

# Audience understandings of disinformation: navigating news media through a prism of pragmatic scepticism

Journalism  
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–18  
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DOI: 10.1177/14648849221114244  
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## Abstract

The content and effects of disinformation have become a focal point in communication studies over recent years. But how media audiences themselves interpret the meaning of disinformation and mitigate the risks it poses to their understanding of the world have remained largely understudied. This article draws upon a UK-based focus group study that examines how people conceptualise disinformation, and the ways this informs their engagement with news media. Our findings revealed that common definitions of disinformation go beyond ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories to include an array of phenomena, such as biased news, political spin and misrepresented information. Far from simply not trusting information sources or being passive recipients of disinformation, we argue that audiences have developed a pragmatic scepticism in their relationship with media across different platforms, which reflects a critical reading of news media both as texts and institutions.

## Keywords

disinformation, news audiences, media trust, media scepticism, focus groups

Debates about misinformation, disinformation and fake news have dominated academic discussions about the democratic role of journalism and political communication over recent years. The current ‘disinformation order’ (Bennett and Livingston, 2018) has been

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associated with a wide range of issues, such as the polarization of societies, the rise of populism, public mistrust in institutions and, ultimately, the erosion of democratic politics. Urgently trying to address such phenomena, academic research has explored the content of disinformation (Marwick and Lewis, 2017), its circulation (Vargo et al., 2018), as well as ways to deal with it, such as fact-checking (Amazeen et al., 2018).

Questions of public mistrust in news media, audience vulnerability to disinformation and media literacy have been at the centre of such debates. However, what has been largely remained understudied to date has been questions about how *news audiences* themselves understand the phenomenon of disinformation, and the ways these understanding mediate their engagement with news media and politics in general. Such a bottom-up approach not only supplements existing debates but can further help us develop more nuanced understandings of disinformation as a phenomenon, the ways it is experienced by news audiences and its impact on them. In that respect, exploring public understandings of disinformation can help inform the practices and conventions of news media, and more broadly enhance the legitimacy of journalism by responding to audience needs. In this study, therefore, we ask: how do news audiences understand disinformation, and what do their conceptualisations tell us about their relationship to and engagement with news media?

In order to answer these questions, we draw upon a UK-based study with 14 focus groups, which included 52 participants in total. The focus groups were conducted online between April and May 2021. The discussions were designed to explore participants' understandings of disinformation, including their evaluations of news media reporting and attempts to tackle misinformation. Our analysis revealed that common definitions did not only entail references to 'fake news' or conspiracy theories but also included a wider array of phenomena such as biased news, political spin, and manipulated information that many respondents felt they were exposed to on a daily basis and through a variety of media platforms. We conclude that these audience approaches did not necessarily express an explicit lack of trust in news organisations but what we call here a *pragmatic scepticism* in their relationship with the media. We define this as a form of media engagement that is underlined by the tension between, on one hand, the acceptance of disinformation as inevitable in various media and, on the other hand, the reliance on these media as a source of making sense of the world. As such, pragmatic scepticism combines expressions of particularised trust with critical readings of news media both as texts and institutions. The contribution of the study is, therefore, twofold. First, in relation to debates on disinformation, it provides a largely neglected audience perspective. Second, with regard to audience studies, it illustrates how news audiences navigate a media environment that they approach both as fraught with shortcomings and a necessary source of political information, as indicated by our research participants and will be further discussed below.

## **Understanding disinformation: towards an audience approach**

In their attempt to comprehend and explore the unique nature of the contemporary 'post-truth' era, academic debates have often focused on questions of definition, constructing conceptual typologies of related but distinct phenomena, such as disinformation,

misinformation and so-called ‘fake news’. The level of facticity of news content and the intentionality behind its manipulation, have been central in the unpacking of these phenomena that have been roughly identified in public debates with the buzzword ‘fake news’ (Tandoc et al., 2018, 2018a). Wardle (2018: 954), for example, defines disinformation as the dissemination of deliberately falsified information. This is viewed as distinct from misinformation that describes false content that is not intended to harm, such as satire or clickbait, and malinformation, which describes truthful information that intends to cause harm for personal or corporate profit. Common across all these definitions are the underlying assumption and anxiety that such manipulation of information that emulates the appearance of actual news ultimately undermines audience trust in news and journalism overall.

