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Why Media Systems Matter: A Fact-Checking Study of UK Television News during the Coronavirus Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Academic attention towards the effectiveness of fact-checking often centres on how receptive people are to the correction of news. But many studies do not take into account audience expectations of fact-checking or their engagement with news generally in the context of a national media system or its political culture. Our study makes an intervention into debates about fact-checking by focussing on the effectiveness this type of journalism has with audiences who were attentive to the news in the UK's media system during a key point in a major health crisis. Drawing on a six-week news diary study ($N = 200$) during the coronavirus pandemic, our study concluded that the UK's impartial media ecology and public service ethos creates an environment where audiences are largely receptive to journalists' fact-checking and countering misinformation. Yet our content analysis of television news ($N = 1259$) during the pandemic found most broadcasters did not regularly challenge or question the government's decision-making. We argue that since audiences favoured robust forms of journalistic scrutiny, broadcasters could more prominently fact-check claims and question dubious statements without undermining trust in journalism. We recommend scholars should pay more attention to understanding the audience reception of fact-checking across different media and political systems.

KEYWORDS

Fact-checking; misinformation; media systems; news diary study; content analysis; television news

Academic debates about the value of journalistic fact-checking initiatives often centre on how receptive people are to the correction of news and information (Graves 2016). In some countries, research suggests many people are resistant to fact-checking because of a polarized media culture and/or intense political partisanship (Blank and Shaw 2015). However, in nations where people are exposed to impartial news environments and pluralized political systems, there is often more trust in journalists and less ideological dogma informing political perspectives (Curran et al. 2009). This demonstrates the importance of *understanding the context of different media systems and political cultures* when analysing the effectiveness of journalistic fact-checking.

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Our study enters into debates about how receptive the public are to fact-checking by carrying out a case study into how people in the UK responded to fact-checking journalism, including journalists' challenging political claims, in the first few months of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Our focus is on *audience perceptions and trust in fact-checking in television journalism* during a major health crisis. The UK has an overarching public service media ecology that requires many public and commercial broadcasters to produce certain types of news programming which must be impartial and accurate (Cushion 2012). While the Brexit debate led to intense partisanship in the UK, the nation's multi-party-political system means voters more regularly switch political allegiances than in many other countries. In other words, *the UK's media system and political culture offers a case study to explore how receptive people are to journalistic fact-checking in an impartial news environment and less partisan culture than many countries.*

In order to examine audience perceptions and trust in fact-checking, we draw on a six-week news diary study with 200 participants in April and May 2020. We asked respondents about the trust they held in different news media and journalists, along with the role and value of fact-checking in broadcast news at different points in the pandemic. This included showing them examples from coverage to explore their views about the style, nature and format of scrutinizing government decision-making. We also draw on a comparative content analysis of all the major UK television news bulletins over a four-week period ($N = 1259$), which examined the degree to which broadcasters questioned the government's handling of the pandemic, how robustly claims were challenged, and which sources and stories were used to scrutinize policy. In doing so, we assessed the extent to which broadcasters held the government to account at a critical point in the pandemic and consider their performance in light of how audiences were responding to coverage.

The Role of News Consumption and Trust in Journalism

Academic research has long shown audiences have a complex relationship with the news media. In an increasingly diverse media environment, the degree of trust in and level of news consumption across different media can vary significantly (Strömbäck et al. 2020). It can also vary according to the environment in which news is consumed. So, for example, the 2021 Reuters Institute report that draws on representative surveys across many countries identified that trust in news had increased since the coronavirus pandemic. However, much of this trust was invested not in news consumed on social media sites, but in recognized news organisations that were perceived as accurate and reliable sources of information (Reuters Institute 2021).

Broadly speaking, over time scholars have developed a more nuanced appreciation of how people respond to and interact with competing media formats or type of journalisms, as well as specific news stories and topics (Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019). For example, researchers not only examine if people use online news, they measure the frequency of their consumption with it as well as their evaluation of different media platforms' (see, for example, Perrin and Atske 2021). Similarly, specific topics, such as immigration reporting, have been used to explore how people with

different ideological beliefs and demographic profiles, can invest competing levels of trust in the same news coverage.

Research has also linked news trust and consumption with people's expectations from news. Palmer et al. (2020), for example, drew on 83 interviews with news avoiders in Spain and the UK. They found that many of them did not agree with the widely held view among practitioners and academics that journalism plays a vital watchdog role in society and that the media held power to account. This raises important questions about the ways in which news audiences determine journalistic credibility. As Edgerly and Vraga (2019) have pointed out, audiences perceive journalism differently given the increasingly hybrid nature of how news is produced, especially since it can blur with entertainment-type genres. Or, put more generally, in today's crowded digital media environment news users may not always be able to differentiate between sources of news. However, Taneja and Yaeger's (2019) research of online news users discovered a positive relationship between a trusted source and enhanced user consumption. The complexity in which the public make judgements about the credibility of journalists and news was well articulated in Swart and Broersma's (2021) audience study, which highlighted the importance of examining people's practices and experiences of consumption rather than any normative ideals of how we expect citizens to act. UT-Austin's Centre for Media Engagement has led the way in understanding how audiences consume news in different environmental contexts. Peacock, Masullo, and Stroud (2020), for example, discovered labelling types of news online can help enhance the credibility of journalism among users, while Masullo et al. (2021) found that when online news outlets prominently added a transparency box it may have limited influence on that outlet's perceived journalistic credibility. Wenzel's (2020) research with marginalized communities has also shown building trust in audiences can be challenging. But her ethnographic observations of news audiences suggest forms of engagement journalism or solutions journalism may provide answers to forging more trustworthy relationships between the public and media. Overall, this body of scholarship demonstrates the importance of empirically investigating audiences in different environments in order to understand how greater trust can be invested in news and journalists.

