

The Truth Behind Fake News

Insights into the perceived trustworthiness of news and its link to policy decisions

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to shed light on the news consumption and perception patterns of young adults to inform policy decisions on fake news. In recent years, “fake news” – articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers – has contributed to an increasingly uncertain political climate. As such, this paper addresses the following gap in existing literature: How do young adults perceive and react to news? How might this data provide insight into policies that can tackle the problem of fake news? The data was collected using quantitative and qualitative methods from a controlled target group of individuals under the age of 34. The research findings indicate significant correlations between credibility cues and trust in news sources among young adults. Additionally, cluster analysis has identified two distinct categories of newsreaders who place importance on differing credibility cues. The findings above, along with existing research, suggest that education that keeps pace with developments in the information industry would be highly effective in tackling the problem of fake news. This paper is paramount as it provides a backdrop against which effective policy response can be designed to tackle the growing problem of fake news.*

Keywords: *News, Fake news, Social media, Perception, Trust*

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Introduction

Historically, the problem of fake news is no stranger to society and has consistently interfered with the political process of democratic societies. With the development of the internet and the advent of social media recently, traditional constraints can no longer be imposed on news agencies. Information shared on the internet and social media sites can have comparable influence as traditional sources and spread rapidly, yet anyone can disseminate articles on those platforms without them necessarily being true or fact-checked as a prerequisite. Without a revised strategy to tackle this issue, fake news could prove inimical to people's trust in both traditional and contemporary sources of information.

Due to the diversity of platforms that publish online information - from qualified journalists to less reputable tabloid press - it is important for people to critically judge the credibility of the news that they read online, especially fake news. Here, "fake news" is taken to be articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers.

Against this background, surveys and follow-up interviews were employed to investigate the news consumption patterns of young adults and the correlation of their habits with their level of trust in the news. In addition, the factors that readers assess when deciding which articles they trust were examined in close detail. The focus of this paper is the influence of both the more traditional source cues, such as spelling, as well as the effect of community evaluation- for example the number of shares and retweets on an article- on the reader's information selection process.

We find that while there are two distinct categories of cues that two corresponding groups of people focus on, all readers put strong emphasis on the reputation of the news agencies. Additionally, this paper gives policy recommendations to address the issue of fake news, emphasizing the long-term efficiency of policies that target information literacy of the public.

Literature Review

The barriers to entry for producing fake news have dropped precipitously due to the rise of the internet, given how easy it is to set up a website or social media page and monetise it through advertising. This has led to the proliferation of fake news among news media outlets in general. (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017)

There is also an increased reliance of individuals on social media as a platform to access the news. This has been confirmed in a study by the Pew Research Centre which reported that 62% of US adults now cite social media sites as one of their news sources. (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016) This development has caused traditional media outlets to include stories that are trending on social media, without necessarily having a clearly defined policy for verifying the content before it is broadcasted (Adornato & Lysak, 2017). This has also culminated in an uptick in newsreaders' exposure to fake news (Adornato, 2016).

As the development of information technology and social media seems largely responsible for the proliferation of fake news and hence lower levels of trust, it may prove interesting to examine social media usage habits with respect to news and whether this influences individuals' trust in the news.

The fact that fake news has compromised news media trust levels in democracies that rely heavily on news media to inform its citizens spells problems for political decision making among citizens and the political process (Jones, 2004; Balmas, 2014). It sows confusion about basic

facts, with 88% of US adults saying that fake news has caused them a significant degree of confusion about basic facts (Barthel, et al., 2016). When confronted with confusion about trust in their information, people typically fall back to natural bias inherent in human thinking, such as the strong drive towards belief and attitude consistency, and a tendency to be overconfident in one's beliefs and judgement (Kuklinski, et al., 2000). Worryingly, fake news articles have a lasting impact on a person even after it has been discovered to be false (Polage, 2012). A more insidious effect is that conformity to erroneous recollections was even more pronounced in group settings, making the "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" propagated by social media severe sources of misinformation (Edelson, et al., 2011) and for self-contained narratives to emerge (Bessi, et al., 2015).

Clearly, fake news is a problem that requires closer examination. To formulate effective policies to deal with this issue, a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the perceived trustworthiness of a news article has to be achieved. Although existing literature includes a multidimensional scale of measure trust in news media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), there is a lack of a model that factors in the sweeping changes that have taken place in terms of news consumption and perception patterns over recent years.

Additionally, current research does not target the consumption habits of young people in particular who receive the highest exposure to social media and hence fake news (Greenwood, et al., 2016). Moreover, this is the demographic that carries the most political weight in terms of the future.

As a side note, the existing literature is primarily US based. Research that focuses specifically on the UK should be used to determine if such trends are present across borders.

This prompts these research questions:

What determines the perceived trustworthiness of a news article among young adults?

What implications do the findings of this research have for effective policy response to the problem of fake news?

Methodology

i. Sample

In total, 150 useable responses from young adults under the age of 35 have been collected through convenient sampling. The surveys were distributed online through researchers' social circles. Taking in consideration the researchers' backgrounds, we assumed that our sample population generally had relatively high education levels, as reflected by our question on education level. Young adults were chosen as the group of interest because they heavily rely on digital platforms for news consumption, thus more prone to the effects of proliferation of fake news on social media.

ii. Data Collection

Surveys

Survey questions were designed to navigate the correlation between the target group's news consumption habits and the credibility cues that would affect their perception and trust in news.

In terms of news consumption patterns, the frequency and the sources from which young people read news were of interest. The survey questions were designed to evaluate nine factors that could influence level of trust in news: reputation of news sources, presentation of an article, alignment with pre-existing knowledge, number of similar articles, number of shares, spelling and grammar, etc. (see Appendix). After data collection, SPSS was used to evaluate our survey data to see relationship between different factors in influencing credibility.

Interviews

Follow-up interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with a sample of five people who completed the survey previously, with an aim of refining the survey findings and delving deeper into their news consumption habits on social media platforms. We grouped the questions thematically and prepared a starter question with several suggested follow-on questions to allow for flexibility when conducting the interviews.

iii. Limitations

Time and resource constraints

Due to limited time and resources, convenience sampling was used. Hence, surveys were distributed through the social networks of the researchers. It potentially led to sampling bias as the sample was skewed towards the over-representation of prevalent characteristics in those social circles; thus it might not be easily generalised.