These rigorous academic efforts to define disinformation as content and intent have largely neglected the question of how disinformation as a general phenomenon is understood by the public. For example, often the discourse around news audiences conceptualises their engagement with media in terms of their vulnerability to fake news, without acknowledging their active and critical agency. At the same time, much research has been preoccupied with the effects of exposure to misinformation and the corrective potential of fact-checking (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Schaffner and Roche, 2017; Thorson, 2016). This research, mostly experimental in nature and, thus, limited in external validity (Weeks and Gil De Zúñiga, 2019), has suggested that people tend to apply motivated reasoning when confronted with disinformation and its corrections, namely they tend to believe information that confirms their political opinions, and are prone to reject corrective messages that challenge their existing worldview.

Albeit significant in their own terms, these research studies largely approach audiences as consumers of falsified information, and do not engage with how they understand and relate to disinformation in the context of their daily lives. They focus on the moment of consumption of disinformation or its corrections as isolated from other factors, except from political orientation. However, the broader field of audience studies has repeatedly highlighted the intertextual nature of processes of mediation, given that ‘social resources and experiences are drawn upon in the reception and interpretation of the media’ (Fairclough, 1992: 204). In other words, the way people understand and engage with news media are framed not only by their direct exposure to them or their political allegiances but also other factors, such the broader media system and political culture, social discourses about the role of journalism and interpersonal relations.

In this context, our approach departs from normative conceptualisations of disinformation and its role in the public sphere, as well as of what the relationship between the public and news media should be like. It moves beyond ‘researcher-defined understandings’ (Knudsen et al., 2021: 2) and builds upon growing audience-focused research in the field of journalism studies. This research foregrounds folk theories of journalism, namely the popular beliefs of what journalism is and what it does (Nielsen, 2016), or, in other words, audience understandings of hitherto theoretically and, often, normatively, defined concepts, such as trust (Coleman, 2012; Knudsen et al., 2021), time spent on news (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2020), public connection (Swart et al., 2017), or even the meaning of news (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020). Such a bottom-up perspective can

provide insights that can further help ‘critically interrogate longstanding assumptions about the role, relevance and function of journalism’ (Swart et al., 2017: 903).

In this vein, exploring audience perspectives on ‘fake news’, Nielsen and Graves (2017) found that for news consumers the difference between fake news and news is one of degree rather than a clear-cut distinction, as often applied in academic typologies. Combining a survey of online users with eight focus group discussions with online users in the US, the UK, Spain and Finland, the authors argue that the wide spectrum of what audiences understand as fake news includes examples of poor journalism, political propaganda, and advertising more often than explicitly false information. They concluded that such audience definitions were expressive of a generalised scepticism and a ‘wider discontent with the information landscape’ (Nielsen and Graves, 2017: 1). Yadlin and Klein Shagrir (2021) reached a similar conclusion, after analysing online audience reactions to content manipulations in a docu-reality series on Israeli public service broadcasting. They argued that the audience discussions, often calling for civic literacy, are expressive of a general mistrust both in the media and state institutions, and a generalised critical stance.

The issue of trust – or lack thereof – is central in these studies, as the concept of disinformation or ‘fake news’ is seen as a discursive signifier of a generalised mistrust that is central in contemporary political experience (Farkas and Schou, 2018). At the same time, trust in different media platforms and news sources mediate audiences’ understanding of and dealing with disinformation. For example, people that actively question or reject mainstream news are found to be more likely to understand misinformation as partisan information or mainstream media ‘scaremongering’ and approach alternative media as ‘truth seekers’, even when they carry speculative content (Ofcom, 2021).

The use of the dichotomy between ‘trust’ and ‘mistrust’ in order to measure how people relate to the media and politics can also be rather limited in value. First, it does not tell us much about audience engagement with the media, as it has been shown that people consume media that they do not trust (Tsfati and Cappella, 2005). Second, it can be differentially attributed not only across different media platforms but across different programmes and even journalists (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Finally, as a concept, trust is multi-dimensional in that it entails a variety of attitudes and beliefs that cannot be easily captured within the single or too simplistic indicators of trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020). It is ultimately a complex concept that can be measured through multiple constructs (Fletcher and Park, 2017).