We consider this approach important when exploring audience receptiveness to fact-checking, the focus of this study. While there is important experimental research emerging into people's trust and consumption of news across different media formats and types of journalism, there has been limited attention paid specifically to how the public respond to fact-checking. As we explain in the research design, the sample in our study was largely attentive news audiences during a key point in a major health crisis. By the method of a qualitative diary study, we explore *audience perceptions* and *trust* in fact-checking during the coronavirus pandemic, a moment in time when the watchdog role of journalism is perhaps more apparent to the public than in 'normal' times. In doing so, we consider the importance of media systems, as well as political beliefs, in understanding people's relationship with fact-checking. At the same time, we understand this relationship to be meaningful beyond the context of immediate encounters with fact-checking, and conditional upon people's expectations from the media and trust in them. We are interested, for example, in the degree to which the

public believe the government should be held to account and its policies scrutinized and challenged by journalists. The context of the pandemic provides a compelling testing ground for these research questions, as it allows us to explore to what extent the public prefers journalists to accept the government's health guidance or fact-check, question and, where appropriate, directly challenge the government's policies and statements. The following sections set out our theoretical framework for assessing the receptiveness of fact-checking within the UK's media system. In doing so, our aim is to develop new lines of inquiry about the relationship news audiences have with journalistic fact-checking and how the news media hold the government to account.

Researching the Effectiveness of Fact-Checking

Today's fact-checking initiatives aim to identify and report misinformation or disinformation by determining the accuracy and truthfulness of political claims. This distinguishes them from traditional internal fact-checking practices in news organizations, which verify claims of journalistic sources (Graves 2016). Studies on fact-checking have largely focussed on its emergence as a journalistic movement and its underlying principles and aims (Amazeen 2020; Graves and Cherubini 2016; Graves 2016). However, the fact that existing research has largely focussed on the US (Nieminen and Rapeli 2019), whereby the main fact-checkers are independent organizations with close connections to academia and non-profit initiatives (Graves 2016), has meant that fact-checking has been predominantly discussed as separate from mainstream journalism and traditional media organizations. However, in order to counter the routine flow of disinformation and misinformation, news organizations in different media systems have increasingly begun to integrate more dedicated fact-checking services into their journalism (Graves and Cherubini 2016).

As fact-checking organizations have grown larger over recent years, academic attention towards studying their role and value in democracies has also increased. Debates often centre on their effectiveness in correcting dubious or false information among not just the general public, but people with different political opinions, values and beliefs (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Schaffner and Roche 2017). At first glance, research findings seem to be inconclusive. On the one hand, motivated reasoning (Schaffner and Roche 2017) and "belief echoes" (Thorson 2016) have been found to turn research participants resistant to corrective messages that challenge their views (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). On the other hand, there is evidence of positive attitudes towards the media employing fact-checking (Amazeen et al. 2018), that some forms of fact-checking can be more effective than others (Thorson 2016), and that randomized exposure helps people be better informed (Nyhan and Reifler 2015).

In their meta-analysis of academic literature, Walter et al. (2020) concluded that fact-checking broadly has a positive influence on political beliefs, although its effectiveness is conditional upon the format of fact-checking. Most importantly, they found motivated partisan reasoning largely circumvented fact-checking. They also concluded that during election campaigns - when fact-checking is often at its most prominent when broadcasters draw on them for debates and enhance their own journalistic scrutiny - many studies revealed partisan motivated reasoning was at its highest. Finally,

they identified that when fact-checking was quite general about, say, a political speech rather than statements within that speech the effects of correcting people were minimal. This was, they reasoned, because general claims were more difficult to fact-check than more specific statements. When a specific claim was fact-checked, it meant audiences were exposed to more decisive judgements about its veracity. In other words, the more explicit the fact-check the more receptive audiences were to the effects of the correction.

At the same time, studies concerned with the role of fact-checking in public knowledge have focussed on the effectiveness of corrective information, often in experimental contexts. Their findings, therefore, tell us little about broader public expectations with regard to fact-checking and perceptions about its place in the journalistic profession or, put more simply, *the public's receptiveness to fact-checking*.

Why National Media Systems Matter in Fact-Checking: The Case of the UK

It has long been recognized that national media systems reflect the social and political world they inhabit (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956). Over recent decades, there has been greater academic attention to the nature of comparative media systems, and their relationship to national political culture and systems. Based on an 18-national study from Western European and North America, Hallin and Mancini (2004) developed three media systems— liberal, democratic corporatist and polarized pluralist – that characterized countries according to their political and journalistic identities. While rightly hailed as a landmark contribution, the book also drew criticism because it characterized media systems too broadly, overlooking important differences between nations.

