



COUNTERING MISINFORMATION IN POLITICAL REPORTING

ENHANCING JOURNALISTIC
LEGITIMACY

STEPHEN CUSHION AND
MARIA KYRIAKIDOU

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Enhancing Journalistic Legitimacy

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Introduction: Journalistic Legitimacy in the Age of Misinformation

The growing tide of political disinformation around the world represents an urgent threat to the democratic health of many countries. For false and deceptive information has become more widespread in today's digital media environment, promoting conspiracy theories and dubious claims that can misinform the public and undermine the integrity of democratic systems. Journalists have become central actors in stopping the flow of false and misleading information. Yet they have had a contradictory role in dealing with it. On the one hand, they have been heralded as the solution to countering disinformation because they have the weight and authority to correct and challenge dubious political claims and actions (Pickard 2020). On the other hand, journalists have been accused of reporting 'fake news' and being the cause of disinformation (Tsfati et al. 2020). In other words, the news media have the power to both perpetuate and prevent the spread of political disinformation around the world.

During and after the 2020 United States (US) presidential election campaign, for example, Donald Trump was given a media platform – notably on television news – to repeatedly make false claims about voter fraud without any supporting evidence. While many journalists appeared sceptical at these statements, the airtime Trump received helped legitimise his assertions and convince many Republican voters that the election was rigged (Cillizza 2021). While the claim was questioned by some journalists during the campaign, it was not until election night that networks such as MSNBC, ABC and NBC famously pulled away from a Trump press conference – after Biden had been declared the winner – and explicitly challenged his allegations of voter fraud live on air.

Four years later – during the 2024 presidential campaign – Trump continued to make wild and unfounded claims about voter fraud, but journalists more

regularly questioned them. And yet despite far more journalistic doubt being cast on the so-called rigged ballot, there remained widespread public misinformation about the integrity of the electoral process, with a large minority of people – almost a third of Americans according to one poll (Kamisar 2023) – continuing to believe Trump’s egregious claims. Over the last decade, then, the news media have helped fan the flames of political disinformation emanating from Trump before attempting to put some of them out. But despite many journalists directly confronting Trump’s false assertions, they have spread like wildfires, with the burning embers of many claims still glowing and misinforming a significant number of Americans.

The reporting of Trump’s claims has become a prominent debating point about how political disinformation and misinformation challenges the work of journalists (Lecheler and Egelhofer 2002). Within these discussions, disinformation has been widely theorised as representing information that has deliberately been falsified, whereas misinformation has been understood as not knowingly communicating inaccurate information (Wardle 2018). We adhere to this distinction throughout the book, occasionally employing disinformation to refer to both concepts. At the same time, as we discuss in later chapters, the boundaries between disinformation and misinformation become porous, both in terms of how they are understood by the public, as well as how one morphs into the other once they emerge in the public sphere. Therefore, although we set out to explore how disinformation is being tackled by journalists and understood by audiences today, we ultimately concluded that misinformation caused not only by misrepresentation but also gaps and omissions in political information is ultimately the biggest concern for a democratic public sphere. The paradoxical role of news media both causing and countering misinformation lies at the heart of this book. It offers a comprehensive and comparative assessment of how journalists have counteracted fake or deceptive information in both their routine output and specialist fact-checking coverage. We explore the relationship between public knowledge and political disinformation, including how audiences think such disinformation should be dealt with by news media. But the book also considers the role the news media can play in spreading misinformation in the reporting of politics and public affairs. While a voluminous academic literature about the rise of disinformation online and across social media networks has grown over recent years (Aïmeur et al. 2023; Gottlieb and Dyer 2020; Shu et al. 2020; Tandoc et al. 2020), far less attention has been paid to the role played by mainstream media spreading misinformation whether intentionally or inadvertently. The interrelationship between disinformation and misinformation can be challenging for journalists to understand and counteract in today’s media and political environment. After all, interpreting the

veracity of information in a fast-moving, 24-hour news cycle can put pressure on journalists to prioritise speed over accuracy (Cushion and Sambrook 2016). In doing so, the editorial processes of a news organisation may not be able to distinguish fact from fiction, misinforming viewers rather than intentionally spreading disinformation.

But when the news media have been the object of debate about disinformation, it has tended to be partisan media – notably Fox News in the US (Bauer et al. 2022; Simonov et al. 2021) or tabloid media in the UK (Chadwick et al. 2018) – that have been criticised for exacerbating rather than correcting false or misleading political claims. As Chadwick et al.’s (2018, 4270) study concluded, ‘UK tabloid newspapers negatively affect the quality of civic life on social media because they provide a fertile context for misinformation and resources for disinformation.’ While these critiques expose the partisanship of specific news organisations, they tell us little about how ostensibly ‘unbiased’ mainstream media deal with and (re)produce misinformation. This book largely focuses on news media that have to abide by rules on impartiality or follow public service broadcasting obligations (Horowitz et al. 2022). We largely focus on public service media (PSM) because – as Sehl (2024, 3) – has put it, ‘Within the spectrum of media organisations, PSM occupy a distinguished position due to their dedication to public value.’ She has argued that ‘the remit of PSM should be broadened and sharpened to not only provide high-quality, diverse and impartial news, but also to proactively combat false narratives’ (Sehl 2024, 1). We would agree because throughout the book we explore how sometimes subtle but significant instances of misinformation can spread through mainstream media, including public service media. This is in spite of them subscribing to highly professionalised editorial standards, or pursuing journalism that calls out politicians for their dubious claims by fact-checking statements robustly.

The book evaluates how and where journalism has challenged or exacerbated political disinformation, thus contributing to broader public misinformation. It examines how audiences engage with and interpret news reporting across different news platforms, programmes and websites, and how they react to journalistic approaches to countering disinformation. We draw on a range of original case studies, including some of the largest content analyses and audience studies to date on fact-checking, in order to empirically examine how journalists counter disinformation and, importantly, how the public respond to these attempts to hold politicians to account. This approach allows us to illustrate journalistic legitimacy as a negotiation between journalistic practices and audience expectations. As outlined in the following chapters, we argue that news reporting needs to more effectively confront political disinformation, by

more explicitly challenging dubious source claims in order to better inform audiences about politics and public affairs. With declining levels of trust towards mainstream media, the book makes the case that there is an urgent need for the legitimacy of journalism to be enhanced so the public feel confident that they have been accurately and fairly informed about politics and public affairs. According to a 2023 Gallup poll in the US (Brenan 2023), trust in mainstream media is at its lowest point in history – matching the same level of mistrust many Republican voters felt during the 2016 presidential election, when Trump was regularly attacking professional journalists and spreading disinformation about them.

But while public scepticism towards journalists has grown stronger in recent years, most people still rely on mainstream media outlets to understand what is happening in the world and, crucially, invest their trust in them at critical moments, such as during election campaigns or a major health crisis (Newman et al. 2023). During the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, for example, many people trusted mainstream media, such as ABC, CBS and NBC or *The New York Times* in the US, for supplying credible news and analysis (Newman et al. 2020). Likewise, in the United Kingdom (UK), the public continue to invest their faith in impartial broadcast media, particularly the BBC, although many people remain generally suspicious of mainstream media and consume their news from a wide range of sources (Ofcom 2023). This book further highlights the importance of media and political systems in discussions about disinformation and ways to challenge it. It does so by juxtaposing the UK media and political environment with that of the US, illustrating differences in how journalism counters disinformation as well as how receptive audiences have been to interventions by news organisations. As examined throughout the book, much of the research about how journalists and the public respond to political disinformation is dominated by US studies, creating a narrow set of observations and solutions about how Americans should counter so-called ‘fake news’ (cf. Walter et al. 2019). After examining the prevailing trends in US-centred research, we then compare it with our UK-focused case studies and other countries, broadening debates about how the media and political environment can influence the journalistic legitimacy of political reporting.