Schwarzenegger (2020) used the concept of ‘pragmatic trust’ to describe how news users rely on specific news sources, even if they are suspicious of the media to varying degrees, adopting the belief that one simply cannot question everything. Expressions of such pragmatic trust, Schwarzenegger argued on the basis of biographical interviews with news consumers in Germany, ranged from naïve strong distinctions between good and bad sources to more informed understandings of the news as made by humans and driven by external forces, and thus inherently limited. Pragmatic trust, along with audience criticality and self-perceived competence were viewed as part of people’s personal epistemologies of the media, namely the beliefs, prior experiences, world views and

political orientations that framed news consumers' relationship with the media (Schwarzenegger, 2020: 374).

Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) have argued that this relationship between news consumers and their media is expressed through novel ritualised patterns of news consumption consisting of personalised information systems. This is a reflection of how people make sense of and deal with a news media landscape that is widely perceived to be undermined by fake news and misinformation. Having interviewed citizens around the US, the authors concluded that, although research participants had a negative view of the overall quality of news reporting and particularly distrusted news on social media, especially after the 2016 election of Donald Trump, they still trusted the media they consumed, and in so doing developed a number of tactics and practices to deal with what they perceived as misinformation. These included triangulating information through different news sources, consuming information from cross-ideological sources, relying on traditional news media and personal experience and knowledge, and trusting personal contacts in social media as curators of reliable information. These tactics echo earlier research findings illustrating that individuals develop their own acts of authenticating information, relying on their own personal judgement about the news source, but also more actively seeking verification from their personal social circle or other institutional sources (Tandoc et al., 2018a).

Such studies are important in pointing out a move away from normative understandings of the relationship between citizens and their news, and the need to explore 'folk theories' of the role of news media and journalism (Palmer et al., 2020) both in the public sphere and people's everyday lives. They also illustrate that this relationship is not conditional upon straightforward expressions of trust but is underlined by continuous negotiations of trust and critique, and daily practices of verifying information. In this study, we build on and add to debates about disinformation by examining people's perceptions, experiences, and emotional connections with the media, as ways that can best illustrate the cultural processes through which journalistic authority in news telling is constructed or undermined. Along similar lines, we argue that it is important to understand how audiences themselves understand disinformation, in order to be able to contextualise the phenomenon within the frame of their everyday lives. In what follows, we will discuss how audience understandings of disinformation mediate their perceptions of and engagement with news media.

## Method

In order to explore disinformation from an audience perspective, we draw upon 14 focus groups that included 52 people from the UK and were conducted online between 22 April and 26 May 2021. The discussions were conducted via Zoom, due to COVID-19-related social distancing restrictions imposed at the time of the research. Their duration varied from 55 – 90min. Given the potential restrictions of the online environment, which can make group interaction harder, we decided to keep the size of the groups smaller, ending up with about four participants per group (Abrams and Gaiser, 2017). Discussions were carried out by two of the authors, who were both present during the discussions, one as an

active moderator and the other as facilitator with technical issues. We recruited participants through Prolific, an online participant recruitment company, and compensated them for their contribution to the focus group discussions.

We used purposeful sampling, ensuring that participants varied in terms of age, gender, political affiliation, and news habits. 65% of our participants identified as female and the rest as male, except for one participant that identified as 'other'. About 32% were 18–24 years old, 21% were within the 25–34 age bracket, 23% were between 35 and 44, almost 10% were 45–54 and the rest 14% were 54 and above. Politically, about 42% supported the left-wing party, Labour, while about a quarter voted for the Conservatives. The rest were affiliated to other political parties, except about 8% of them, who did not support any. When asked what their main source of news was, 42% of participants claimed to get their news mostly online, 25% through social media, 21% relied mostly on television news, whereas 6% would get their news through newspapers and 6% through the radio.