Curran (2011), for example, pointed out that putting the UK and US together, and emphasizing the commercial nature of a shared Liberal model, overlooked distinctive characteristics of their comparative media and political systems (Brüggemann et al. 2014). While the UK has a partisan press system, its impartial broadcasting media, by far, serves the most amount of people with news and information. Hallin and Mancini (2012) produced an edited book to encourage study of media systems beyond the Western world. A voluminous literature about media systems has since grown, emphasizing the importance of empirically understanding the distinctive characteristics of national media systems and political cultures (Brüggemann et al. 2014).

Given the distinctive nature of national media systems, we would argue they play an important role in debates about journalism, misinformation and fact-checking. But there has been little scholarly attention paid to the comparative relationship between media systems and fact-checking in journalism studies (Graves 2016). We would theorize that people's relationship with fact-checking is shaped by national media systems. This is because *when people invest trust in the news media, they are more likely to be receptive to journalists correcting false or dubious claims from a range of ideological perspectives*, rather than only believing facts that are consistent with their beliefs from selected and often partisan information sources.

The UK's media system and political culture, in our view, represents an important case study to explore how receptive people are to journalistic fact-checking in an

impartial news environment and less partisan culture than many other countries. Of course, fact-checking has long been part of routine news reporting, but over recent decades several UK news organizations have followed other nations and begun developing specific editorial teams dedicated to checking and validating contentious issues and statements, especially in politics. For example, the BBC launched Reality Check, a fact-checking service, ahead of 2015 general election campaign, while Channel Four ran a fact-checking blog during the 2005 general election. They both now operate a routine service, but more resources are invested in them during newsworthy periods of time. We chose to examine the receptiveness of fact-checking during the coronavirus pandemic, when the importance of accurate and impartial news was paramount for people's health. But our analysis of news audiences should also be viewed in the context of the public's attitude towards the UK government. When we began the study on 16 April 2020, there was evidence of a 'rally round-the flag' response to the pandemic, with representative polls showing people generally supportive of the government given the challenging national crisis (Jennings 2020). However, by the end of our six-week study in May 2020 support for the UK government had declined given the rising the death toll and criticism about lockdown measures, testing and tracing, and the supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) to healthcare workers. In other words, our study can assess *how receptive the public were to journalists questioning government decision-making and fact-checking responses at a time of national unity*, as well as interpreting whether that changed over time when public support declined.

Drawing on a six-week news diary study and a four-week content analysis of UK television news bulletins during the pandemic in April and May 2020, we ask two main research questions:

Were there any differences over time in how audiences viewed journalists, the scrutiny they should apply to the government's decision and their degree of fact-checking?

To what extent did different UK television news bulletins question government decision-making and explicitly challenge them?

Method

We drew on a diary study to examine audiences because we wanted to explore how they were responding to news and information over time. We conducted the diary study between 16 April and 27 May 2020, a six-week period when the public closely followed the news (Ofcom 2020) and the government was making important policy decisions. We employed online participant recruitment agency, Prolific, to recruit a mix of 200 people from across the UK population. The sample consisted of 146 women and 54 men, 84 Labour party voters and 31 Conservative party voters and 159 participants under 40 with 39 people over the age of 41. The diary was not designed as a representative study of the UK population, but a rich, qualitative exploration of respondents' views over time. We therefore present our findings as patterns of responses rather than individual participants.

Respondents were asked to complete two diary entries per week. We focussed on three themes over the six-week study: respondents' level of trust towards journalists generally and across different news media platforms; the degree of scrutiny they think

journalists should apply to the government during a crisis such as dealing with a pandemic; and the extent to which fact-checking should be part of routine television news reporting.

Part of our analysis of audiences involved showing them clips from news coverage not long after being aired. For example, we asked them to compare how the BBC's fact-checking service, Reality Check, and the BBC's News at Ten on TV, analysed a UK government claim about how many people they had tested for the coronavirus. The former was far more robust by challenging the claim compared to the latter. In doing so, we directly compared the use of fact-checking in different media formats as well as how audiences responded to the degree of scrutiny they provided. We also asked participants to respond to a Channel Four interview that involved a news anchor robustly interviewing a UK government minister, which included challenging some of the claims being made. In doing so, we assessed their perception towards an adversarial type of live interview that included fact-checking political answers. In analysing all responses, we isolated respondents who indicated they voted for the UK government (the Conservative Party) in order to see if their views were similar to or distinctive from responses overall. After all, if they supported the UK government, they may be less receptive to them being subject to more scrutiny and fact-checking.