Potential biases in survey responses

There could be social desirability bias as respondents might respond in ways they thought would be viewed favourably, rather than responding genuinely. For instance, they might give answers that made them seem like more of an engaging reader of news.

A Likert scale was used rather than Agree/Disagree questions to avoid acquiescence bias. This scale presupposed that the sample had an opinion on the question asked. Hence, sampling highly educated young adults reduced the likelihood of the sample having no opinion.

Potential biases in interview responses

Due to rather limited experience in conducting interviews, there arose concerns of the interviewer-led bias. Interviewers might have unintentionally prompted interviewees in a certain direction, through the choice of words or the tone when phrasing questions. In addition, we would expect more significant social desirability bias to occur in interviews as it took place face-to-face and the interviewees were friends of the researchers.

iv. Ethical considerations

To comply with standard research ethics, the identities of the participants remained anonymous. Consent was asked for both surveys and interviews. The two survey responses that did not consent were disregarded. Pilot surveys were tested to ensure that the methodology conformed to the ethical requirements.

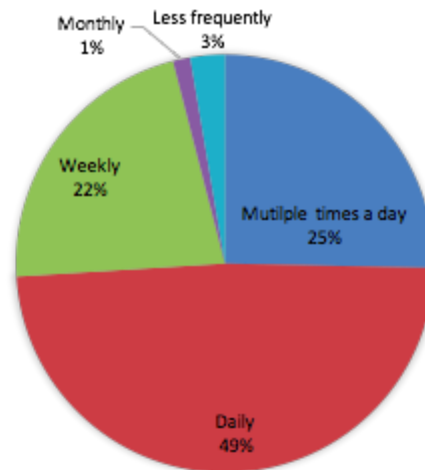
Analysis and Results

i. Descriptive Statistics

58% of the survey respondents were UK nationals. 94% of respondents were aged 18-34. 90% of respondents were students and 81% had an undergraduate or higher degree.

The data (Fig.1) showed that 74% of respondents read news at least daily, suggesting the significance of news consumption in young adults' daily life.

FIG.1 FREQUENCY OF NEWS CONSUMPTION



The data (Fig.2) indicated a clear majority of digital sources (95%). This confirms our expectation as the chosen target group, young adults, rely heavily on digital platforms for news. Further breaking down into digital sources indicated a mixed balance between social media and news websites (Fig.3), out of which 70% of respondents listed BBC as one of their three main news sources.

FIG.2 SOURCES OF NEWS

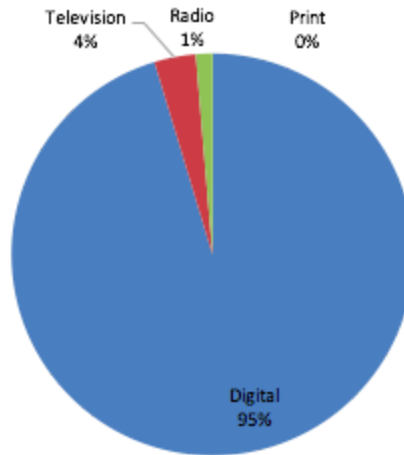
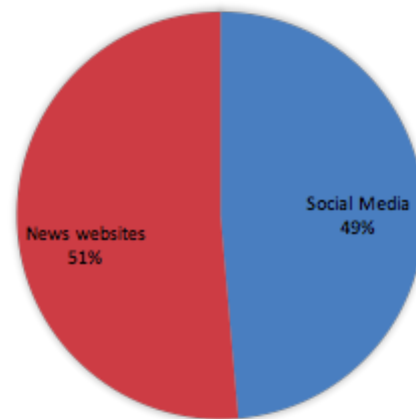
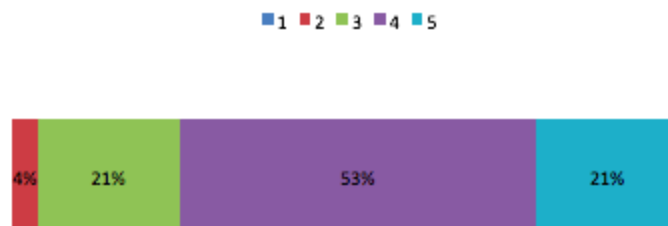


FIG.3 BREAKDOWN OF DIGITAL SOURCES



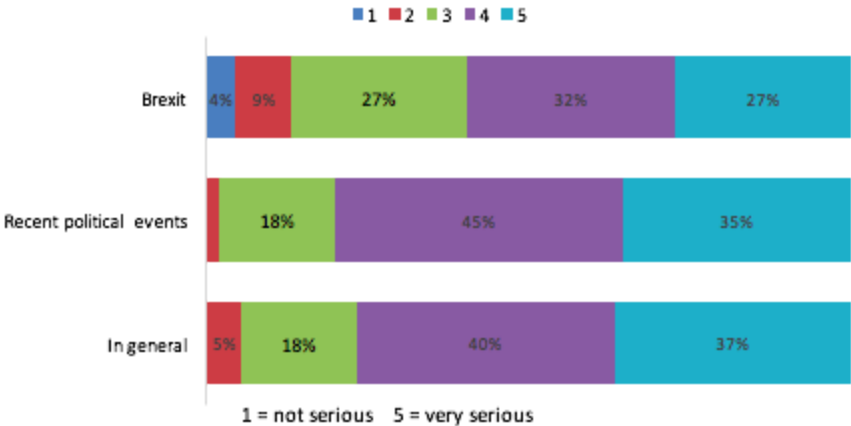
The data (Fig.4) also suggested that a majority of respondents placed a fairly high level of trust in their sources of news.

FIG.4 DISTRIBUTION OF TRUST IN NEWS SOURCES



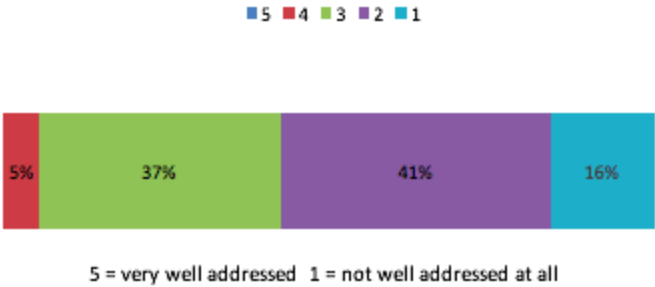
About fake news, the data (Fig.5) shows that about 77% of respondents believed that fake news was a serious problem in general. About 80% believed that fake news was a serious problem in recent political events. The proportions were sufficiently significant. However, only 59% saw it as a problem in the referendum on Brexit.