The sample was not constructed to reflect a representative picture of the UK population but to explore a diversity of different opinions, based on the assumption that factors such as gender, age, political orientation and levels of news consumption are significant in people's engagement with news media (Ofcom, 2020). Given the predominance of Labour voters in the sample, direct criticisms of the Conservative government were frequently mentioned in the discussions. However, the broader critique of politics as spin and misrepresentation, discussed below, was common across the political spectrum. Furthermore, and despite the differences in their media consumption habits, the BBC seemed to constitute the gravitational centre for most participants, as the mainstream news source they most used and, generally, trusted. The groups were deliberately homogeneous in terms of political affiliation, even though this was not always possible. Due to that and possibly the online nature of the discussions, conversations were conducted in a friendly atmosphere, and researchers could ensure all participants contributed to them.

Focus groups were chosen as a way of gaining access to people's opinions and experiences through group interaction, which constructs the conditions for common sense ideas and beliefs to be negotiated and illustrated. As Kitzinger (1995: 299) put it, group conversation can illustrate 'not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way'. By placing the focus on the social rather than the individual, the method moves away from 'mechanical conceptions of media effects' and towards more social conceptualisations of media processes (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 90). We were interested in the project in the ways people discuss disinformation and their pertinent experiences with news media. The empirical material was thematically coded adopting an inductive approach. Themes were developed through several re-readings of the material, which allowed us to construct a list of nodes paying close attention to participants' own understandings rather than theoretical categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The discussions covered a range of themes, such as the evaluation of broadcasters' attempts to tackle disinformation, questions of trust and news habits. We sought to encourage debates about the concept of disinformation in ways that were meaningful to participants in order to gain insights about how *audiences themselves* understand and approach disinformation in their daily encounters with news media. Apart from very few

research participants, who seemed to be confused about the concept or had evidently not thought about it before, most of the discussions illustrated a wide range of understandings and descriptions of what disinformation means to news audiences. In these understandings, sometimes disinformation was conflated with misinformation. We do not always point out the difference between the two in the analysis, despite the theoretical distinctiveness of the concepts. Our focus is on how news users themselves approach the concepts rather than whether they were ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in their applications of the terms according to academic definitions.

### *Defining disinformation*

In describing disinformation in their own terms, participants seemed to understand it in ways similar to its academic conceptualisations. In the majority of discussions, disinformation was described as the manipulation of information, most often with the intention to deceive. Reflective of such understandings was this description:

*Disinformation, it's just when a source of information, like a news report or a Web site, or wherever you go to get your information, is deliberately misleading their viewers, or their readers, and only focusing on certain aspects of the story and leaving out other aspects. Not being entirely truthful, basically.*

(Male, 25–34, online news consumer, Greens)

This impression of truthfulness, or ‘*information pretending*’ as one participant put it (female, 35–44, newspaper reader, Conservative), was what some participants pointed out as ‘*dangerous*’ and was created either by the use of seemingly credible sources or the misrepresentation of partially factual information.

What was debatable, however, in some of the discussions was the question of intent behind disinformation and its spread. For some participants, disinformation was not always intentional, as it could be attributed to misunderstandings, poor research and ignorance, or personal beliefs and unconscious biases. These descriptions seemed to ascribe, therefore, more to definitions of misinformation as the act of holding inaccurate beliefs (Kuklinski et al., 2000). For other research participants, though, it was important to distinguish between the initial distorted information that might entail intent, and its spread by people that believed it to be factual. In that respect, people circulating disinformation were actually defended as victims themselves:

*Maybe somebody would start it deliberately but, as Callum<sup>1</sup> [another focus group participant] was saying, people could spread it and continue to disseminate it in good faith, thinking that they have got some decent information and that it is their sort of duty to share it with other people. I suppose if people believe it, they think they are countering disinformation.*

(Female, 45–54, TV news consumer, Labour)

As expected, the concept of ‘fake news’ came up in some discussions. These descriptions of disinformation as fake news would often include references to Donald Trump, as well as COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation. The association of fake news with Trump interestingly identified the concept not as a new phenomenon per se but as a new construct that signifies a new understanding of news and initiates new practices of engaging with it. As one participant put it,

*I think, to a certain extent, a lot of this categorisation of, effectively, fake news does come from the whole Trump movement for me, in terms of, if you say it's fake news enough, then it's fake news. [...] I think before that, there was a lot of, oh yes it could be right, it could be wrong, but now as soon you see an article and someone puts #fakenews, that's it you can't trust it. So I think there has been a lot of power behind that, that it can just be used for anything.*

(Male, 25–35, online news consumer, Labour)