Overall, the book carries out an extensive review of international academic literature over recent years, and is informed by an analysis of over 2,000 news items and 2,500 news sources across a wide range of fact-checking sites and broadcast programming, as well as by large-scale surveys that draw on more than 1,000 respondents, together with a news diary of 200 participants, fourteen focus groups and interviews with some of the most senior editors and journalists in UK broadcasting. Our research was supported by a large

AHRC grant (AH/S012508/1) and was conducted over a three-year period (2020–22), at a time when disinformation was rife during the early years of the coronavirus pandemic, and when the impact of false or misleading information was being extensively debated during the 2019 UK and 2020 US election campaigns. We further reflect on some of our analysis in light of the 2024 UK election campaign, and how broadcasters dealt with dubious claims and fact-checked politicians.

Taken together, the book asks the following questions: What editorial practices to counter misinformation and disinformation have been put into practice by news media? To what extent does each broadcaster's fact-checking service inform the editorial output of their leading TV news bulletins? How do news users view disinformation reporting in relation to journalistic legitimacy? Do they think journalists are robust enough when challenging dubious source claims from politicians or other actors? How, overall, can different media systems counter misinformation in ways that enhance the legitimacy of journalism?

Journalistic Legitimacy in the Age of Misinformation

While academic and public debates about how journalism should deal with so-called 'fake news' have received more attention over recent years, this book argues that it is necessary to understand this issue by focusing not only on the news media but also what the public expect from journalists. It does so by examining the production, content and reception of political disinformation reporting. We make the case that we need to consider these processes at the daily, routine level of reporting, as produced and consumed by news audiences, alongside atypical periods such as during election campaigns and a major health crisis. It is only by examining journalistic and news users' practices as embedded in the context of daily life or highly significant periods of time that we can evaluate both the role of political journalism in informing the public and its effectiveness in tackling political disinformation and misinformation.

Such an evaluation and reflection are necessary for understanding and enhancing journalistic legitimacy in the 'disinformation order' (Bennett and Livingston 2018, 122). In the US context, the rise of opinionated news channels, online sites and social media platforms has led to fears about the development of echo chambers and filter bubbles (Arguedas et al. 2022). In doing so, rival media attack and undermine their journalistic competitors, creating an information environment where people increasingly expose themselves to news ideologically consistent with their own viewpoints (Pickard 2020). Growing evidence has suggested that the spread of misinformation, as well as

populist attacks against mainstream media, have begun to erode public trust in news media institutions (Mitchell et al. 2018). Against this backdrop, concerns have been raised about journalism losing its legitimacy, with reporting dismissed as being inaccurate or biased, since many people view news coverage through a partisan prism (Carlson et al. 2021).

However, we argue that this perspective is largely seen through an Americanised prism and does not always account for differences between news media around the world and the diversity of ways the public engages with them. The UK, for example, has a public service media ecology and is not as politically polarised as the US public, or heavily influenced by a market-led media environment. Given the different media and political contexts, there will be distinctive editorial practices and ideological perspectives that influence US and UK journalism and their audiences. In other words, our book makes the case that the journalistic legitimacy of news reporting needs to be re-understood in an age of political disinformation and contextualised within specific media systems and journalistic cultures.

We understand journalistic legitimacy as the cultural authority attributed to journalism to produce knowledge about the world. Skovsgaard and Bro (2011, 323) theorise journalistic legitimacy according to three components: practices, principles and preferences. ‘Preferences’ refers to the prestige of the organisations journalists work for, ‘principles’ reflects the type of journalism championed, while ‘practices’ represents how news is reported (*ibid.*). Each component allows journalists to claim legitimacy by different measures and understandings of journalism. But these values remain dynamic and open to contestation as journalism has evolved (Tong 2018). In doing so, journalistic legitimacy has become a more fluid concept to theorise, shifting between representing authoritative practices and new ways of producing and reporting journalism (Carlson 2017).

This book starts from the assumption that journalistic legitimacy needs to be understood as co-produced between journalists and their audiences. In the context of disinformation, we need to question not only how journalists can best defend their professional boundaries and authority as truth-tellers but also how audiences evaluate and engage with these practices in their routine news consumption across different media and political systems. Journalists have the cultural authority to tell stories about and largely define social reality. However, this authority is dependent on forces at play within wider national media systems and broader political environments. It is relative to the wider environment and other information sources, such as social media, and thus open to continuous negotiation. We believe that journalistic legitimacy needs also to be theorised within the context news is consumed, which includes

the ways the public respond in different situations. During the first months of the coronavirus pandemic in the UK, for example, public service media became the primary storytellers about the virus, whereas in the US a range of market-driven and ideologically driven media were the primary definers. This, as we explore throughout the book, led to contrasting public attitudes towards the pandemic with surveys suggesting more public confusion in the US than the UK. In other words, when debating journalistic legitimacy, it is important to constantly re-evaluate it on the basis of how audiences critically understand and interpret journalism but also media as institutions during routine and critical periods of time. This continuous renegotiation of legitimacy takes place at the intersection of both journalistic and audience perceptions – of what journalism is and should be – as well as practices that enact the role of journalists as storytellers in daily life. As our research shows, we identify a disjuncture between journalists' perceptions and understandings of journalistic legitimacy, and audience expectations and public knowledge. For this disjuncture to be bridged and journalistic legitimacy enhanced, we make the case that more evidence-based interventions into the relationship between news production, output and audiences are needed.

The Scope of the Book and the Methodological Framework

The book develops new ways of understanding journalistic legitimacy by empirically examining the editorial strategies designed to counter disinformation, the routine and specialist reporting developed to prevent it, as well as – importantly – how audiences are responding to the ways journalists deal with false or misleading information. In doing so, we draw on a series of large-scale content analysis studies of how journalistic practices have countered disinformation. The systematic studies of UK television news, online news and fact-checking sites were conducted between 2019 and 2021 by a team of researchers and included the analysis of thousands of items. Approximately 10 per cent of the samples were subject to strict intercoder reliability tests, with all variables achieving high scores (Cushion et al. 2022a; Cushion et al. 2022b; Hughes et al. 2023; Morani et al. 2024; Soo et al. 2023). We also monitored the role of fact-checking on the BBC flagship evening bulletin, the *BBC News at Ten*, in the first seven months of 2024. This involved analysing the extent to which the BBC's new fact-checking service, Verify, was referenced in a 'normal' period of time and during the 2024 UK general election campaign. The analysis of news output was combined with an exploration of the strategies journalists have used to challenge disinformation in routine coverage. We conducted semi-structured interviews with senior editors and

journalists from UK broadcasters in 2020, including those from specialist fact-checking sites. Taken together, they provided insights about journalistic perceptions and practices of confronting misinformation, as well as their editorial judgements about the degree to which fact-checking should inform routine reporting.