FIG.5 DISTRIBUTION OF VIEWS ON THE SERIOUSNESS OF FAKE NEWS AS A PROBLEM

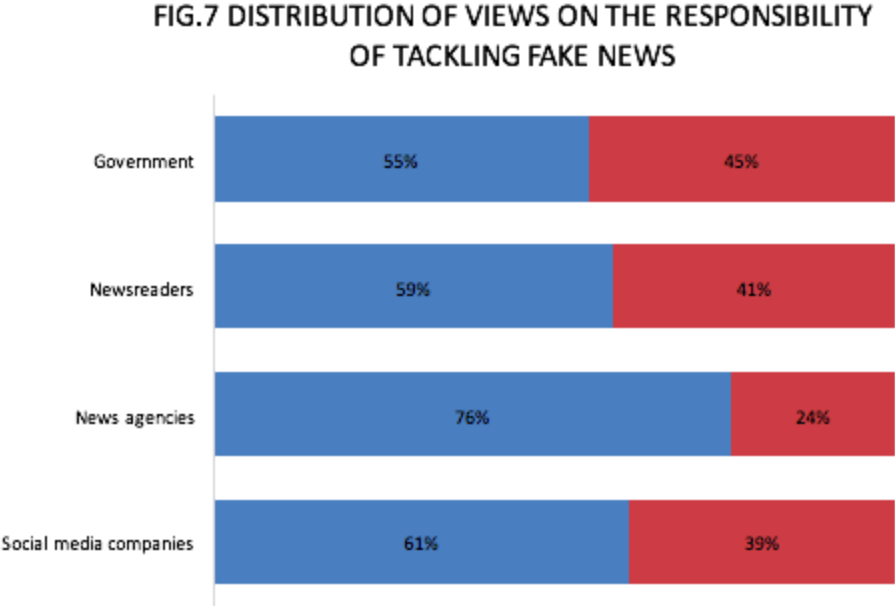


Regarding the tackling of fake news, about 94% of respondents gave a score of 3 or less. (Fig. 6)

FIG.6 DISTRIBUTION OF VIEWS ON THE TACKLING OF FAKE NEWS



The proportions of respondents who believed that the government, newsreaders, news agencies and social media companies should be responsible for tackling fake news were 55%, 59%, 76% and 61% respectively. (Fig. 7)



ii. Spearman’s Correlations

Relationship between frequency of reading news and trust levels

Correlation analysis found a positive relationship between the frequency with which respondents checked the news and the level of trust they had in the news. More specifically, the test found a correlation coefficient of 0.148, with a p-value of 0.071, meaning that this relationship was significant at the 10% level of significance. (Table 1)

Taking into account the interview sessions, this relationship was attributed to the possibility that frequent newsreaders are more familiar with the narratives presented by news websites. As a result, news articles that they subsequently read are more likely to conform with their pre-existing beliefs, contributing to generally higher trust levels in the news.

From another angle, we may presume that with greater experience in judging credible news sources, readers might settle on a few but very trusted news agencies- and have a great level of trust in them.

TABLE 1: CORRELATION BETWEEN FREQUENCY OF NEWS CONSUMPTION AND TRUST IN NEWS SOURCES

			How often read news	Trust in sources
Spearman's rho	How often read news	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.148
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.071
		N	150	150
	Trust in sources	Correlation Coefficient	.148	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.071	
		N	150	150

Relationship between the importance of reputation and trust levels

The data indicated a strong positive correlation between the importance that newsreaders attach to reputation in trusting a news article and the overall level of trust they had in the news. The correlation was calculated to be 0.296 with a p-value of 0.000 (3 decimal places), meaning that this relationship was significant at the 1% level of significance. (Table 2)

When asked if their level of trust in news generally has changed in recent years, one interviewee replied: “*Not in those mainstream websites like BBC or CNN, but more with random articles you view online. (Interview #1)*” Another interviewee commented: “*...when it comes to less credible news agencies, I would sometimes discredit them all together. (Interview #2)*” This shows that established news agencies still draw in readers based on their reputation while some disregard any articles not published by a trusted agency.

Relationship between the importance of the existence of articles stating similar facts and trust levels

The data showed a positive correlation between the importance that newsreaders place on the existence of articles stating similar facts in believing a news article and the level of trust they had in the news. The correlation coefficient was 0.164 with a p-value of 0.045, meaning that this relationship was significant at the 5% level of significance. (Table 2)

Analysing the qualitative data, this finding was ascribed to the fact that readers who placed high importance on reputation as a trust factor believed that the existence of multiple sources would result in the weeding out of misinformation. During the interviews, *cross-reading* was cited as a way to verify their news: “*I usually read through various news articles to get a better picture of what’s going on. (Interview #3)*”

			Importance of presentation	Importance of no. of shares	Importance of aligning with beliefs	Importance of reputation	Importance of no. similar articles	Importance of reliable data	Importance of author	Importance of spelling	Importance of tone	Trust in sources
Spearman's rho	Trust in sources	Correlation Coefficient	.114	-.017	-.083	.296**	.164*	.153	-.088	.164*	.135	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.164	.840	.313	.000	.045	.061	.285	.045	.099	
		N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

iii. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

An analysis of variance was run taking the various media outlets as the treatment groups. It was found that people's trust in social media as a news outlet was significantly less than people's trust in TV/radio. This finding was statistically significant at the 1% level of significance.

Paradoxically, individuals seemed to prefer using social media as a mean of accessing the news as compared to formal news websites despite the fact that they had lower trust in social media as a source of news. One reason for this is that young adults feel that accessing the news through social media is more efficient. With social media, individuals do not have to read an entire article and can keep updated in a matter of seconds. Additionally, interviewees found that news articles that appear on their social newsfeed are likely to be more interesting and engaging as they are shared by their friends.

As young adults find social media an increasingly convenient means of reading the news, this points towards the fact that policies which ensure the content available on social media is factually verified are of paramount importance. This raises the question of whether social media companies should assume a certain level of responsibility for the information shared on their sites.