We began the study with 200 respondents, but this fell to 155 by the final diary entry. Between entry 1 and 8, we asked respondents about their TV news viewing habits. At the start of the study 159 – roughly eight in 10 – watched TV news every day or most days in the last week. Specifically, seven out of 10 indicated they watched and trusted BBC news. This represented a higher proportion than other television news bulletins. By entry 8, close to six in 10 respondents said they watched TV every day or most days in the last week, with the BBC once again the most watched. This high level of consumption on TV news was reflected in representative surveys conducted during the pandemic (Ofcom 2020). Of course, respondents also relied on other news platforms. This included regularly consuming online and social media sources, and to a lesser degree newspapers, magazines and radio programming. This means our sample's reliance on television news during the pandemic and our content analysis of television news bulletins can be connected to the kind of coverage they were likely to have been exposed to when completing the diaries. We focussed on analysing television news content because most respondents invested more trust in this medium than other types of news media. We also focussed on television news bulletins because a lot of people consume this type of programme rather than other broadcast forms or online and social media sites where there are more fragmented and diffuse consumption patterns. We would acknowledge that the study cannot account for the influence of other sources of news on the findings, in particular the role played by different fact-checking sites. Early on in the diary study we asked participants if they regularly or occasionally used the following fact checking sites – BBC's Reality Check, Channel Four's Fact Check and Full Fact – and found the BBC's Reality Check service was most used, but not by most respondents. Nevertheless, our audience sample could have been exposed to other fact-check services or other media content that contested governmental decisions making during the pandemic on websites or social media, as well as on TV news.

Table 1. The percentage of news items in the sample across different UK news bulletins.

BBC	24.4% (307)
ITV	19.6% (247)
Sky	15.1% (190)
Channel 4	17.6% (222)
Channel 5	23.3% (293)
Total	100% (1259)

The content analysis included five major evening bulletins – the BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten, Sky News at Ten, Channel 4 at 7pm and Channel 5 at 5pm – between April 14 to 10 May 2020 excluding Easter Monday. In order to fairly compare and contrast coverage between broadcasters, we only coded the first 25 minutes of Channel 4’s nightly bulletin (which typically airs for just under an hour). The weekend editions of Channel Five and ITV were also relatively short (5 and 15–20 minutes respectively) compared to routine television bulletins (typically 20–25 min). Our unit of analysis was any coronavirus-related television item during the sample period. We coded items according to news convention rather than different stories. This included items that were either a stand-alone anchor only, an edited package, a live two-way or studio interview/discussion. A story about the government meeting its testing targets might last five minutes, for example, but it may be covered by two items, such as an edited package and a live studio interview.

Overall, 1,259 news items were examined over the four-week study. Table 1 shows the spread of items across the broadcasters. It should be noted than items on Channel Four and Sky News were longer in length, which explains why there were less of them overall.¹

Our content analysis focussed on how often government decision-making was questioned. In doing so, we coded if a news item featured the government being questioned, how implicitly or explicitly they were challenged, whether it was from a journalist or external source, and the topic under scrutiny. Measuring the extent and degree to which the government was challenged allowed us to comparatively quantify how broadcasters held power to account. By contrast, quantifying fact-checking is methodologically difficult to trace in news content because it is part of routine news gathering and reporting. The intercoder reliability test involved recoding roughly 10% of the sample with two researchers. All variables achieved a high level of intercoder reliability according to Cohen’s Kappa (CK) (see Appendix).

Findings

Which Journalists Were Trusted over Time?

In order to explore how respondents felt about journalists generally and across specific media, in the opening few months of the pandemic (between April 27–30) we first asked if they trusted journalists generally to report the coronavirus, and then more specifically asked if they trusted journalists working in TV news, radio news, newspapers, online news or social media. We found levels of trust for television journalists were higher than those working on radio, newspapers, online and social media,

and for journalists more generally. To further explore respondents' relationship with television journalists, we then asked which organizations they trusted most. Above all, the BBC stood as out the trusted television news bulletin, followed by ITV, Channel 4, Sky News and Channel 5.

In the final part of this diary entry, we asked an open-ended question about how respondents trusted journalists across different media platforms and specific organizations. Television news was widely viewed as being an authoritative medium, including broadly for Conservative voters. Overall, they thought television news provided accurate rather than speculative reporting, and felt television news journalists were more accountable, balanced and fairer than journalists working in other news media. Moreover, there was a broad agreement that the editorial standards of broadcasting were far higher than many other platforms. Some respondents pointed to the strict regulatory broadcasting code, and contrasted it to the more lightly regulated newspaper, online or social media environment. These respondents were able to identify different editorial standards between broadcasters and, in many cases, singled out the BBC for its fact-checking.

Roughly three weeks later we followed up our analysis by assessing if respondents had changed their levels of trust towards journalists across different media and between television news broadcasters over time. We found, once again, journalists generally were not trusted, while television news journalists – particularly at the BBC – were trusted more than other journalists working for newspapers, online and social media. This demonstrates the influence of the UK's broadcast media system (Curran et al. 2009), which – as respondents acknowledged – is widely trusted for its impartial and fact-driven journalism compared to more lightly regulated newspaper content and online media sites.

To What Extent Should Journalists Challenge the Government during a Health Crisis?

Having established the level of trust participants had in different news media during the pandemic, we also wanted to understand how they thought journalists should act when reporting UK government decisions. To what extent should they challenge government statements as opposed to accepting its policy agenda and relaying its health guidance at a time of national crisis? We began exploring this question on April 20 not by asking respondents directly, but indirectly by showing them examples from coverage just two days before they completed their second diary entry.