Finally, we carried out extensive research with UK audiences between 2020 and 2021. The first study was a six-week news diary study conducted at the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 16 April to 27 May 2020. The diaries included questions and probes that allowed us to explore people's thoughts and attitudes about specific issues that were covered in the media during that period. We started the study with 200 participants. Participation numbers fluctuated over the six weeks of the study and 175 participants filled in ten out of the twelve entries they were asked to complete. The second study included fourteen focus groups, which consisted of 52 participants in total and were conducted online between 22 April and 26 May 2021, a choice dictated by the constraints imposed by COVID-19. Finally, we conducted a two-stage survey that started with a sample of 1,065 respondents, who represented a range of different ages and political affiliations, as well as different media consumption habits. The 542 respondents that mostly consumed their news through television, a key focus of this book, participated in the second survey because we wanted to understand their responses to journalistic attempts to counter disinformation in closer detail. These surveys were conducted in May 2021. Research participants for the audience studies were recruited through Prolific, an online research company, and were compensated for their participation. We used purposeful sampling in all audience studies, in an attempt to ensure participant variation in terms of age, gender, political affiliation and news habits, given that these factors influence engagement with news media (Ofcom 2020c). Our aim was not necessarily to achieve representativeness but to reflect a diverse range of perspectives from different social groups and with divergent political perspectives. The combination of different methods allowed us to carry out both a quantitative and qualitative examination of public knowledge at key points in time, and explore audiences' relationship with news media, notably television news and fact-checking sites, as well as the ways they responded to news agendas and specific stories. Throughout the book, we bring together our large bank of audience material, systematic studies of news output, and interviews with editors and journalists in order to understand how disinformation operates, where it can be countered and, most importantly, to identify ways journalists can more effectively advance public knowledge about what is happening in the world. While the book draws on a series of UK-based case studies, each chapter will contextualise debates and

issues across other democratic nations, in particular the US, in order to achieve a broader understanding of journalistic legitimacy across political and media systems.

The first chapter begins by setting the context of how disinformation and its challenges are understood by journalists. It discusses how these understandings are informed by established assumptions about professional journalistic boundaries and roles. Our aim in exploring the ways journalists understand disinformation is to further illustrate how they view their role in relation to it and their audiences. In doing so, we draw upon research carried out around the world, as well as interviews we conducted with some of the most senior broadcast news editors and journalists in the UK. The evidence shows that journalistic understandings of disinformation have largely centred on external threats to their profession, such as social media and political spin. Audiences were often absent from these considerations and, when present, there was an assumption they were often manipulated by social media disinformation. Taken together, we argue that disinformation is not seen only as a threat to democratic politics but also as an affront to the epistemic role of journalism in society, undermining the authority of journalists to produce and mediate political knowledge. Against the backdrop of a fast-moving media ecology, journalists fear that their role as gatekeepers has been inadvertently compromised. Our analysis suggests that it is the re-establishment of this role that journalists view as a way of fighting disinformation. We conclude that in these efforts the audience is perceived as another challenge news media need to deal with.

Chapter 2 examines how audiences understand disinformation and how they evaluate the role of journalism in relation to it. It discusses how audience research around the world has illustrated that news audiences understand disinformation in much broader terms than so-called 'fake news', conspiracy theories and falsehoods on social media. It illustrates that political spin as well as mainstream journalistic reporting are central in these understandings. As we highlight in Chapter 1, although journalists largely view disinformation as an external threat to their profession, for audiences it is intrinsic to the work of journalists because of factors such as media bias and the structural conditions journalism operate under. Journalists were seen by many of our research participants as being complicit in the production of disinformation either by failing to challenge it, or even amplifying it by prominently reporting it. According to many of our respondents, disinformation was a taken-for-granted aspect of their daily news consumption habits. For that reason, they employed a number of practices to navigate and verify information that they found important and relevant to their lives.

The discussion draws upon our extensive UK-based audience research, which included a six-week online diary study, focus group discussions, and two surveys. We conclude that audiences ultimately approached journalism with a sense of pragmatic scepticism, a term we use to describe the tension between the belief that disinformation and misinformation are inevitable in news media and the reliance on these same media for necessary political news and analysis.

Chapter 3 considers debates about how the mainstream media can both spread so-called ‘fake news’ as well as effectively challenge it. It shows that much academic focus has been on understanding the impact of disinformation primarily from new online and social media sources, which became more prominent during the pandemic. We make the case that while instances of disinformation should not be underestimated, more subtle forms of misinformation emanating from mainstream media need to be investigated. We draw on a news diary case study conducted at the start of the pandemic to explore public knowledge of COVID-19 disinformation, as well as the UK government’s policy decisions to effectively manage the health crisis. We found that the vast majority of diary participants easily identified so-called ‘fake news’ about the pandemic, and referenced mainstream media for alerting them to disinformation. But they had limited knowledge about how the UK government was mitigating the impact of the pandemic. We then draw on our systematic analysis of television news to help explain why few people understood the UK government’s management of the health crisis compared to other countries. We argue that this was because coverage overwhelmingly focused on domestic news, with very few comparisons between the UK and other nations. In other words, the information environment facilitated an understanding of blatant acts of disinformation but did not arm audiences with knowledge about the comparative policies between national governments and their records in managing the crisis. Taken together, we conclude that editorial decisions – even at impartial broadcasters with high editorial standards – can leave gaps in public knowledge that lead to a misunderstanding of politics and public affairs.

Chapter 4 further explores how subtle forms of misinformation can emanate from mainstream media and not just unreliable websites and social media accounts. It does so by exploring how accurately the news media attributed power to political bodies, explaining to audiences which parties were accountable for making decisions. The chapter shows that few studies have empirically understood how government accountability reporting can lead to public misunderstanding. In order to develop a new misinformation research agenda, we draw upon a UK-based case study that identified a lack of public understanding

among our diary participants about lockdown decisions in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was connected to our analysis of UK television news over a similar period of time, which revealed that there was limited coverage about where these policies applied across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Television news largely focused on England rather than all four nations of the UK. Without explaining the devolved political system of the UK, we argue that it could lead to misinformation in relation to lockdown reporting because the public may not understand which government was responsible for political decisions. For example, our diary study revealed many viewers did not pick up on geographical references in news reporting about the attribution of powers and were confused about how the rules were applied between the four nations. The broader conclusions of the chapter point to the importance of journalists more accurately framing the attribution of power and responsibility in order to counter misinformation and advance public knowledge.

Chapter 5 explores how the editorial practices of impartiality, objectivity and political balance can counter political misinformation. While they have become terms interchangeably used by journalists and academics, they can be applied differently in subtle but significant ways across media and political systems around the world. This chapter draws on a comparative case study that examines how the BBC interpreted the UK's 'due impartiality' guidelines in its fact-checking of political statements in domestic and foreign reporting during the 2019 UK and 2020 US election campaigns. It found political claims were corrected more robustly and directly by journalists in the coverage of the US than the UK reporting of election campaigns, as well as on fact-checking sites compared to online news and especially television news bulletins. The chapter argues that the degree to which journalists rigorously challenged claims was based on how impartiality was applied across media platforms, including television, online news and specific fact-checking websites. Our analysis suggests reporters felt more emboldened to challenge the claims of foreign over national politicians because of the domestic pressures and scrutiny they face to remain impartial and not take political sides. Furthermore, we argue that because of this domestic political pressure journalists often left it to rival politicians to interrogate claims and counterclaims – what is known as a 'he said, she said' approach to reporting – rather than independently assess the relative merits of both perspectives. More broadly, the chapter concludes that a shift from conventional reporting to fact-checking journalism would enhance the legitimacy of journalism by holding power to account more effectively and advancing better public understanding of issues and events.