TABLE 3A: TRUST IN NEWS SOURCES

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
TV/Radio	7	4.143	.8997	.3401	3.311	4.975	3.0	5.0
News websites	71	4.099	.7202	.0855	3.928	4.269	2.0	5.0
Social media	70	3.714	.7641	.0913	3.532	3.896	2.0	5.0
Total	148	3.919	.7694	.0632	3.794	4.044	2.0	5.0

TABLE 3B: ANOVA ANALYSIS OF TRUST IN NEWS SOURCES

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.574	2	2.787	4.962	.008
Within Groups	81.453	145	.562		
Total	87.027	147			

iv. Factor Analysis

Relationship between factors determining the trustworthiness of a new source and types of newsreaders

We focused on the different factors influencing level of trust namely and by analysing the raw data from the survey, two distinct components were identified (Table 5 and Fig.8):

- Component 1 is “traditionalist”, i.e. uses traditional cues

- Component 2 is “modernist”, i.e. uses digital cues

Component 1 relied mostly on data reliability, author, spelling and tone to form their opinion on the trustworthiness of a source of news. Factor analysis indicated a strong cohesiveness for traditionalists. This data suggested that component 1 placed more importance on the professionalism of the journalist and the article in forming their opinion; which were relatively objective features of the source of the news.

Component 2 relied mostly on presentation, number of shares, number of similar articles, alignment with pre-existing knowledge to judge the trustworthiness of a source of news. These factors play a subjective role in the determination of the trustworthiness of a source of news. Indeed, the number of shares or the pre-existing knowledge do not give an objective indication as to whether a news article is trustworthy. It raised the question if component 2 were more prone to the proliferation of fake news as fake news tend to be widely shared and generally well presented.

Curiously, there was a difference between the survey and the interview responses. Respondents in the survey seemed to put forward the importance of *traditionalist* cues. However, none of the interviewees, who had previously taken the survey, suggested *traditionalist* cues, rather opting for using *modernist* cues. The research gave evidence that even though highly educated young adults were aware that *traditionalist* cues could potentially be the best way of evaluating a news article, they actually used *modernist* cues for their relative convenience.

Relationship between factors determining the trustworthiness of a new source and types of newsreaders

Discourse analysis revealed that interviewees valued critical thinking skills to judge online information: “...our education in critical thinking lags behind developments in the way we consume and process information. (Interview #3)” It has been suggested that the young adults should be taught how to critically evaluate online information to prevent the spreading of misinformation on internet. By establishing good habits at a school age, it equips people with the right tools to keep up with the changing ways of information consumption, leading to a better informed public.

Another approach suggested by our interviewees is more government and social media interventions. However, this sort of supply-side regulations raised ethical issues. One interviewee mentioned: “...too much government control might influence press freedom and lead to serious political concerns (Interview #3)”, adding that “As the incentives are not aligned correctly, (social media) companies shouldn’t have a stake in information control”.

Furthermore, interaction between governments and social media is complicated. For example, Facebook’s monthly users is close to 2 billion (Statista, 2017), which would give it a population far greater than any country. In many ways it operates like its own country, setting many of its own rules and regulations, yet so far attempts to use these internal rules and regulation to prevent fake news have been deemed unsuccessful by commentators in *The Financial Times* and the

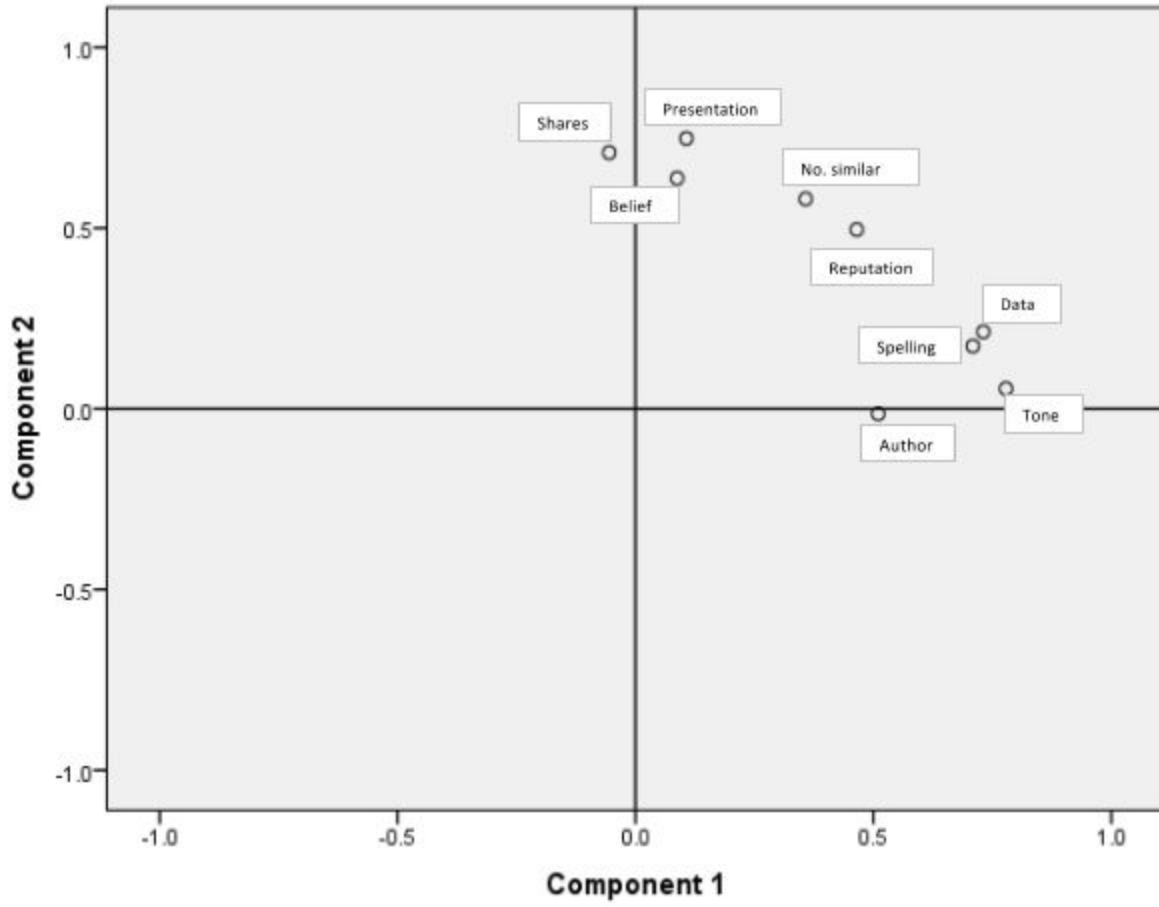
Guardian. The size and transnationality of social medias like Facebook makes any government regulation onto them difficult to enact and enforce. This leaves only policy which directly affect news consumers. Ground up policy has mostly been unexplored until recently, with Facebook themselves looking to educate news readers (BBC, 2017), and is an area with great promise, while other routes to solutions have failed.