After respondents watched the headlines of the BBC's and ITV's late evening TV bulletins on the day that the UK recorded its highest number of deaths so far in the pandemic – April 8 – we asked them to assess the ways in which broadcasters had reported the UK government's handling of the pandemic. Consistent with how respondents perceived the BBC generally, they thought its news bulletin adopted a largely factual and impartial approach, offering informative coverage. On the other hand, ITV's reporting was often seen as being more dramatic which – for some – conveyed the severity of the UK's death rate. We found a variety of views about how broadcasters should cover the pandemic. There were some who echoed a kind of 'rally

round-the-flag' approach to reporting, which suggested criticizing the government during a national crisis was inappropriate (c.f. Jennings 2020). But, overall, there was far more support for greater scrutiny of decision-making, with respondents indicating they thought broadcasters should hold the government to account more robustly.

Other respondents focussed generally on coverage, encouraging broadcasters to take a more adversarial stance with government decisions:

Updates on what the government are doing I believe are not critical enough, they are stating facts such as the government aims to test 100,000 people per day, however they have not criticised the government themselves (Female, 26, no political party preference).

At this crucial point in the pandemic – when government support was generally high according to opinion polls (Jennings 2020) – our study suggested respondents did not want 'a rally around the flag' approach to reporting.

In order to further explore the degree to which participants wanted more robust coverage of decision-making during the pandemic, we followed up our analysis a few weeks later with a specific example about how the BBC News at Ten and the BBC's fact-checking service, Reality Check, had reported a UK government target of testing 100,000 people a day by May 1. On April 30, the UK's Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, claimed the government had "smashed" its target of testing because it had achieved a total of more than 122,000 tests that day.

We monitored coverage that day across BBC platforms and found some subtle but significant differences in how the claim was interpreted. The BBC "Breaking News" Twitter account, for example, simply repeated the UK government's assertion that it had met the target: "The UK carried out 122,000 coronavirus tests on the last day of April, passing the government's target". However, the BBC's Reality Check account cast doubt on the figure – repeating the line that the 122,000 figure included testing kits sent out to homes but not returned or analysed. It read: "Having set a target of 100,000 tests per day by the end of April, the government says it reached 122,347 tests yesterday. This figure includes home testing kits which are counted when they are sent out - so it does not mean the test was actually completed or returned to a lab". Our comparative analysis of how news bulletins reported this UK government claim revealed striking differences between broadcasters. While the BBC News at Ten repeated the government's claim in its opening headline, a subtle caveat was later added. This revealed the figure "includes nearly 40,000 test kits posted out, which may not yet have been used or returned to laboratories".

In order to explore how audiences responded to varying degrees of scrutiny towards government decisions during the pandemic, we showed our diary respondents the opening part of the BBC's News at Ten and the Reality Check tweet from May 1. In the context of the clips we showed them, we asked respondents if they felt the coverage was either too critical or not critical enough, or was about the right level of criticism. We received a wide variety of responses, but very few participants thought the BBC News at Ten headline was too critical of the UK government. Respondents instead thought the headline was not critical enough. Some suggested it was potentially misleading for viewers because it simply repeated the government's dubious claim. For example, one respondent – a Conservative voter – referenced the

Reality Check tweet and suggested television news coverage should have fact-checked the government's testing target in the same way:

The huge number plastered on screen is misleading as most people will take a quick glimpse at the news and take that at gospel. It was only briefly mentioned that not all tests were taken and that this figure included home tests sent out. Had I not read the BBC reality check tweet I wouldn't have necessarily taken that fact in and just gathered the tests had been done (Female, 26, Conservative).

In order to follow up on these responses, we then asked respondents more specifically about the role fact-checking should have on BBC television news coverage, such as whether it was appropriate to have a Reality Check service more prominently in broadcasting. While some respondents took issue with the way the way the BBC tweet reported the testing target, generally speaking a more forensic fact-checking approach to television coverage was welcomed, with some even suggesting that the fact-checking could have been even more detailed. This was connected to raising public understanding:

I think the BBC reality check tweet made it much clearer that the home-testing kits might not actually be used, and I think this could've been made clearer in the headlines as all I really understood from the headlines was that it included home testing kits, but no mention was really made of the significance of this. (Female, 19, Liberal Democrat).

Taken as a whole, we identified overwhelming support for the greater use of fact-checking by broadcasters to ensure accurate reporting. Some respondents made specific points about holding power to account: "fact-checking should be included in reports where it is likely to be beneficial, such as those covering tenuous claims" (Female, 19, Liberal Democrat). One participant even stated: "I would watch the news on TV more if things were more regularly factchecked" (Female, 20, Labour).

In the final weeks of our diary study – between May 18 and 21 when the health crisis intensified – we revisited the issue of how far journalists should hold the government to account about its decisions. For example, in entry eight of the diary we showed respondents an interview on Channel Four news where the anchor took an adversarial approach to interviewing a government Minister about not managing the pandemic effectively. At various points in the interview, the anchor stopped the Minister from speaking and fact-checked her responses. Some diary participants expressed a little apprehension about the general conduct of broadcast interviewing because they often provided more heat than light. But, overall, the interviewer's style was viewed as appropriate, with respondents supporting close scrutiny of politicians and, where appropriate, journalists challenging their claims.