Chapter 6 further develops the book's analysis of fact-checking by considering how it has informed journalism around the world. It is split into three sections. The first section explores the latest empirical studies examining fact-checking sites, moving beyond US studies that have dominated and distorted academic debates because of a focus on partisanship. The chapter then argues that scholarship needs to move beyond the narrow US context in order to better understand the impact of fact-checking across different political and media systems. It is concluded that far more research is needed to understand how and where fact-checking could enhance journalism. To address this, the second section draws on a case study that explored three fact-checking sites during the 2019 UK general election campaign, from the BBC and Channel 4, along with an independent fact-checker, Full Fact. Above all, it found that broadcasters focused on fact-checking claims from the main parties' agendas and relied on a select few institutional sources, while Full Fact featured a broader range of topics and expert figures. The chapter also draws on interviews with journalists and discovers that broadcasters highly valued their fact-checking teams but there was often a lack of integration with the main news gathering teams. The third section of the chapter focuses on a study that examined the extent to which fact-checking journalism informs routine, day-to-day reporting and if claims were treated differently across between platforms and websites. We discovered that fact-checking output was not regularly drawn upon in flagship television news, which often left claims go unchallenged. We argue that broadcasters constructed impartiality as balancing competing perspectives by often leaving it to rival politicians to scrutinise each other's claims. By contrast, on specialist fact-checking websites we found journalists adopted a more robust application of impartiality by directly challenging and, where necessary, calling out any false or misleading statements. Taken together, the chapter makes the case that fact-checking represents a more effective way of countering misinformation than constructing balance between party political perspectives. The final part of the chapter examined the first seven months of 2024 in order to assess how far fact-checking informed the BBC's *News at Ten* in routine coverage and during the UK general election campaign. We suggest that there were signs that a more assertive approach to impartiality was being pursued by the UK's main public service broadcaster, but that may only apply to election coverage rather than routine reporting.

Chapter 7 moves from examining the output of fact-checking to assessing its impact. We begin by exploring the limited body of scholarly research on audience engagement with fact-checking, which has evaluated the relationship between political beliefs and the public's receptiveness to corrective

information. In doing so, we highlight how much of the research informing relevant debates has been conducted through the narrow lens of election campaigns and mostly from a US perspective. Since the US has a highly polarised political environment, we argue that more research needs to focus on how receptive audiences are to fact-checking outside the US and in their routine consumption of news media. We make an intervention into these debates by drawing upon our own audience research in the UK to understand the broad use of fact-checking and its wider value in news consumption. Through an online diary during the pandemic, two surveys and focus groups, the chapter carries out one of the largest and most sustained analyses of audience understanding and engagement with fact-checking. Our analysis showed that our research participants had limited knowledge of fact-checking services, and, by extension, very rarely used it. Nevertheless, when we discussed examples of fact-checking with them, participants described it as useful in their understanding of news, in a way that constructed it as a type of ‘valuable journalism’ (Costera Meijer 2022, 230). We identified three interrelated dimensions of fact-checking use: it can provide contextual information that helps the public better understand politics, act as a tool of political accountability and confirm the role of journalism as the watchdog of political power. The chapter concludes by making the case that the public would welcome fact-checking as a routine journalistic convention. This, in turn, would enhance public trust in and understanding of news, and, according to many of our participants, more effectively hold political power to account.

The final chapter is informed by the salient findings of the book, developing a wider discussion about their significance by drawing on the growing body of disinformation studies, fact-checking literature and illustrative examples across five themes. First, the chapter restates the predominant argument of the book – that we need to rethink debates about the origins of disinformation and misinformation. In our view, debates should focus less on blatant acts of disinformation and instead identify where and why misinformation can flow from mainstream media and undermine public understanding. Second, we examine how impartiality informs reporting and how old-age conventions might undermine fact-checking journalism. In doing so, we suggest a more assertive interpretation of impartiality would lead to a more robust interrogation of claims made by politicians as opposed to balancing their competing perspectives. Third, we focus on the role and use of fact-checking by news media over recent years. We suggest it should become a more normalised practice in routine reporting rather than being reserved for specific moments, such as during election campaigns. Fourth, the chapter explores the role political systems can play in countering disinformation and advancing public

understanding. This includes considering the value of disinformation initiatives launched by public service broadcasters over recent years, and how far they can engender trust in journalism and fact-checking. Fifth and finally, the book concludes by arguing that the legitimacy of journalism would be enhanced if the news media adopted a more assertive approach to challenging misleading political claims and holding political power to account.

Journalistic Understandings of Disinformation

Introducing the panel on ‘Defending the Truth’ at the 2024 World Economic Forum (WEF), Mark Leonard described its title as ‘a kind of mission impossible’. His admission reflected the fears and anxieties of the wider news media industry in its effort to deal with disinformation, which the 2024 WEF Global Risk Report defined as ‘the most severe global risk anticipated over the next two years’ (World Economic Forum 2024, 8). Similarly, UNESCO (2023) included disinformation among the major threats to the freedom of the press across the world. This was reflected in an American nationwide survey (PEN America 2022), which found that journalists were worried about the impact of disinformation on their work, as it disrupted established processes and distracted them from routine reporting, leaving many feeling underequipped to deal with it. The survey further reported that journalists were spending much more time debunking misinformation and so-called ‘fake news’, while also having to deal with attacks from the public. Some even claimed to have avoided covering a story because they feared a ‘fake news’ backlash that would seek to discredit their reporting.

These fears are expressive not only of the gravity of the threat of disinformation on public discourse but also of the questions it poses for the nature and long-term survival of journalism and its normative ideals. While trying to safeguard democracy against disinformation, political journalists have simultaneously been struggling to protect their own professional identity in a fast-changing news ecology that constantly challenges it. Our first chapter provides an overview of these journalistic struggles by focusing on the question of how journalists understand disinformation as a phenomenon. These understandings are central to unpacking how they see their role in relation to disinformation, and by extension how they communicate it to audiences. The

relationship between journalistic efforts to tackle disinformation and audience evaluations of these efforts lie at the centre of this book. We begin the exploration of this relationship by illustrating the assumptions that underline the work of journalists in their fight against political disinformation.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of attempts to adapt journalistic practices to the new ‘disinformation order’ (Bennett and Livingston 2018) and the challenges it poses for the profession. It then moves on to discuss how these attempts are informed by established understandings of professional journalistic boundaries and roles. In this discussion we draw upon research conducted around the world through analyses of editorials and interviews with journalists, as well as interviews we conducted with some of the most senior broadcast news editors and journalists in the UK. We illustrate how in their understandings of disinformation journalists situate themselves in relation to what are perceived to be external threats to journalistic practice, namely social media, political spin and manipulation. At the same time, audiences are either largely absent from these considerations or assumed to be easily influenced and manipulated by social media disinformation. Ultimately, we argue that this disconnection between journalists and audiences further contributes to the problem of declining journalistic legitimacy. This problem, largely expressed through public mistrust in news media, is not merely generated by the external threat of disinformation. As we will further explain throughout this book, it has to do with a discrepancy between journalistic understandings and audience expectations.