TABLE 5: ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX

	Component	
	1	2
Factor_belief_reputation	.465	.496
Factor_belief_presentation	.107	.749
Factor_belief_no._shares	-.055	.709
Factor_belief_alligns	.087	.638
Factor_belief_no._similar	.357	.581
Factor_belief_data_reliable	.731	.213
Factor_belief_Author	.510	-.014
Factor_belief_spelling	.709	.174
Factor_belief_tone	.778	.056

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization
 Rotation converged in 3 iterations

FIG.8 COMPONENT PLOT IN ROTATED SPACE



Conclusion

In summary, this paper illustrates the following key findings. First, the more an individual reads the news, the more he would trust the news. Second, the reputation of a source of news was by far the most important factor in deciding whether a news article was believable. Third, although people had lower trust levels in social media as a news outlet, they were likely to prefer social media as a news outlet to other sources, citing reasons of convenience, relevance and engagement. This highlights the question of whether social media companies should bear responsibility for monitoring the verifiability of news content on social media. Fourth, two types of newsreaders, “traditionalist” and “modernist” were identified. The “modernist” methods of verification were found to be widely adopted even among highly educated individuals, although these methods do not give an objective indication of how trustworthy a news article is. In contrast, the “traditionalist” methods gave an objective indication of trustworthiness, but was adopted by much fewer individuals. This suggests that education which emphasises the “traditionalist” methods would be effective in improving the average newsreader’s ability to discern fake news.

There were instances of limitations in the research conducted. First, in the statistical analysis of the data, there are variables such as education levels and age that confound the data and which were not deliberately controlled. Second, the correlations identified are potentially spurious as there is a limited amount of existing literature studying the causal relationships presented in this paper. Third, the findings may lack significance as the amount of quantitative and qualitative

data collected was not sufficient in the time frame given to produce an authoritative result on the matter.

All in all, this paper addresses the existing gap in literature by presenting an understanding of news consumption patterns that accounts for the recent changes in the way news is accessed. This paper recommends demand-side policies to address fake news, by increasing the information literacy of the general public through educational schemes, as supply-side policies might enter sensitive and complex territories. If the public is equipped with the tools to effectively evaluate information, this will lead to better tackling of fake news in the long term.

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Appendix I: Survey Questions

Do you consent for your answers being used anonymously in a research paper that will be publicly available?

- Yes
- No

About news consumption habits:

How often do you read news?

- Multiple times a day
- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than frequently

Which platform do you use to access news most frequently?

- Print
- Television
- Digital
- Radio
- Others

Among the digital sources available, which source do you frequent the most?

- News websites (e.g. www.bbc.co.uk)
- Blogs
- Social media newsfeed (Facebook, Instagram)
- Youtube
- Others

What are your 3 main news sources? (the Financial Times, BuzzFeed, BBC Radio 1)

About perception of news:

On a scale of 1-5, how much do you trust the news sources you most frequently use?

On a scale of 1-5, how important are each of the following factors for you to believe a particular news article?

- Reputation/Credibility of the source
- Presentation/appearance of the article
- Number of shares on social media
- Whether it aligns with pre-existing knowledge
- Number of news articles stating similar facts
- Whether the article refers to reliable statistical figures

- Author
- Spelling/Grammar
- Tone/style of the article

What leads you to feel the need to verify a piece of news? (Give 2 or more reasons)

On a scale of 1-5, how serious of a problem do you think fake news is as a whole?

On a scale of 1-5 (5 being very serious), how serious of a problem do you think fake news is in recent political events?

On a scale of 1-5 (5 being very important), do you think fake news played an important role in Brexit? (not required if you did not follow)

Who do you think should be responsible for addressing the problem of fake news?

- Government
- Newsreaders
- Social media companies
- News agencies

On a scale of 1-5 (5 being very well addressed), do you think the problem of fake news has been addressed properly so far?

What is your current employment status?

What industry are you working in?

Are you a UK national or living in the UK?

Please select your age

- Under 18
- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to over

Please select your gender

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

What is your highest degree/level of schooling you have completed? If currently enrolled, what degree are you working towards?

Appendix II: Interview Questions Guideline

About news consumption habit in general

Where do you normally get your news? (channels: digitally, TV, radio, etc). Why?

In terms of digital sources, which kind do you use most frequently?

Have you ever verified a news article that you come across on the source that you use most frequently?

About news consumption habits on social media platforms

What do you do when you come across an interesting article / headline on social media sites such as Facebook? Why?

Do you think there is any difference between the news you come across in social media sites and traditional news outlets? Or how different do you think is the news on social media sites and traditional news outlets? Which type do you prefer?

Do you normally share news on social media platforms? If yes, do you pay particular attention to the credibility of the article? Have you shared any article on Facebook that you have later discovered that is false? If no, why?

About fake news:

When you saw the phrase 'fake news', what comes to your mind?

Do you think (the general public) people have the ability to spot fake news? Why?

Do you think fake news is a problem? If yes, in your opinion, why does it persist? Has your trust (of news sources, of news in general?) been altered by the proliferation of fake news?

About the policy decisions:

Who do you think should be held responsible for tackling the problem of fake news? Why? How could they do it?

Can it be fixed?

Appendix III: Interview Transcripts

Interview #1

I: Do you consent to this interview being recorded and used for a publicly available research paper?

P: Yes.

I: Which news platform do you access frequent most frequently?

P: I usually use the internet and digital sources.

I: Among the digital sources available, which one do you use the most?

P: Usually I visit bbc.co.uk, but sometimes I use Reddit.

I: When you are browsing the BBC website or Reddit, have you ever felt the need to verify or double-check a news article?

P: I usually do this when the article is on Facebook. BBC and Reddit do a good job of aggregating the news really well.

I: Have you ever visited a fact-checking website or a government statistical board to fact-check articles you read?

P: I mean, I have probably checked it out once, but I definitely do not do it on a regular basis. Most people probably can't be bothered to fact-check the news.

I: Let's say you came across an interesting or controversial article on Facebook or other social media platforms. Could you tell me what your initial thoughts would be and how you would react to it?

P: I typically just read it, but I don't share it on social media. I might retweet it, but I would not share it.