A few days later, we concluded our analysis about the degree to which respondents wanted journalists to be more or less critical of the UK government during the pandemic. We asked if they had changed their opinion over the course of the diary study. Overall, we found participants maintained a consistent stance that journalists should maintain their critical coverage. Respondents generally wanted more – not less – critical scrutiny of the government. We then asked more specifically about how regularly broadcasters should subject the government to close scrutiny during the pandemic,

Table 2. Proportion of news items with journalistic or source questioning of UK Government decision (N in brackets).

	Yes		No		Total Count (N Covid-focussed stories)	
BBC at 10 pm	104	33.88%	203	66.12%	307	100.00%
Sky News at 10 pm	100	34.13%	193	65.87%	293	100.00%
ITV at 10 pm	83	33.60%	164	66.40%	247	100.00%
Channel 5 at 5 pm	43	19.37%	179	80.63%	222	100.00%
Channel 4 at 7 pm	113	59.47%	77	40.53%	190	100.00%
Total	443	35.19%	816	64.81%	1259	100.00%

such as not protecting care homes or testing enough people for COVID-19. We asked: should journalists be challenging them on these issues on a daily basis or more occasionally? Respondents said they wanted journalists to routinely hold the government to account. However, some participants did qualify their support by stating criticism should not be for the sake of it, but to alert audiences to promises not being met or dubious claims being challenged.

Finally, we asked diary respondents to reflect on the statement that “some people argue that fact-checking undermines trust in broadcast news because facts are difficult to establish”, and whether they generally agreed or disagreed with this perspective. Of those who gave a preference, it was broadly agreed that journalists should establish facts even if they were sometimes contentious and difficult to verify because it meant politicians would be accountable to their decision-making. For example:

I disagree. I think fact checking is more relevant than ever before because unfortunately people in power make false claims that, sadly, are believed by many people. I think fact checking should play a much bigger role not just in crises such as this but also in other serious issues that affect people's lives (Male, 29, Labour).

Overall, our six-week study with respondents showed that since people trusted broadcast journalists, they wanted them to scrutinize government decisions, to fact-check their claims – including those that supported the party in power – and to enhance the regularity of this type of journalism in television news. In other words, the public's confidence in the UK's broadcast media system informed their responses to how robustly they wanted journalists to fact-check.

We now turn to our content analysis to systematically assess how often journalists challenged UK government decisions during the first few months of the pandemic. In doing so, we can explore not just how regularly broadcasters held the government to account, but also how claims were challenged, and the type of issues being scrutinized.

The Degree of Challenge towards Government Decisions on TV News

Of the 1,259 items about the pandemic examined across television news over four weeks in April and May 2020, roughly a third included at least one instance of a journalist or source challenging or questioning a government decision (see Table 2).

Table 3. Proportion of news items with explicit or partial/implicit questioning of UK Government decisions by either a journalist or a source (N in brackets).

Programme	Explicit	Partial/Implicit	Grand Total
Channel 4 at 7 pm	56.7% (161)	43.3% (123)	100% (284)
Sky News at 10 pm	52.2% (108)	47.8% (99)	100% (207)
BBC at 10 pm	48.2% (106)	51.8% (114)	100% (220)
ITV at 10 pm	49.7% (77)	50.3% (78)	100% (155)
Channel 5 at 5 pm	42.7% (38)	57.3% (51)	100% (89)
Total	51.3% (490)	48.7% (465)	100% (955)

For example, on April 21 the BBC Political Editor quizzed the Health Secretary about the government's (in)ability to supply personal protective equipment for critical workers:

This was declared a pandemic well over a month ago. Why is the Government still having to scramble now to get our health workers the equipment they need and allowing UK firms we've been hearing from today who could supply British hospitals and care homes to sell their products abroad? (BBC News at Ten, 21 April).

There was a remarkable degree of consistency between how BBC News at Ten, Sky News at Ten and ITV News at Ten held the government to account, with one in three items featuring some questioning of the government's handling of the pandemic by either a journalist or a source. Channel Five had the lowest proportion of items challenging government decisions – roughly one in five items – while Channel Four had the highest amount with almost six in 10 items including some interrogation of policy.

We found instances where journalists and sources were often quite partial or implicit with criticism of policy decisions. These reflected instances where the government might not be mentioned specifically but the journalist or source might subtly address issues that were in the government's area of legislative responsibility. For example, when social care workers were concerned over a shortage of PPE in care homes, without explicitly mentioning or blaming the government, a care home worker was on camera stating: "The staff are all quite worried because when we have ambulances come in, they've got the full-on gear on and we haven't got a lot of PPE. You feel vulnerable" (BBC News at Ten, 14th March). But we also coded instances of explicit questioning towards government decisions, which included more overt references to an issue or policy choice not operating effectively. Take, for example, a live two-way with the Channel 4's Political Editor:

The government is really quite reluctant to talk about exit strategy in part, of course, because there isn't one fully worked out, there isn't a file, it's not completed work. But mainly because they are deeply worried about the idea that if they go around talking about a relaxation... people will stop their compliance with the rules. And as they stood themselves accused of mixed messaging before the shutdown happened, they are acutely aware of the dangers of mixed messaging (Channel 4 News, 16 April).

