Xiao, X., Borah, P., & Su, Y. (2021). The dangers of blind trust: Examining the interplay among social media news use, misinformation identification, and news trust on conspiracy beliefs. *Public Understanding of Science*, 30, 977 - 992. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662521998025>.

² Zimmermann, F., & Kohring, M. (2020). Mistrust, Disinforming News, and Vote Choice: A Panel Survey on the Origins and Consequences of Believing Disinformation in the 2017 German Parliamentary Election. *Political Communication*, 37, 215 - 237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1686095>.

³ Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (2019). An Exploratory Study of “Fake News” and Media Trust in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. *African Journalism Studies*, 40(1), 107–123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2019.1627230>

⁴ Gunther, A. (1992). Biased press or biased public? Attitudes toward media coverage of social groups. *Public*

measuring trust in the news media or, more generally, in the information environment has proven to be a difficult task. Trust in the news media, for example, can be understood as faith in media organizations as expert systems, but it can also be understood as trust in journalistic selectivity, or as confidence in the news media, with these connotations varying by cultural and historical contexts.⁵

5. The direction of the relationship between trust in news and concerns around disinformation, particularly perceptions about the ubiquity of inaccurate information, has been difficult to discern. In other words, there's no consensus on whether concerns around the prevalence of disinformation impact trust, or whether it is lack of trust that fuels the perception that false information is ubiquitous. Similarly, repeated exposure to dis-information can create an "illusory truth effect," leading to a belief in the falsehoods and a cognitive bias towards certain thinking.⁶ Individuals who report high levels of perceived exposure to mis- and dis-information also report low levels of trust in the news media and high levels of consumption of news on social media and alternative outlets.⁷ Furthermore, individuals who self-report higher levels of media distrust and score higher in populist attitudes are more likely to find established information sources untrustworthy.⁸
6. In summary, there is a reciprocal relationship where belief in misinformation and/or concerns about the ubiquity of dis-information can lead to decreased trust in news media, and lower trust in media can increase susceptibility to misinformation and/or accentuate perceptions of the prevalence of inaccurate information. Furthermore, mis- and dis-information have the potential to erode public trust, influence political choices, and shift news consumption patterns towards alternative media sources. The role of social media is particularly significant, as it can amplify conspiracy beliefs and mis- and dis-information, especially among users who place high trust in the information disseminated through these platforms.

Opinion Quarterly, 56, 147-167. <https://doi.org/10.1086/269308>.

⁵ Engelke, K., Hase, V., & Wintterlin, F. (2019). On measuring trust and distrust in journalism: Reflection of the status quo and suggestions for the road ahead. *Journal of Trust Research*, 9, 66 - 86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21515581.2019.1588741>.

⁶ Chen, C., Ma, Y., Lai, Y., Chang, W., & Yang, S. (2022). Analyzing Disinformation with the Active Propagation Strategy. *2022 24th International Conference on Advanced Communication Technology (ICACT)*, 262-266. <https://doi.org/10.23919/ICACT53585.2022.9728847>.

⁷ Moreno-Castro, C., & Crespo, M. (2023). IBERIFIER Reports: The Impact of Disinformation on the Media Industry in Spain and Portugal. . <https://doi.org/10.15581/026.001>.

⁸ Egelhofer, J., Boyer, M., Lecheler, S., & Aaldering, L. (2022). Populist attitudes and politicians' disinformation accusations: effects on perceptions of media and politicians. *Journal of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqac031>.

5b) Are changes needed to the way the Government addresses mis- and dis-information?

7. Addressing the proliferation of false information, including mis- and dis-information, across a range of communication platforms (from encrypted messaging platforms to fringe news outlets) requires a multifaceted approach that involves multiple stakeholders including governments, media entities, platforms, and audiences, and draws on a plurality of actions. Some scholars, including myself and my co-authors, have stressed the importance of advocating for a socio-technical mix of strategies that foregrounds the various actors and actions in the wider mis- and dis-information production and consumption cycle, and interrogates the complex processes and the relationships among them. My own research has shown that these socio-technical understanding is favoured by news consumers.⁹
8. Scholars and practitioners have coalesced around the idea that responses to mis- and dis-information can be summarised into four types, namely *regulatory approaches* (e.g., forced removal and blocking of falsehoods, criminal sanctions against those spreading false information); *technological approaches* (e.g., automated detection of false information, using labels and warnings); *journalistic approaches* (e.g., strengthening independent media, fact-checking news content), and *educational approaches* (e.g., media and information literacy campaigns).¹⁰ It is my view that, to date, the Government's efforts have been overly focused on the first two approaches, particularly on the development of new regulatory frameworks. However, more emphasis is needed on the latter two approaches, particularly in regard to educational approaches.
9. It is urgent that misinformation literacy be embedded across school and university curricula. More efforts, beyond those already being carried out by Ofcom under the Communications Act 2003, are needed. Misinformation literacy can be understood as a combination of six competences, namely *context* (i.e., knowledge of the contexts in which false and accurate information are produced); *creation* (i.e., knowledge of the institutions that create false information, their motivations and the skills to identify those who produce specific information online); *content* (i.e., knowledge of the difference between facts and opinions, the different ways information can mislead and the skills and practices to distinguish accurate and inaccurate information); *circulation* (i.e., knowledge of the processes by which accurate and inaccurate information circulates and what drives people to share information; consumption (i.e., knowledge of the reasons individuals may believe false or misleading information to be true); and, *consequences* (i.e., knowledge of the different forms of actual and potential harm caused by believing and sharing false and misleading information).¹¹

⁹ Tully, M., Madrid-Morales, D., Wasserman, H., Gondwe, G., & Ireri, K. (2021). Who is Responsible for Stopping the Spread of Misinformation? Examining Audience Perceptions of Responsibilities and Responses in Six Sub-Saharan African Countries. *Digital Journalism*, 10(5), 679–697. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1965491>

¹⁰ Posetti, J., & Bontcheva, K. (2020). *Disinfodemic: Dissecting Responses to COVID-19 Disinformation*. Paris: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374417>

¹¹ <https://camri.ac.uk/blog/articles/misinformation-literacy-not-punitive-laws-needed-to-combat-fake-news/>

10. Any strategy to counter mis- and dis-information by the Government needs to clearly differentiate between types of inaccurate information. It is important that distinct strategies are devised to tackle everyday mis- and dis-information, politically motivated extreme speech, and foreign dis-information campaigns.

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