I: If you see something interesting on Facebook, would you 'Like' the video or would you read it and not do anything?

P: If I quite like the news article, I'd probably 'Like' it.

I: Do you think there is a difference between the news you see on social media and the news that you see on bbc.co.uk for example?

P: I think news websites like bbc.co.uk are generally quite straightforward. On social media sites you are more likely to find clickbait or BuzzFeed lists. The news on social media is definitely tailored to suit the social media platform. I would prefer to use websites like bbc.co.uk

I: Have you ever shared an article that you later discovered was false or not entirely true?

P: No for me it usually goes the other way. When my friends share a false article, I will correct them and tell them it's false.

I: What is the first things that come to your mind when you hear the phrase "fake news"

P: I think one would be the political process and recent political events. Another would be bogus articles about health-care such as the one claiming the vaccines lead to autism.

I: Generally speaking, do you think people nowadays have the ability to discern a fake news article from a real one?

P: I think most people can discern the obvious. However, I would say the fake news is becoming more and more realistic, and increasingly it blurs the lines between reality and what is fake.

I: Do you the problem of fake news poses a problem?

P: It's a problem especially for the political process. I mean the Trump campaign relied upon fake news.

I: The issue of fake news is now becoming mainstream. Lots of people talk about it, but it seems that little is being done to address this issue. Why do you think this problem is so persistent?

P: I think there is a problem of engagement. Due to the increased polarization of political views, less people are willing to listen to what the other party has to say, or fact-check the claims that the party they support is making. They just tune out everything that does not align with their political views. Also social media platforms make it very easy for people to share whatever they want, compounding the problem.

I: When would you say you became acutely aware of this issue?

P: Ever since Brexit, the idea of fake news came into the mainstream for me. So I became more aware around then.

I: Would you say your general trust level in all news sources has declined significantly?

P: Likely. Not in those mainstream websites like BBC or CNN, but more with random articles you view online.

I: Who do you think should be in charge of addressing this problem?

P: I think everyone's responsible. But I feel social media sites like Facebook and Twitter play an especially large role. This is because social media has such a large influence. Especially for our generation people do use Facebook and Twitter very frequently to access the news.

I: From what you currently know, could you foresee any possible policy responses?

P: In the short term, I think this problem will persist. I mean look at Trump, even CNN has to cover his fake truths. Algorithms play a large role in this. Because algorithms are not personal. If someone who put in charge of this role, it could be viewed like a 1984 situation.

Interview #2

I: Imagine if you came across an interesting article or headline on a social media site such as Facebook, what would you do? What goes through your mind?

P: I still have a read of it but I would be wary of the sources. Before I click the link, I would like to see which news agency it came from. [...] On social media, I feel that there are a lot of news

that are from not so credible news agencies, that are there as click-baits. And therefore although the headline might be interesting, the article might not be so or might not be so trustworthy.

[...]

I: Have you ever verified news that your friends sent you?

P: In a sense, I would just read it and go along. [...] I trust it a little bit more if it is shared by a friend of mine. I pay a lot of attention to the credibility of the article, especially if the headline looks a bit outrageous or strange.

I: Can you recall any articles that you have read and found dubious or--?

P: Yeah, what I saw ages ago— “Oh! Massive Sinkhole found in Colorado!” It was nothing. [...] I looked at it- “Ah, this article seems interesting! And it’s a natural phenomenon!” No, no, it was quite small and it was nothing.

I: Is it too small [an issue] to justify verifying it?

P: Yes, but I do know that it was not true.

I: Ok, so your judgement of its authenticity is based on your existing knowledge or-? About the article--?

P: Yeah, it’s a bit of both. One is common sense, obviously. There are somethings that you know is not true. And other things might be: controversial, against the mainstream media—though I know the mainstream media isn’t perfect but I take that as a benchmark. So if it is overly controversial compared to the mainstream media... Yeah, I would take that with a pinch of salt.

I: Ok, I see, so let’s move on to more general questions. Questions about fake news as a problem itself. When I say the phrase “Fake News”, what comes to your mind?

P: Donald Trump.

I: Would you care to elaborate more?

P: I think ‘fake news’ is a term specially coined by him, I think. I think a piece of news came out two days ago where people protested the London attack. Some networks like CNN and BBC framed all of the protesters, like, gathered them in a particular spot to shoot them and pretend that they are walking by it, that all the people are really angry, and ah this is the sign of fake news [Inaudible audio]. But I personally don’t see it as that big of an issue but at the core of the report, as long as it is genuine, I don’t really mind the way they present, in a sense. As an individual, I can see past that. [...] I don’t think it’s a particularly serious problem among mainstream (news agencies) because they carry some social responsibility- to deliver somewhat the truth. But obviously when it comes to less credible news agencies, I would sometimes discredit them all together. Therefore, I don’t see them as a problem—I won’t personally take them on-board or gather information from them, obviously. I don’t know if that applies to everyone else, but if everyone is reasonably rational, they wouldn’t believe the really outrageous things- and so it won’t be a problem.

I: Then, do you think the general public have the ability to spot fake news?

P: Um, I feel like a lot of the times- Personal bias, people around me—so people *can* tell if it's fake news since we don't consume just one type of media- we consume a number of different types and we can collaborate—like some news are ridiculous. So, I feel like the less obvious ones could be a problem as less people are likely to spot them.

I: So actually you think that the people's ability to spot fake news depends on the sources. Actually you just mentioned that you generally have trust in the mainstream media- so I was wondering if your trust in your news sources has been altered by the proliferation of fake news?

P: As I said previously that I personally intake news from a number of different sources. I understand that each news agent has their own take on a particular situation. They could be editorial opinions...so I think it's fairly reasonable for them to do so. Just on the consumer's part, we have to be a little bit wise ourselves to be [able to tell apart] what are the facts and what are the opinions that are being proliferated by the reporters themselves. I think by cross reading many different sources, that definitely would help that kind of issue.

I: How about your trust in news generally?

P: I'm personally okay with it because I take my news from multiple sources.

I: Ok, just now you mentioned how consumers must be very cautious. So, in terms of the policy implications, are you suggesting that consumers and new-readers should be held most responsible for the problem?

P: I feel like people need to be more aware of what they're reading. I think a bigger chunk is that if you can tell Facebook to stop proliferating—but my point is that people should be more aware and be able to intake information from sources that they know that the information is genuine. And I think there's not a lot that- from a policy standpoint- the government can do.