Shifting Journalistic Practices

The recognition of disinformation as a societal and professional threat has generated a variety of recommendations about how journalists can fight against it. Some of these initiatives aim to recentre established journalistic norms, others to improve and reinforce editorial practices in order to better equip reporters when dealing with false or misleading information. Journalistic training on identifying and debunking disinformation and misinformation has been provided by NGOs, journalism organisations and schools around the world, or even within large media outlets. UNESCO (2018), for example, published a handbook on journalism education and training on the assumption that misinformation has created new conditions for journalism for which new skills and training will be required. The handbook focuses on the development of digital skills in order to verify social media sources and content, fact-check and combat online abuse. The International Centre for Journalists launched a global programme on ‘Disarming Disinformation’, which included digital

skills training, the sharing of resources and capacity building at a global scale. Meanwhile, The National Union of Journalists in the UK has provided training to ‘strengthen digital research and verification skills’ (NUJ 2024). Likewise, PEN America (2024) has promoted ‘resilience tools’ for journalists, which include advice on dealing with breaking news, navigating disinformation on social media, using online verification and bot detection tools, and dealing with generative AI.

Besides developing a digital skills toolkit, a number of other strategies have been discussed in order to defend journalistic standards both against a growing level of disinformation and public mistrust in news reporting. Transparency, for example, has been seen as valuable for reinforcing journalistic accountability and, by extension, public trust in journalism. It is largely understood as openness about the ways journalists work, both through providing explanations of how news is made, and encouraging public participation in news making (Karlsson and Clerwall 2018, 1923–4). It can take a variety of forms, such as publishing newsroom policies and standard practices, including sections for the audience to submit complaints, providing biographical and contact information of reporters, acknowledging mistakes made (Jahng et al. 2023, 237), publicly verifying sources and facts, asking news readers to help with fact-checking or explaining and showing audiences the processes of fact-checking (PEN America 2017, 61). Such openness about how news media deal with misinformation, it is believed, can allow journalists to either ‘publicly and swiftly respond to valid critiques of their work’ (UNESCO 2018, 60) or pre-emptively address any criticisms. BBC Verify, for example, was launched by the broadcaster in May 2023 to explain the ‘how’ of newsmaking (Turness 2023). ‘People want to know not just what we know (and don’t know), but how we know it’, wrote Deborah Turness, CEO of BBC News, when introducing the service (ibid.). By March 2024, videos produced by BBC Verify included a new transparency tool, namely a ‘content credentials’ feature, which explained where images or videos used in news stories were coming from and how they were authenticated by BBC staff. This information was embedded within the image or video itself, ‘helping to counter disinformation when the content is shared outside the BBC’ (*Transparency tool launched by BBC Verify* 2024). However, although such initiatives have been on the rise as a journalistic response to disinformation and in an effort to regain public trust, some research has suggested that news audiences have been indifferent to this approach to journalistic transparency and negatively reacted to user participation in the news (Karlsson and Clerwall 2018).

Another long-standing journalistic practice that has been reconsidered in

the context of debates on disinformation is the ‘he said, she said’ approach to reporting. Allowing for opposing views on a debate to be heard, the approach has been traditionally seen as a guarantee of balanced news coverage and impartiality. It has conventionally required journalists to ‘present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute, and provide both sides with roughly equal attention’ (Entman 1989, 30). This means that journalists rarely adjudicate between contradicting sources and claims (Coddington and Molyneux 2023). This approach to reporting, however, can lead to false equivalence between arguments with unequal epistemic standing. Didion (2002, 207) characterised this as ‘autopilot reporting and lazy thinking’ even though it stemmed from the ‘benign ideal’ of fairness. She argued that when political journalists adopted this reporting style, it resulted in ‘a scrupulous passivity, an agreement to cover the story not as it is occurring but as it is presented, which is to say as it is manufactured’ (ibid.). Ultimately, this form of journalism seems to focus ‘more on the avoidance of subjectivity than the pursuit of truth’ (Birks 2019b, 16). This ‘ritualised’ or ‘procedural’ objectivity, therefore, is viewed as leaving the public vulnerable to manufactured uncertainty aimed at reproducing disinformation and confusion (Lawrence and Schafer 2012, 769). Indeed, ‘he said, she said’ reporting has been criticised for enabling the spread of misinformation in debates about vaccines (Nyhan 2013), climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff 2007) and the Brexit referendum (Damazer 2019). Even when journalists covered the facts that discredited fringe claims with limited evidence supporting them, the framing of some issues as genuine debates between views granted the same attention might have long-term consequences, such as legitimising falsehoods and misinformation as valid opinions.

The ‘he said, she said’ approach to reporting is actively resisted by fact-checking journalism, which places the establishment of ‘truth’ instead of balance at the centre of its mission. The practice has been described as a ‘professional reform movement’ (Amazeen 2017, 95) that aims to restore ‘truth-seeking ideals in journalism’ (Lim 2018b, 1). The fundamental principles of fact-checking have included proactively detecting and uncovering disinformation, and determining the accuracy and truthfulness of claims, notably from political elites (Amazeen 2019). The reporting of dis/misinformation is, therefore, at the centre of professional fact-checking organisations, which differ from traditional internal fact-checking practices in news organisations, aiming at verifying reporters’ sources. Thus, fact-checking has largely been seen as distinct from the conventions and practices of mainstream journalism and considered to be overlapping with but separate from the day-to-day role of professional journalists. The practice has faced occasional criticisms for being underlined by a ‘naïve

political epistemology' that assumes that truth can be absolute and indisputable, thus reflecting a simplistic understanding of the world (Uscinski and Butler 2013, 162). It has nevertheless been broadly celebrated as a professional movement of a 'new style of political news' that can revitalise mainstream journalism by holding political actors accountable for reproducing disinformation and falsehoods (Graves 2016, 6). It has been viewed as a central development in fighting disinformation, rehabilitating public trust and restoring journalistic legitimacy. We question these assumptions and explore the practice and perceptions of fact-checking in later chapters. What is worth highlighting here is the confidence and optimism with which the practice has been approached and embraced around the world. For example, a measure of its growing influence can be evidenced by the 430 fact-checking organisations that were operating around the world in March 2024, according to Duke Reporters' Lab.

Disinformation and Journalistic Boundaries

Our discussion of journalistic practices so far is by no means an exhaustive list of the initiatives and developments considered by journalists in their efforts to tackle disinformation and re-establish public trust. All these practices, however, are reflective not only of journalists' fight to protect democratic politics, but also their attempts to reinstate their legitimacy and protect their professional identities. As we discussed in the introduction, dis/misinformation does not only undermine public trust in politics but also media institutions and journalism. Besides its broader societal consequences, disinformation is a grave threat to the epistemic authority of traditional journalism, namely its ability to produce knowledge about the world that is accepted by their audiences as factual and truthful (Carlson 2020b, 231). The story, therefore, of how journalists have tried to tackle disinformation is ultimately a story of how they have tried to re-establish themselves as the central storytellers in a fast-evolving news ecology.