For a couple of participants, a characteristic of such fake news was their time-specific nature, conditional upon the dominant news agenda. In this context, fake news would proliferate in opposition to reported facts and prevailing news stories:

*I think it is also quite related to news and to a certain timeframe, so I think the timeframe is important. When you think about disinformation, you usually, for example, think about Covid and when there is this wave of disinformation. So there is the official facts and official announcements and official arguments, and then you have against it a bunch of things that try to destroy these official facts.*

(Female, 18–24, online news consumer, Labour)

Related to the concept of ‘fake news’ was the understanding of disinformation as conspiracy theories. It is here that the time-specificity of the concept became most evident, as focus group participants referenced – without prompting – dominant conspiracy theories that were all related to Covid-19, such as the idea that 5G technology played a role in the spread of the virus, the manipulation of coronavirus-related death numbers or, most often, the risks and conspiracies behind vaccinations. Such conspiracies and fake news were described by participants as part of broader practices of ‘scaremongering’ the public, or even targeting specific groups. They were defined as easy to identify and, therefore, to reject as instances of disinformation.

Social media, primarily Twitter and Facebook, and to a lesser degree Instagram, were discussed by most participants as the spaces where they encountered disinformation the most. This was attributed to the ‘easiness’ and speed with which information can be shared on these platforms, with no fear of repercussion or challenge, and the ‘difficulty’ of checking the validity of sources. These conditions, as discussed in the focus groups, create an environment where personal opinions can be shared as truths, and actual facts can be distorted through rumours.

### *Disinformation as inherent in news work*

Although social media were identified as central in the broader phenomenon of disinformation, they were not seen as exclusive platforms for the creation and circulation of misleading and manipulated information. Instead, disinformation was approached in most discussions as a taken-for-granted part of daily encounters with news, both because of inherent limitations in news reporting and due to the perceived nature of contemporary politics and its relationship with journalism.

When it came to defining disinformation, some participants described it as manipulated or partially correct information found in news reporting. This was widely seen as a *deliberate* attempt to mislead the audience by distorting facts or obscuring parts of a story. In some discussions this intentional manipulation in the news was linked to what participants described as ‘clickbait’, whereby the media were accused of exaggerating and sensationalising their headlines and distorting stories in order to get readers’ attention and digital clicks. The fact that the actual story might differ from the headlines was seen as inconsequential, given that ‘most people’ tend to only read the headlines – a point confirmed by a recent Ofcom (2019) study into audience news behaviour. Tabloid newspapers, such as the *Sun* and, in particular, the *Daily Mail* were most commonly identified as the media that would resort to such clickbait practices.

Disinformation was not always seen, however, as an ostensible attempt to mislead for profit. Media bias was also part of many participants’ definitions of disinformation. The explicit political bias of the press, as well as the broader ideological bias of British media, were mentioned in these definitions. The perceived biased coverage of Brexit or of the Israel-Palestine conflict were discussed as relevant examples. These included criticisms of the BBC, which was otherwise mentioned in all discussions as the most trusted news source but was accused of ‘*pushing a horrific narrative against the Palestinian people*’ (Female, 18–24, social media news consumer, Labour). Political bias was understood as inherent in all news media. Even if broadcast news were seen as ‘*hopefully more factual*’, they were still perceived to reflect the interests of their business owners or ‘*donors*’, in the case of the BBC.

One participant that consumed both Russian and British news media pointed out the ideological differences between them, as well as what she described as the caricatured representation of Russia in British media. Disinformation as media bias was understood in terms of omissions and emphases, which reflected broader values and media interests:

*But that kind of what the news chooses to show, even if it's maybe not an untruth, like these things happen, people are protesting, but if you don't show it [...], that's an omission that gives a false impression of reality. And if you over-cover something without giving the alternative viewpoint, or giving necessary weight to the other side, then that's also presenting a kind of untruth overall, I suppose.*

(Female, 45-54, TV news consumer, Labour)

Clickbait and news bias were discussed in relation to disinformation in both traditional and online or alternative media. A research participant, for example, who claimed not to

watch television and characterised the BBC as *'biased'*, described that she *'read quite a bit of news'* on her phone:

*Being into my left-wing politics, as it were, I follow Another Angry Voice on Facebook. And again, that is going to be biased as he's a left-wing blogger or journalist. I'm fairly sceptical of most things I read, regardless of the source.*

(Female, 35–44, online news consumer, no party affiliation)

At the same time, some participants acknowledged that distortion is not always the result of a conscious effort to mislead or of bias but part of the daily practices of journalists and limitations inherent in the nature of reporting, such as the journalists' *'very limited attention span'* so that *'sometimes they really focus on what's very hot right now'*. Such discussions seemed to acknowledge the limitations and constraints under which journalism operates:

*Sometimes it's just poor research into something, not enough time perhaps. That could be one thing, or probably incompetence. That's one way it could be and maybe timelines and guidelines.*

(Male, 55–64, online news consumer, Labour)

Such discussions displayed a rather sophisticated appreciation of the challenges associated with producing accurate and informative reporting under the conditions of contemporary news media organisations.

A related problem identified in the discussions was the lack of contextual information, which was not necessarily seen as a distortion, but as prohibiting audiences to fully understand the news reported:

*But also there is something that's not really well reflected, it's the context around it. Sometimes it's not necessarily about the politician lying necessarily but sometimes there is a lack of context to what happened before that could really help people to understand the full situation.*

(Female, 18–24, online news consumer, Labour)

In such understandings, disinformation was not described in terms of its intentions but its consequences. Indeed, what participants were alluding to was misinformation created by information gaps in reporting. Context was seen as instrumental in helping people to understand politics but also as something missing from daily journalistic reporting.

There are two important points to highlight, though. First, although disinformation was often linked to mainstream media, this was not always accompanied by explicit expressions of mistrust in the media. What participants expressed was an acknowledgement of the limitations of news media as institutions embedded in specific sociopolitical contexts and subject to organisational pressures. Second, even when participants did not identify a deliberate intention to deceive, the lack of context in political reporting was viewed as potentially misleading or confusing to the audiences.

### *Disinformation as inherent in politics*

While disinformation was constructed as something expected in news media, it was also often described as something that political actors often do in their communication through the media. Such political understandings included ostensible lies and ‘fake news’. Donald Trump’s outward lies, such as winning the US elections, how drinking bleach can help against Covid-19, or an alleged terrorist attack in Sweden, were mentioned in this context. The British government’s handling of the pandemic and its initial claims that wearing face masks did not make a difference to the spread of the virus were also brought up by some participants.

At the same time, however, more discreet manipulations of information and political spin were discussed in the focus groups as instances of political disinformation. One participant, for example, brought up a specific instance, where numbers were used in a political pledge by the UK government, in order to create the impression that they were planning to do more than would be actually done:

*One of the examples I'm thinking of generally in some parts of a slightly more right wing media, when the Government announced they were going to bring in 50,000 new nurses and then it actually turned out they were counting in people who were going, who would have possibly retired and they were counting students in both figures as well who'd come onto the frontline during the Coronavirus pandemic, and I do not think enough was done sometimes to dissect the politicians on stuff like that.*

(Male, 55–64, online news consumer, no party affiliation)

In other words, political disinformation was viewed as commonplace and rather expected. This disinformation was not always considered to be explicit but was associated with messages that participants considered to be confusing rather than outward manipulations. The confusion here was not created by contextual gaps left by journalists, as discussed earlier, but by politicians failing to give clear information. In this vein, focus group discussions debated the clarity of Government messaging with regard to Covid-19 restrictions:

*But I don't understand why in this day and age with all the technology and all the psychologists and all the things that are available, that the Government cannot make a message clear to people that we have got a virus that's going around, that's killing people and that could kill them.*

(Female, 55–64, radio news consumption, Conservatives)

These criticisms of political messaging and pledges as examples of disinformation were not always accompanied by explicit arguments about lying politicians or the media. As such, they seemed to be more expressions of a pragmatic, rational understanding of politics as intentional communication rather than illustrations of an ostensible lack of trust in either politics or the media. As one participant put it:

*I think it's important sometimes to just understand a bit more and to understand that politicians sometimes make decisions that are not for the good of everyone, it's driven by economic needs and there is more at stake than just... it's not just right or wrong, it's not about lying or saying the truth, it's more about picking one thing and making something big out of that, and politicians are very good at it.*