I: Do you have any suggestions? About how to make people more aware or more cautious?

P: It's obviously crucial to identify who's more susceptible to fake news: if it's the elderly? If it is the teenage people? I suppose it's important to identify the individuals and what they consume first. Then, I think the second stem point is to [establish that] fake news does exist and take the following forms. At the same time, somewhat encourage people to take on news from different sources. Like some people consume a lot of news of Facebook and you might want to encourage them to share more news from the BBC website, more Financial Times news. So if there are more news like those being circulated, they will drive out the bad news and the fake news- and it will probably help.

Interview #3

I: Would you be okay with today's interview being used in a research paper that will be publicly available?

P1, P2: Yes.

I: Where do you normally get your news?

P1, P2: We access our news through digital platforms.

I: Which digital sources do you use the most?

P1: Social media

P2: I use the BBC website

I: Have you ever fact-checked an article from the source that you frequent the most?

P1, P2: No.

I: Could you guys talk me through your thought process and your reactions when you see something interesting or controversial on Facebook or any other social media platform?

P1: I normally don't share news articles on Facebook. Typically, when the subject is controversial, there will be many news articles about it. I usually read through various news articles to get a better picture of what's going on.

P2: If I do share an article, I will also include my opinion. But definitely, before I share it, I would want to fact-check the article, and especially if it comes from unfamiliar sources or sources that I know are not as reliable.

I: Do you think there is any difference between the news that you come across on social media sites and news that you encounter on news websites?

P1: For me there isn't that much of difference. The links that I see on my news feed are shared by my friends, who typically share articles from reputable news websites, so the content is essentially identical.

P2: If the content were to be the same, the difference between reputable news sites and unofficial socio-political commentary sites that spread their articles mainly through social media is that the socio-political commentary sites tend to angle their articles in a certain manner so as to achieve a particular political agenda or paint a certain political party in a certain light. For example, you would have clickbait, sensational headlines, etc.

I: Would you prefer to go to social media websites to access the news or go directly to the news website to access the news?

P1: For me I would prefer scrolling through social media because it is very accessible and convenient. It also takes up less time because I see news articles that I would likely be interested in.

P2: Same for me as well.

I: Have you ever shared an article that you later discovered was false?

P1, P2: No, not really.

I: What comes to your mind when you think about the phrase "fake news"?

P1, P2: Trump.

I: Generally speaking, do you think people have the ability to discern between real and fake news?

P1, P2: Maybe not for outrageous facts, but for more subtle things such as statistics of event-based news, people in general are definitely more likely to have difficulty telling the two apart.

I: Do you think education has an impact on an individual's ability to discern whether a news article is fake or not?

P2: Personally, I do not think education is correlated to one's ability to discern whether an article is fake or not. I think it has more to do with one's broader views such as political view and worldview. We can have really intelligent and highly educated people, who, due to a certain political affiliation, will blindly believe whatever is claimed by their favoured political party. Whatever news that suits their agenda, suits their preferred party, is the news they will believe. An average joe may be better at discerning fake news than a highly educated person.

I: Why do you think so little has been done to address this issue, and do you think this issue will persist?

P1: People will always want to push their own agendas and it's very easy for anyone to create a fake news article. If it is outrageous, it will become viral, so there is a monetary incentive to create fake news, like in the case of the Macedonian teenagers. Essentially, the advancement of information technology and the complete anonymity associated with the internet has given rise to a general lack of accountability and increasing ease with which false information can be disseminated. This in turn contributes to the ubiquity of fake news in daily lives.

P2: Additionally, people have more access to the internet than ever before and are capable of generating their own content. The chances of fake news being generated is even higher.

I: Now that fake news has become a mainstream topic, do you think this has decreased your trust levels in news generally?

P1, P2: Not really. The sources we frequent are still trustworthy, we just have to be more critical when we decide to use alternative news sources.

I: Who do you think should be responsible for addressing the problem of fake news?

P1: I think the government shouldn't play too large a role because too much government control might influence press freedom and lead to serious political concerns.

P2: Social media sites and news agencies also shouldn't have too big a role because they are profit driven and actually benefit more from having fake news around than not. As the incentives are not aligned correctly, companies shouldn't have a stake in information control.

I: What kind of policies would help people become better at discerning real and fake news?

P2: Education in and outside of school needs to keep up with developments in news consumption. We note that our education in critical thinking lags behind developments in the way we consume and process information.

Interview #4

I: Where do you normally get your news and why?

P: Generally, I just go online- BBC, the Guardian. Apple do a thing on one of their apps called Apple News- news from lots of different sources- it sort of takes news articles from the BBC and- god help us- from the Daily Mirror if you have to. It also takes American sources as well, which is quite interesting. Politico is quite useful for the political side. Why? Um, BBC and the

Guardian are just the ones to trust- they generally fact check. They are just free, easy to get...they're the ones that people generally go to. BBC seems to be impartial and give both sides of the debate; the Guardian, they're one of the few newspapers [...] in the fact that they normally take both sides of a debate. They're not like the Sun and heavily right wing- or like the Daily Mirror and go to the left. You get both sides, not necessarily in just one article but kind of across the board. I do occasionally read newspapers but not in University - normally at home, when my parents have them. That would be the Daily Telegraph which is not what I normally prefer. [...] I have the BBC app and the Guardian app, which is what I go to.

I: Have you ever verified something you have read on your trusted news source?

P: No... not at the top of my head. I see things on Facebook and that's when I do go to check. I go to somewhere like the BBC and the Guardian to check. [...] Especially during the election campaign, you get 140 character updates on it on the BBC politics twitter account, which is really quite interesting to follow. But, no, generally I don't verify.

I: With the events happening right now, would you look to a social media platform or would you look to a more traditional—

P: Interestingly, if I give an example on the Westminster attack- I actually heard about that first on social media and then I went to the BBC to see- "Hang on, is this true? Shots fired in Westminster and there's nothing on the BBC about it". It took the BBC 5 or 10 mins to pick up on it. In that sense, kind of?

I: If you see an interesting headline on a social media site, what would you do?

P: Take it with a massive pinch of salt- unless it's the BBC Facebook page that is just being shared by Facebook, where I would take it as genuine.

I: Why?