In that respect, we can consider disinformation and its related phenomena, such as misinformation and so-called 'fake news', to be what Tandoc et al. (2019, 674), following Zelizer (1992a), have described as a 'critical incident in journalism', that is to say 'one that forces the journalism community to reflect on its practices and protect its ranks'. As a critical incident, disinformation invites journalists to reconsider their professional norms and practices in relation to technological developments that have allowed for the proliferation of misinformation, as well as the further changes these developments have precipitated in politics and news consumption patterns. Critical incidents, Zelizer (1992b, 191) has argued, illuminate conventions about journalistic authority

and open up discursive spaces for boundaries of journalistic practice to be discussed, challenged and negotiated, which ‘in turn allows journalists to set up collective notions about journalistic practice and thereby uphold themselves as an authoritative interpretive community’.

In order to illustrate how these renegotiations of journalistic boundaries take place within the context of disinformation, studies have examined journalistic understandings of ‘fake news’ and disinformation, either by exploring journalistic outputs (e.g. Carlson 2020a; Tandoc et al. 2019; Vos and Thomas 2018) or through interviews with journalists and news editors (e.g. Canavilhas and Jorge 2022; Jahng et al. 2023; Koliska and Assmann 2021; Schapals and Bruns 2022). The latter have provided insights into individual journalists’ reflections on their professional role and practices. Journalistic texts, such as editorials, on the other hand, have been viewed as a window into how journalists negotiate their values and practices as well as how they present them to the public (Tandoc et al. 2019). As such, they are part of ‘metajournalistic discourse’, which Carlson (2016, 350) has described as the ‘field of discourse that continually constructs meaning around journalism and its larger social place’. This discourse is central in establishing professional legitimacy, as ‘journalism functions within this larger context of meaning about journalism’ (Carlson 2020a, 377). As in much research on disinformation, these studies have largely focused on the US context, with a few exceptions.

According to this growing body of scholarship, journalistic content, such as editorials, has illustrated a fluidity in the ways the concept of fake news has been understood and described by journalists, while also legitimising it as a grave social concern by acknowledging it (Tandoc et al. 2019; Carlson 2020a). Irrespective of the variations in understanding the phenomenon, however, there have been commonalities in the attribution of blame for the proliferation of fake news. In particular, technological platforms such as Facebook and Google featured heavily in journalistic narratives about how fake news as a phenomenon emerged at the international level. The economic motives of these platforms, as well as the lack of professional journalistic gatekeepers, were seen as enabling an ‘informational cacophony’ that allowed for the proliferation of ‘fake news’ (Carlson 2020a, 383). Interestingly, however, the audience was also identified as a perpetrator of this cacophony and concomitant misinformation rather than their victim (Carlson 2020a, 384). The lack of critical skills, when using social media platforms, as well as the tendency to stay within their ideological filter bubbles were some of the reasons used in newspaper editorials to attribute blame to news audiences. By concentrating their criticism on social media, the audience and the broader political environment, journalists simultaneously resisted accountability (Tandoc et al. 2019, 686), while advocating

for traditional journalistic practices (Carlson 2020a, 380). Ultimately, by identifying fake news as a problem for democratic politics, journalists also engaged in boundary work, defending their own accounts and storytelling processes (Carlson 2020a, 375).

Similar insights were established by studies that employed interviews with journalists in the Philippines (Balod and Hameleers 2021), Chile (Núñez-Mussa et al. 2024), Germany (Koliska and Assmann 2021), Australia and the UK (Schapals and Bruns 2022), and the US (Benham 2020; Jahng et al. 2023). These studies illustrated that journalists broadly interpreted fake news and disinformation as a challenge both for journalism and society in general, while also attempting to reinforce their role as a ‘pillar of democracy’ (Schapals and Bruns 2022, 10). Journalists seemed to respond to dis/misinformation, as well as attacks to their profession by ‘putting increased emphasis on long established professional norms, roles and practices’ (Koliska and Assmann 2021, 2742). Filipino journalists, for example, found that the watchdog and disseminator role were becoming more important in an environment fraught with disinformation, and felt the need to correct it, so that they did not become complicit with it. However, they were often forced to continue the ‘he said, she said’ routine in order to provide what could appear as more balanced and detached reporting (Balod and Hameleers 2021, 2378). In the US, journalists repeatedly juxtaposed the construction and presentation of fake news to their traditional journalistic practices, while emphasising their long institutional history as a way to reinforce their trustworthiness (Jahng et al. 2023). Ultimately, journalistic gatekeeping was constructed as a way of producing balanced reporting and confronting disinformation (Benham 2020).

The journalists and editors we interviewed described disinformation in broadly similar ways, constructing it as a grave threat for journalistic work and democracy overall. We held in-depth discussions with senior news editors, producers and journalists from the BBC, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News, as well as fact-checkers working for BBC Reality Check and Channel 4’s FactCheck. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2020 and lasted approximately one hour (see Soo et al. 2023).

Disinformation was largely described by our interviewees as the deliberate attempt to mislead for political purposes or, as Ben de Pear, the then Channel 4 News Editor, put it, the ‘weaponising of fake news, uncertainty, different versions of the truth for mostly a political audience, to try and persuade them to support you rather than opponents’. The concept, largely conflated with fake news in the conversations, was further unpacked in more nuanced ways, which included ‘being blatantly deceptive’ (interview with Paul Royal, then BBC News at Six and Ten Editor), ‘cynical lying’, ‘professional disinformation

campaigns' and cyberwar (interview with Patrick Worrall, then head of Channel 4 FactCheck), 'twist[ing the truth] to suit a particular political end' (interview with Jon Snow, then Channel 4 News anchor) and information that maybe is 'true but is being used in a particular way for a particular reason and maybe isn't in the public interest' (interview with Isla Glaister, then Sky News producer). Our interviewees pointed out that disinformation was not a new phenomenon, as political propaganda and spin have always existed. However, there was a broad acknowledgement that there was something distinctive about how these practices were conducted and experienced in the contemporary context.

If for the US the turning point in disinformation debates was the election of Donald Trump in 2016, for British journalists it seemed to be the 2016 Brexit referendum, which was discussed in all our interviews. That critical political moment illustrated both the extent to which disinformation could easily spread and have a detrimental effect on politics, as well as the difficulties that the phenomenon posed on journalists. These difficulties centred on two interrelated processes, namely the ease with which politicians would lie or manipulate the truth, and the prominence of digital media and social media platforms in news circulation.

Disinformation as an External Threat to Journalism

Disinformation was understood by the broadcast journalists and editors we talked to as inextricably intertwined with online media. The changes brought about by the rise in social media use were integral to their definitions of disinformation. The speed and the scale with which information can be shared through digital media were discussed as the major dimensions of contemporary disinformation campaigns. According to Jon Snow, who was Channel 4 News's main anchor for over twenty years, disinformation was 'more to do with the dissemination than it is to do with the content. The content has not changed very much.' Similarly, Rupert Carey, the then editor of BBC Reality Check, pointed out that the content of current disinformation campaigns was not very different from earlier scaremongering tactics, such as the 1992 'Labour's Tax Bombshell' poster that falsely claimed that Labour would increase taxes by more than £1,000 for the average voter, or the 1997 Tony Blair's Demon Eyes advert, which was a collage depicting the then leader of the opposition with cartoonish devilish eyes. The difference to the present, Carey pointed out, was that in the past members of the public would have to open a newspaper or pass a billboard in order to be exposed to these campaign adverts, whereas now such messages can be 'pumped out' and 'bombard'

people repeatedly through social media platforms. 'The message might not have changed but the volume and the targeting obviously has changed', he further argued, and this could have 'a greater effect in reaching people you want to reach'.