Table 3 shows the overall degree of scrutiny towards the government's handling of the pandemic was roughly split – 51% vs 49% - between explicit or implicit questioning of policy respectively.

But this does not reveal the striking differences in approach between broadcasters. Channel Four News, for example, offered the most explicit interrogation of policy with

Table 4. Proportion of news items with direct or indirect journalistic questioning of UK Government decisions (N in brackets).

Programme	Direct	Indirect	Grand Total
Channel 4 at 7 pm	72.5% (95)	27.5% (36)	100% (131)
Sky News at 10 pm	56.6% (60)	43.4% (46)	100% (106)
BBC at 10 pm	53.6% (60)	46.4% (52)	100% (112)
ITV at 10 pm	69.1% (56)	30.9% (25)	100% (81)
Channel 5 at 5 pm	71.8% (28)	28.2% (11)	100% (39)
Total	63.8% (299)	36.2% (170)	100% (469)

56.7% of its questioning of government adopting this approach, compared to 52.2% on Sky News, 48.2% on BBC, 49.7% on ITV and 42.7% on Channel 5.

How journalists discussed government decision-making and scrutinized them varied across broadcasters. On the one hand, we found indirect questioning of policies, where a journalist namechecked an external source raising an issue. This tended to feature in live two-ways or anchor/reporter studio interviews with reporters summing up a critical source. For example:

Care providers say they still are not getting enough personal protective equipment and they want more testing (Anchor/reporter live studio interview analysing the care home crisis, BBC News at Ten, 14 April).

These were instances of indirect forms of scrutiny. On the other hand, we found more direct journalistic forms of scrutiny about the government's handling of the pandemic. For example, one Channel Four reporter concluded an edited package on a pregnant nurse dying after contracting the virus by stating:

The death of yet another NHS worker in the most tragic of circumstances again casts a spotlight on the Government's management of this crisis and those risking all on the frontlines (Channel 4 News, 15 April).

Similarly, when a Sky News journalist was examining statistical data in the context of comparing the UK with other countries and asking whether locking down earlier would have made a difference to the death toll, he said:

And this is where we are now. Over 16,000 people have died in hospital. We had time to prepare, we had seen the trajectory in other countries (Sky News at Ten, 19 April).

News anchors even introduced some reporter packages with direct criticism of government policy decision-making:

The Government says it's ordered millions of items, but some deliveries have been incorrect, late, and understocked. (Channel 5 at 5, 20 April).

Table 4 shows all broadcasters had more direct than indirect sourcing of criticism, with almost two thirds – 63.8% - adopting this approach to questioning government decision-making.

In the questioning of government policy on Channel 4, ITV and Channel 5, roughly seven in 10 instances emanated directly from a journalist rather than indirectly from an external source. For BBC and Sky, the ratio was lower with approximately every 11 instances from a journalist rather than external source. Journalists accounted for most of the questioning of government decision-making. But of the external sources who scrutinized policy, just over two in 10 were from politicians from a range of parties,

including the Conservative government. They made up roughly two in ten external sources, compared to just under one in ten from care homeowners or managers, members of the public, scientists and trade lobby associations, such as the CBI. Interestingly, front line staff, including NHS workers, care workers, were not widely drawn on, nor were SAGE or academics more generally. Overall, a clear majority of questions about government policy – just over six in ten – emanated from journalists or politicians, rather than experts, members of the public or keyworkers.

The government's handling of the crisis was questioned in a variety of ways by broadcasters. Two thirds of policy areas included specific issues such as the government not responding to events quick enough, introducing lockdowns earlier, or safeguarding care homes, as well as for not supplying enough tests or PPE for front line health staff. In other words, the majority of governments criticisms – whether direct or indirect, explicitly or implicitly – were of tangible policy topics, giving broadcasters the opportunity to fact-check the government's performance from a variety of sources. Despite BBC and Channel Four having dedicated fact-checking services, we found both Reality Check and Full Fact were not regularly drawn upon by broadcasters (unless informed without acknowledgement) to interrogate government claims during the pandemic.

Why National Media Systems Matter: Towards More Fact-Checking Journalism

Broadly speaking, our diary study found respondents trusted broadcast journalists throughout the coronavirus pandemic, particularly the UK's main public service broadcaster (the BBC). In explaining why, participants pointed out how the UK's different regulatory systems across media influenced the editorial standard of news and, in many cases, singled out the BBC for its fact-checking. Over the course of our study, opinion polls showed public faith in the UK government's handling of the pandemic had fallen dramatically. But irrespective of their political views, respondents consistently said they wanted accurate and impartial information, with journalists regularly fact-checking government statements and challenging claims. We isolated all diary respondents who said they supported the ruling UK political party and found they broadly shared the same perspective as other participants. In other words, despite being politically aligned with the government of the day, participants still believed the party in power should be subject to robust scrutiny and independent fact-checking. But further research is needed to explore the patterns of partisan perceptions towards fact-checking in different contexts with a larger and more representative sample. Overall, our study showed respondents wanted a departure from journalists pursuing speed and speculation to verifying facts and questioning misleading statements.