P: Because social media is one of those where you really don't know. You have to take it with a pinch of salt because there is no one fact checking which is why the BBC has this thing where they've the impartiality rule and fact-checking. It's somewhat the same with newspapers since there's an editorial process. the fact that there is no editor means to an extent I will trust it less. I look at it and go: 'oh, it's social media'- there is a subconscious thought that I could have written this if I wanted to. Why should I trust this guy and that guy when I can get it from a more trustworthy source? [...] I'm not saying there can't be an overlap between digital BBC and guardian news but there is a distinction between them and stuff anybody could have put out there?

I: Do you think people should be able to put anything out there?

P: Yeah, but only if they're actual facts- it's not someone smashing their keyboard and be like 'Let's spread some fake news about Brexit or something'. As long as it's trustworthy... But how can you make sure that it is trustworthy when everyone can do it. You can't use hundreds of people just to fact check everything when there are already more trustworthy sources you can use. So what would be the point?

I: So, who do u think should tackle it?

P: I don't think you can pinpoint responsibility to one individual or one group. It's a kind of collective effect. I think definitely social media and that something should be done with when it's not the actual truth- when it's fake news almost. Government, I don't think they can do much. Whenever there is a platform for people to spread information of any form, it always provides the opportunity for fake information- you can't prevent that. To an extent, you take a newspaper and every so often you see an article for the Sun or the Daily Mail- usually on the second or third page- a box saying: "We apologise for a fact we reported a week ago. This is the correct information". That shows that even then people who report news professionally cannot always get everything right. So I think it shows that we can do accurate information most of the time but we need editorial guidance. [...] It's a massive task that really is too difficult to be solved

I: Do you normally share news on social media?

P: No.

I: Is there a reason for that?

P: People who want to know about the news should read it themselves. I don't see the advantage of sharing, unless it's a really interesting article. And, also to do with politics. I don't think that should be on social media. I don't like spreading my opinion and sharing an article that isn't impartial can sometimes should what you are thinking and I think sometimes it's best for that to be kept private.

I: Do you think there should be news on social media? Is there place for it?

P: Yes, of course- sometimes it can be quite useful. If you go to like the BBC News Facebook page, they are engaging people on social media: people can share or link to their articles that way. Like I mentioned earlier, following the BBC political editor on twitter can be really interesting. You don't have to have a formal article that takes to read- you can have something that takes you 30 seconds and keeps you updated day to day.

I: In terms of association with words, what comes to your mind when you hear "fake news"?

P: Everyone says Brexit and the US presidential election, but I'm not sure that the idea of the emails and so on- that actually no one confirmed if it was actually true- but it perpetuated itself because people just kept on talking and it kind of went round. I don't know if fake news was a huge influence in people's political decisions. I think politics is where people think that fake news have the biggest impact and I'm a bit sceptical if it has as big of an effect as people say it does.

I: Do you think people generally have the ability to spot fake news?

P: I think it depends on the quality of the fake news, if you get me? [...] You regularly see people falling for fake news such as the Onion. And that shows quite clearly that people do fall for fake news. [...] There are some that are very cleverly worded around the truth so I think the fake news element of it can blend in with reality because people just don't notice the fact that it is fake. To an extent, I think it's a problem that we can't do much about. Maybe the only thing we can do is to make people more aware of it. Just let them know that not everything that you see

and hear is not truthful. Investigate it further if it has sparked that much of an interest. Personally I would go away and research it to an extent. I think people shouldn't take them as gospel about what they have already read. Sometimes people might read something and be like: "Ah, that fits in with what I read last week." Events are rarely individual event- it's rarely an isolated event. If it draws on what happened in the past, that you've already read about, then it should be truthful. But people aren't aware of that already. I think it's probably a problem with people who don't regularly read the news.

I: Do you feel like your trust in news source and news?

P: No, I still trust the BBC and the Guardian.

Interview #5

I: Do you consent for the information gathered from this interview to be used anonymously in a published research paper?

P: Yes.

I: Where do you normally get your news? (channels: digitally, TV, radio, etc). Why?

P: Digitally using the mobile application (ex. BBC) as well as TV news channels (ex. CNN, BBC, etc.)

I: In terms of digital sources, which kind do you use most frequently?

P: Mobile Apps (as stated above) as well as Social Media websites such as Facebook and Twitter.

I: Have you ever verified a news article that you come across on the source that you use most frequently?

P: In terms of social media, I only choose to read articles from credible sources such as Bloomberg, Al Jazeera etc. I try to refrain from using sources such as Daily Mail and BuzzFeed News.

I: What do you do when you come across an interesting article / headline on social media sites such as Facebook?

P: The great thing about Facebook is you can subscribe to particular platforms to receive news (such as CNN, Times, The Economist). So I would use their pages to access interesting articles. However, for celebrity gossip and other miscellaneous articles (music, fashion, etc.) I usually click on any link that appears on my newsfeed

I: Do you think there is any difference between the news you come across in social media sites and traditional news outlets? Or how different do you think is the news on social media sites and traditional news outlets?

P: Traditional news outlets appear to be more credible than news on social media. This may also be due to the fact that there has been a lot of accusations regarding the accusations

I: Which type do u prefer?

P: Traditional news – more reliable

I: Do you normally share news on social media platforms? If yes, do you pay particular attention to the credibility of the article? If no, why?

P: No I refrain from sharing news on social media but if I did, I would check the credibility.

I: If yes, have you shared any article on Facebook that you have later discovered that is false?

P: No

I: When you saw the phrase ‘fake news’, what comes to your mind?

P: Fake news: news that was created as a result of a publicity stunt.

I: Do you think (the general public) people have the ability to spot fake news?

P: Yes and No. I think they have the ability to but they don’t check the source of information as they might be under the assumption that anything considered “news” is true.

I: Do you think fake news is a problem? If yes, in your opinion, why does it persist?

P: Yes because it misinforms the public. It persists because of media sensationalism

I: Has your trust (of news sources, of news in general?) been altered by the proliferation of fake news?

P: Yes. I have been more aware of the sources of information.

I: Who do you think should be held responsible for tackling the problem of fake news? Why?

P: I believe news channels should be held accountable for providing fake news and the government should attempt to implement guidelines based on the news that is available to the public. The government (in particular, the department responsible for media) should also ensure that there are consequences to news outlets that provide fake news.

I: How could they do it?

P: The above suggestions may be difficult to implement. But the government (or the department responsible for media) could release a list of reliable news sources to the public and maybe introduce more schemes that would educate the general public about real news and fake news.

I: Can it be fixed?

P: Yes, but it would be a slow and gradual process. Any policy implementation will take time but it can be done.