Twitter (now X), Facebook and, to a lesser extent, YouTube were the platforms mentioned by our interviewees in relation to disinformation. By spreading information fast and widely, these platforms were seen as constructing an anarchic news environment, whereby news and fake news alike could reach the audience indiscriminately. This was believed to have altered the type of information that was considered credible, as well as news consumption habits. As Ben de Pear described, audiences have moved

from being informed by newspapers and TV news and radio, from a sort of regulated environment, to short snippets of information or video mostly online on their phones, which has also had the actual physiological effect of shortening peoples' span of concentration, their levels of concentration, and I think political disinformation has come from that, that the loudest voice or the most emotive or angry voice is heard above others.

For many of our interviewees, these processes, and the move from a 'regulated' news environment, threw into relief what was ultimately the diminishing mediating role of journalists in the flow of political information. Reflecting on whether something felt different in the contemporary political landscape, Paul Royall, then BBC News Editor, observed that:

It feels like there is, because of the changes in technology and the rise in social media and the ability to be able to broadcast and disseminate yourself. So in an old world where maybe the BBC and BBC News and one or two others were, effectively, the platform and the means of dissemination, and so information is travelling through our hands and being checked, processed and approved in all the usual editorial ways, that's not the case to the same extent anymore.

Similarly, Isla Gaisler, then Sky News producer, described that what had changed in news work was that information that used to reach the public through 'a filter' did not need to do so anymore. Instead, she argued,

whether that's because politicians are trying to or would prefer to have their message not through the filter and not through the analysis of a journalist, I don't know if that's their intention but it's certainly part of the effect.

Taken together, disinformation was intrinsically intertwined with what journalists and editors described as the demise of their traditional role in the production and circulation of news. In particular, it was their gatekeeping role that journalists saw as being obliterated in an environment of media and information abundance. The nature and scale of disinformation seemed to have changed, according to our interviewees, because journalists were not the ones deciding what news was anymore, nor could they verify information that would reach the public.

According to some editors and journalists, the loss of this journalistic filter had to do with the unwillingness of politicians to engage with journalists through press conferences or interviews. We asked our interviewees to reflect on the issue of access to politicians, especially during a campaign period. It was often identified as a problem in the coverage of elections, as it could potentially disconnect journalists from the particulars of the campaign and have a detrimental effect on their analysis. Most of the journalists and editors we interviewed mentioned the unwillingness of politicians to engage with reporters and expose themselves to scrutiny. Jon Snow, for example, blamed what he described as ‘the death of the news conferences’ for shutting down any opportunity to challenge politicians about their lies and exaggerations. He described how previous ‘structures for elections’ and ‘regulations’ allowed for political parties to be available to journalists daily during the campaign, which ‘enshrined the right, on behalf of the citizen, [of] the media to ask questions’. This, he argued, did not exist anymore. Similarly, Ben De Pear described how the ‘time between politicians and journalists’ had dramatically decreased over the years and by the different governments. In his view, this led to

interviewers becoming more aggressive because they had less time in order to ask more important questions and the politicians being less likely to do an interview because they knew that the broadcasters were trying to get a line out of them, or a moment.

Ultimately, given the pressures posed by journalistic scrutiny, and the opportunities allowed by social media, politicians, as described in the interviews, preferred to engage with the public directly through social media platforms. As Jon Snow put it, ‘politicians are, effectively, on the run from the conventional media’. This, in turn, undermined political accountability and the ability of journalists to directly scrutinise and challenge political claims.

The lack of journalistic scrutiny of the information that politicians would directly share with the public through social media was considered particularly significant, given what a lot of the journalists and editors we talked to described

as the ease with which politicians would manipulate the truth. Despite describing disinformation as nothing completely new, as discussed above, a general view expressed among our interviewees was that ‘a line has been crossed’ (interview with Cait FitzSimons, then editor of Channel 5 News) and there had been a qualitative shift in the ways politicians would bend the truth or employ outward lies in order to promote their views and interests. This ‘deterioration in honesty’, as Patrick Worrall, then head of Channel 4 FactCheck, described it, was seen in the ease with which politicians could potentially be deceptive. This was enabled by social media and the absence of journalistic challenge. But it was also described as a broader trend in a political culture where ‘the jeopardy for politicians caught out telling lies is less now’ (interview with Patrick Worrall). Instead, both the Brexit campaign and the Trump 2016 presidential election were cases, ‘where you had people who were seen to be playing fast and loose with the truth, and not only were they not punished by the electorate, they were perhaps in a sense rewarded’ (ibid.). In that context, disinformation was described as ‘not just the willingness to mislead but actually the happiness to mislead because it works for you [i.e. for politicians], and you know that it’s cutting through’ (interview with Cait FitzSimmons).

The interviewees alluded to what Gaber and Fisher (2022, 461) have described as ‘strategic lying’. This represents the latest development in political spin, which employs ostensibly misleading content that aims to set the agenda by grabbing attention and being widely disseminated and amplified through social and mainstream media, exactly because of its untruthful nature and likely rebuttal. One such explicit attempt to confuse or mislead the public pointed out by our interviewees was the temporary renaming of the Twitter (now X) account of the Conservative Party’s press office to ‘factcheckUK’ during the political leaders’ debate in the 2019 election campaign. Although this was recognised as an attempt to add credibility to the Conservative Party’s campaign, which was not in itself a novelty, the practice was nevertheless condemned as ‘very low down’, given that there was ‘an element there of trying to fool the public’ (interview with Isla Glaister).

It was, therefore, largely social media and politicians’ propensity to lying, and the complicit relationship between the two, that were identified as the main sources of disinformation by the journalists we talked to. On the one hand, the political landscape has transformed in ways that explicit lies have become part of political spin and are seen as inconsequential in terms of political cost. On the other hand, social media platforms have provided politicians with the opportunity to directly broadcast these lies and misinformation to the public, without the scrutiny of journalistic intervention. It is these conditions that our interviewees described as the context within which disinformation

in its current form has emerged and threatens both the traditional journalistic roles and democratic politics overall.

However, by attributing responsibility largely to politicians and social media, editors and journalists generally constructed disinformation and fake news as external threats to their profession and roles. This could be viewed as further inoculating the news media against any internal criticism, leaving little space for self-reflection and examination of how journalism itself can play a role in how dis/misinformation play out in contemporary politics. Koliska and Assmann (2021, 2737), for example, found that the majority of German news directors and editors they interviewed saw no link between public accusations of a ‘lying press’ and the actual performance of the institution of journalism. Such distancing, the authors argued, allowed newsrooms to develop strategies and responses to these accusations that did not ‘question the validity of the existing institutional myth’ of journalistic authority (ibid.).

One of the news editors we interviewed made an explicit reference to journalistic responsibility in the way news stories were framed. Talking about how journalists should deal with politicians, Cait FitzSimmons, then editor of Channel 5 News, acknowledged that there were ‘different shades’ in political reporting and occasionally some reporters inserted their own take in the story, or they sometimes ‘get caught up in the Westminsterness of it’. This can affect the reporting of political issues, such as adopting the frame politicians themselves impose on journalists rather than questioning the impact related policies would have on the public. FitzSimmons also identified how media can reproduce misinformation by repeating information out of context and without explanation. She specifically referred to a clip that the BBC show *Question Time* shared on Twitter (now X) during the 2019 election campaign period, when a member of the audience criticised Labour’s taxation promises by claiming that a £80k salary was not among the 5 per cent top earners. The claim was false, as this salary was indeed among the top 5 per cent, and was challenged by different sources, including during the show itself. Nevertheless, the clip was still shared without context on the BBC Twitter (now X) account and went viral.