(Female, 18–24, online news consumer, Labour)

Nevertheless, what was constructed as problematic in some discussions was the complicity of the media with politicians in failing to fully challenge cases of political spin or even what were perceived to be political lies. In these accounts, the media were seen as enablers of disinformation by failing to help citizens to fully grasp the specifics of a political situation. It was not only the political context that participants seemed to miss here, but explicit challenges to political disinformation:

*I think the public relies quite a lot on what the news reports. When it comes to general elections, no-one is going to sit there and Google and research what was in his manifesto; they're going to rely on what the news tells them.[...]So if the news can break it down and give more information, then that helps people to make a decision, and if they want to go and do further research, then they can do, and they're a bit more informed about the topics.*

(Female, 18–24, TV news consumer, Conservatives)

Similar claims were made by other participants, who found that political journalists were not always *'as interested'* to report on cases *'where the Government had lied about things'* (Female, 35–44, TV news consumer, Liberal Democrats). The claims made during the 2016 EU referendum campaign were described by some participants as examples of such political disinformation that was not adequately challenged by the media. The Leave campaign *'bus claim'* of the UK saving £350 million per week both before and after the referendum, for instance, was mentioned in a discussion as inaccurate information that *'got a lot of coverage in the media'*, *'one of the stand-out memories of that campaign'* (Male, 35–44, TV news consumer, Conservatives). The claim was actually fact-checked both by BBC Reality Check and Channel Four's FactCheck, and these fact-checks were further broadcast and discussed in the main news bulletins of the respective channels (Goss and Renwick, 2016). However, it seems to be the over-visibility of the ostensible disinformation on mainstream media that has remained in participants' memory as an instance of complicity between news media and political campaigning.

In these narratives of a perceived complicity between media and politics, news media are constructed as complicit to political disinformation by, at best, failing to acknowledge it, and, at worse, amplifying it by reporting on it extensively. Such criticisms of the limitations of news reporting, however, were not reflected on expressions of mistrust in the media or in participants' news habits. Indeed, similar claims were made both by research participants that heavily relied on mainstream media for their news and those that avoided them. What this indicates is audiences' adopting an attitude of *pragmatic scepticism* in their encounters with news media rather than outward mistrust and suspicion.

### *Navigating disinformation through pragmatic scepticism*

Inherent in this pragmatic scepticism towards news media is the tension between the taken-for-granted nature of disinformation in news reporting and the reliance on that same reporting as a source of political information. Our focus group participants dealt with this tension by drawing on practices and tactics that amount to what (Tandoc et al., 2018a) describe as ‘acts of authentication’. These ranged in type and degree of active engagement and can be distinguished in three broad categories: personal fact-checking, relying on trusted sources and cross-referencing across multiple media.

The first category included participants that would actively look for information or do their ‘*independent research*’ by using online sources, searching through Google, or even checking directly the sources mentioned on the news. This seemed to be the most common tactic, with participants claiming to adopt this approach on topics they considered important as they could potentially have a personal impact on them, such as elections or Covid-19 and vaccinations. It was also a practice that they would generally employ for information found on social media, as this was less trusted than mainstream news.

A second way of checking the veracity of news involved turning to trusted or ‘*more reputable*’ sources to verify information they would get on social media or other less reliable sources. Unlike the previous tactic that combined several information sources, in this case participants seemed to assume a hierarchy of perceived trustworthiness of news sources, which led them to resort to a single authoritative source. The BBC news or Web site was the most common source participants drew upon to check the accuracy of a news story or issue they were sceptical about. A third category for assessing the validity of a story or issue was cross-referencing information across a number of sources. This practice can be seen as a passive form of fact-checking, whereby a news story seems truthful or becomes real once it has been reported by numerous different media. As one participant put it,

*I do not really believe anything that I read until I have heard it from a range of sources, or it is been fact checked or whatever.*

(Female, 25–34, TV news consumer, Conservatives)

At the same time, for a couple of participants, cross-referencing information on different news media was an active way of overcoming the inherent political bias of media organisations by being exposed to different ideological viewpoints. Recognising that factual reporting is not necessarily inclusive of all information around a topic, these participants found it necessary to get news ‘*coming in from lots of different sources, because they all seem to have their own take on it and not necessarily the correct or true take*’ (male, above 65, online news consumer, Conservatives).