However, our systematic review of television news coverage of the pandemic found most items did not feature any questioning or challenging of government policy by journalists or sources, with the exception of Channel Four News. When they did feature, approximately half were implicit rather than explicit criticisms of government policy, with almost two thirds of these direct as opposed indirect references to the executive's decision-making. But implicit journalistic challenges to political statements, according to Walter et al.'s (2020) review of studies examining the effectiveness of

fact-checking, are less likely to influence audiences than more explicit forms of journalistic scrutiny. As previously discussed, they identified that the clearer the fact-check the more receptive audiences were to the effects of it. However, we also found that when broadcasters' questioned the government's handling of the crisis, the majority of these instances related to tangible topics, from lockdown measures, the management of care homes, to testing people for Covid-19 and the supply of PPE. In other words, they were not general criticisms, but specific aspects of policy that could be held to account. According to Walter et al. (2020), this nuanced approach to holding power to account is a more effective way of making audiences trust and accept a fact-check rather than a broader assessment of a government's speech or general policy. Given our diary respondents called for greater scrutiny of government decisions, in our view broadcasters could potentially include fact-checking more prominently in coverage and enhance their level of scrutiny of policy decisions without undermining audience trust in journalism. Our study focussed on audiences when they were highly engaged with news at a unique point in time in the first few months of a global pandemic. We would recommend more research is needed to explore whether less attentive audiences still value the need for fact-checking journalism and for journalists to robustly hold the government to account in more 'normal' contexts. In other words, to what extent does the context of news events and issues influence the receptiveness of fact-checking by inattentive audiences.

Our UK case study makes an important intervention into debates about trust in news media, and the relationship between what journalists think the public wants and what the public actually wants. While there is an emerging body of academic literature examining how people perceive the news (Edgerly and Vraga 2019), their interpretation of journalistic credibility and the ways trust and engagement may be engendered by new conventions and practices (Masullo et al. 2021; Peacock, Masullo, and Stroud 2020; Wenzel (2020), in our view a blind spot within these discussions is the role played by journalistic fact-checking. Our study has highlighted how journalistic fact-checking can enhance holding power to account, and demonstrated the trust and value audiences put into broadcasters challenging government decisions during a major health crisis. Contrary to research that suggests people are resistant to or even reject corrections from fact-checkers (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Schaffner and Roche 2017), our study established that the UK's impartial media ecology and public service ethos creates an environment where most people – including those who support the government of the day – remain receptive to journalists countering misinformation. Given that television news in the UK is bound by rules about impartiality, the high levels of trust the public invest in the medium suggests they are living up to their regulatory commitment to deliver impartial and fact-driven journalism. At a time when disinformation is rife across new online and social media platforms, the importance of public service media supplying accurate and authoritative reporting many news audiences chose to rely on during a major health crisis represents an important development. It adds support to debates among academics and policy-makers that the future of journalism could be enhanced by supporting independent, public service media organizations in the production of news (Pickard 2020).

Our study's findings have highlighted the need to develop a greater focus on how national media systems shape fact-checking journalistic initiatives and audience

appreciation of them. Media systems, after all, were developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in order to understand how they were influenced by the political context in which they were produced. In our view, journalism scholars need to better understand how the characteristics of media systems condition the production and reception of fact-checking cross-nationally. As our study has shown, the UK's influential overarching public service media ecology shaped a different audience response to fact-checking than studies conducted in other countries. Since most people trust broadcast journalists (Ofcom 2020), UK audiences appear receptive to robust levels of journalistic scrutiny, including prominently fact-checking political statements claims and questioning dubious facts.

There is, of course, no quick fix solution to how journalists in other countries can engender trust among the public as UK broadcasters have cultivated over many decades. Media systems evolve over time, building credibility amongst audiences for delivering accurate and impartial journalism. In highly commercialized media environments where partisan-led broadcasting is widely mistrusted (Pickard 2020), a publicly funded system of journalism might help facilitate public acceptance of fact-checking news reporting. But this would require not only structural changes in the US's media system, it would also arguably require the political culture to be less partisan. In other words, while a public service media system can enhance journalistic credibility that helps shape news production and reception, it is also important to consider public receptiveness to reporting. Since the US has long had a partisan broadcasting media system, they have helped exacerbate ideological divisions among much of the public making it difficult for many people to trust journalists offering independent and impartial judgements that run counter to their own political opinions. How far an enhanced public service media in the US or elsewhere can mitigate any ideological opposition to independent journalism and accept their fact-checking judgements remains open to debate (Pickard 2020).

Moving forward, we would argue that fact-checking research should focus on better understanding audience reception across different media systems and political cultures. As our study identified, media systems matter in building a relationship between journalists and audiences, and the role of fact-checking offers one type of journalistic practice that news organizations could use to help the public better understand what is happening in the world.

Note

1. All tables may not add up to 100% due to rounding up data.

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Appendix

Variable No	Variable name	Level of agreement, with Cohen's Kappa (CK) in brackets
1.	Convention type	99.3% (0.99 CK)
2.	Covid-19 Focus: Yes/No	100%
Criticism towards UK government		
3.	Author of Criticism category	95% (0.92 CK)
4.	Journalism Direct/Indirect Criticism	99.2% (0.98 CK)
5.	Object of Criticism	94.1% (0.93 CK)
6.	Extent of Criticism	94.1% (0.88 CK)