These categories of personal tactics for dealing with disinformation were not mutually exclusive and participants would occasionally resort to more than one. For example, some participants claimed to both fact-check information themselves but also talk to friends about it. Others claimed to both actively search for information online and then use trusted sources, such as the BBC, describing a process of going down a ‘*rabbit hole*’ of checking

sources and stories. These self-reported practices should not be taken for granted, of course, given the gaps between what audiences say they do with the media and what they actually do (Scharkow, 2019). They are illustrative of people's tendency to overstate their media literacy skills and construct a sense of media superiority, even while feeling susceptible to mainstream media (Rauch, 2010). However, they also reveal two significant points in relation to how audiences navigate news in the context of disinformation. First, despite the generalised scepticism they express, they still apply hierarchies in how they evaluate information sources in particular situations in what can be described as practical or pragmatic judgements. Second, they seem to construct for themselves 'personalised information systems' (Wagner and Boczkowski, 2019: 881) as a way of dealing with what they perceive to be an information environment, where encountering disinformation is to be expected and routine.

### *Pragmatic scepticism as a way of understanding disinformation*

Definitions of disinformation in our focus group discussions illustrated that most research participants did not conceptualise the phenomenon as being only about so-called 'fake news', conspiracy theories or outward lies. Instead, they understood it as relating to frequent occurrences in their daily encounters with news media, attributing it either to inherent and expected journalistic bias or the nature of contemporary politics. These understandings, therefore, constructed disinformation as a normalised and routinised part of news consumption. Such findings, however, should not be approached as an alarmist conclusion about the ubiquity of disinformation and its undermining of citizen knowledge and public discourse. They are also not necessarily connected with a generalised expression of mistrust and overall rejection of journalism or even politics. Instead, we argue, it amounts to what can be described as pragmatic scepticism about the way news media functions and journalists operate editorially. This scepticism consists, on the one hand of a pragmatic trust and confidence in specific news sources, despite overall questioning the media (Schwarzenegger, 2020). But on the other hand, it is expressive of rather sophisticated critical readings and understandings of political news. These readings include an acknowledgement of the political economy of media institutions and the conditions under which journalism operates. This critical scepticism, therefore, is illustrative of people's engagement with the news in ways that go beyond questions of trust and distrust as diametrically opposed and defining of audience engagement with the news.

Research participants' pragmatic scepticism towards news media was further reflected on the practices they employed for consuming news in an environment perceived as rife with disinformation. They seemed to either behave as news media nomads moving between different platforms and sources, or rely on trusted mainstream sources, such as the BBC. These news consumption repertoires represent novel ways in which audiences engage with their news, which include a partial transference of practices, such as fact-checking and information verification, from journalists to users (Wagner and Boczkowski, 2019). These practices of engagement are not necessarily driven by a lack of trust in news sources but enabled by the contemporary multi-choice and multi-

platform media environment. News audiences have access to a variety of sources and types of information and seem willing to make use of them.

These audience practices and understandings of disinformation need to be considered when contemplating and designing efforts to tackle disinformation and its consequences. Academic approaches and media literacy initiatives have attempted to unpack the variety of phenomena that the concepts of disinformation or misinformation encompass. Research has shown how journalists fight what they perceive to be the external threat of disinformation through initiatives such as fact-checking (Graves, 2018) or by reinforcing their watchdog role (Balod and Hameleers, 2021). However, our research suggests that audiences do not always approach disinformation as external to the work of legacy media. In this context, what news audiences need is more than a toolkit for identifying so-called fake news or conspiracy theories online or across social media. Countering disinformation should involve greater acknowledgement of and transparency about media bias, more contextual information about the sources and editorial choices of news stories and, perhaps above all, more journalistic challenges of false or misleading claims from politicians so they are held to account more effectively. Such practices are dictated not so much by a crude mistrust in journalism but by a pragmatic scepticism of long-held practices and conventions in news media that can impede public knowledge, and lead to the spreading of inadvertent misinformation or even blatant forms of disinformation.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This was supported by Arts and Humanities Research Council, grant number (AH/ S012508/1).

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### **Note**

1. The name used here is a pseudonym.

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