Instead of reconsidering such practices, by focusing on the challenges posed by politicians and social media alike, many of the solutions envisioned by our interviewees in the fight against disinformation entailed the refinement or expansion of existing journalistic practices. When we asked about the importance of fact-checking, especially during election periods, virtually all interviewees supported this approach to journalism, despite the difficulties it posed. These included distinguishing between claims that were checkable and political opinions or slogans, keeping in line with guidelines of impartiality,

and reaching the wider public beyond television news. There was an overall sense conveyed in the interviews that journalists needed to be on alert under these new conditions of political disinformation, even more so than in the past, to become ‘much more attentive and geared up for quickly and convincingly analysing and scrutinising claims and information’ (interview with Paul Royall). The need for more explainers for the public was also mentioned in a few interviews, as well as the need to share these explainers in different media platforms, such as YouTube or Twitter (now X) in order to reach more audiences. Katy Searle, for example, then Head of BBC Westminster, described ‘presumed knowledge’ as the ‘biggest challenge’ journalists faced, because they were ‘in a bubble in terms of chatting about stuff’ and, therefore, assuming knowledge that the public did not have. Bringing information ‘back to the basics’ in a sophisticated way was a main challenge for reaching the audience. Indeed, Searle argued that all the audience research that BBC had conducted boiled down to one point, namely that the audience did not really understand what journalists would talk about.

Disinformation and its Imagined Audience

Acknowledging the need for more explainers that can help the public navigate (dis)information, journalists and editors we interviewed recognised the need to better connect with their audiences and produce reporting that is useful to them. At the same time, however, most of the discussions were underlined by assumptions journalists made about their audiences, which constructed the latter as another challenge news media needed to overcome in the context of disinformation. In particular, the audience was assumed to be lacking in two fundamental ways that were integral to the spread of disinformation. The first had to do with the perceived lack of audience attention in its engagement with the news. The argument was that ‘the public’s ability to concentrate has been shortened over time by this constant sort of digital media and the mobile phone’ (interview with Ben de Pear) and they were less likely to listen to lengthy stories and analyses. Doubt was expressed, for example, about whether good reporting ‘even cuts through with the viewers’, unless it is done in a sound bite and concise way, in a ‘big hands-on-hips, here’s a takeout, here’s the truth’ type of reporting (interview with Cait FitzSimmons). This propensity to sound bites and shortform meant that the audience could become more vulnerable to political spin, as well as to the voices that were louder rather than truthful on social media platforms.

The second assumption about the audience had to do with their lack of trust in mainstream journalism and the partisan way in which news consumers

evaluated information. This meant that some journalists imagined their audiences as being inherently suspicious towards their work, which would be interpreted not as objective reporting but ideologically skewed. ‘If you don’t say what they [audiences] want’, Cait FitzSimmons said, ‘then they will obviously say that you are fake news or putting out disinformation.’ At the same time, a few interviewees criticised social media platforms for allowing echo chambers, which reinforced audience beliefs and potential prejudices, thus making it ‘harder to get people to take an objective viewpoint’ (interview with Isla Glasler). Online partisan audiences were also seen as weaponising information in order to reinforce their own political arguments and views. Reflecting on his unwillingness to use a star system in presenting fact-checking verdicts, Patrick Worrall, the then head of Channel 4 News FactCheck, expressed his disappointment in how journalistic nuance was not always appreciated by audiences:

And actually you just realise as a journalist, it’s like you’re doing your best to try and be even-handed and nuanced and people are just kind of wilfully disregarding that, all the effort you’ve put into it and trying to use that one little aspect of it that suits their case. So that’s one reason why we we’re not keen on that kind of four out of five stars thing.

This editorial perspective was illustrative of a lack of trust in online audiences, as well as a sense of alienation from them. The audience was approached as another challenge to deal with in the context of political disinformation. Even if not explicitly identified as perpetrators of disinformation (Tandoc et al. 2019; Carlson 2020a), online audiences were considered to be active contributors to its proliferation, by ignoring nuanced journalism, preferring sound bite information and trusting the voices that confirm their own biases.

In their Chile-based study, Nuñez-Mussa et al. (2024, 10) found that the journalists and editors they interviewed perceived their audiences as passive and with little critical judgement in their daily engagement with news. They seemed to assume that as hard as they fought for reporting accurate and truthful information, the public evidently did not care about the truth anymore. Similarly, Jahng et al. (2023) found that the US journalists they interviewed thought that audiences understood so-called fake news in a much more partisan way than themselves. Although journalists themselves defined fake news as disinformation that intends to mislead and manipulate the public, or information that had not been vetted or scrutinised with journalistic ethics in mind (Jahng et al. 2023, 231–2), they thought that their audiences adopted a partisan definition of the concept, and considered fake news to be any information they

disagreed with, or used the concept to holistically attack the profession and thus challenge the epistemology of journalism (Jahng et al. 2023, 233).

These findings were not surprising in the context of broader research on journalistic perceptions of the audience. Audiences have been historically perceived by journalists as passive and uninterested in significant issues, and therefore their feedback has been largely ignored (Nelson 2021, 16). Research has suggested journalists seem to have abstract notions of their audience (Robinson 2019). Despite changes in technology that have afforded greater opportunities to connect with news audiences, and to therefore get to know them more intimately, these understandings remain abstract and limited (Robinson 2019; Nelson 2021). Instead, technological changes seem to have had detrimental effects on how journalists view their relationship to their audiences, as they feel increasingly disconnected from the public and sense that citizens do not respect their work and mistrust them more than ever (Metykova 2017). This could be viewed as the outcome of technological developments that increase information sources, undermining legacy journalism, and sociopolitical developments, such as the rise of populism and political polarisation (*ibid.*).

The way journalists imagine their audiences is important as it largely affects the ways they communicate with the public (Coddington et al. 2021). Nelson (2021), for example, has illustrated how news media organisations that value actively engaging with their audiences draw upon a more diverse set of voices and sources in order to more effectively reflect the diversity of the public. On the other hand, if journalists negatively perceive their audience as uninterested or passive, they are likely to be unwilling to engage with them, as this would be seen as undermining their professional values (Nelson 2021, 17). Taken together, it can be concluded that the way journalists understand their audiences in the context of disinformation has implications for how they tackle it and inform the public about false and misleading information. What our findings, along with other research, have shown is that in their fight against disinformation journalists feel alienated from the public and even attacked by them. For journalists, this alienation might be discouraging and shape the way they see their professional role. If they feel that their work does not matter as much for the public, the gravest consequence could be that their efforts will also be impacted. If journalists believe that the public does not care much about ‘the truth’, they might become even more disengaged from their audiences and immune to any feedback. Ultimately, framing the audience as both partisan and disinterested in ‘political truth’ can be dangerous both for journalistic attempts to tackle disinformation and journalistic legitimacy overall.

Mind the Gap Between Journalists and their Audiences

This chapter has explored the ways journalists understand disinformation and their role in relation to it. We have argued that disinformation is not seen only as a threat to democratic politics but also as an affront to the epistemic role of journalism in society, namely its authority to produce and mediate political knowledge. We have illustrated how journalists understand disinformation as produced by politicians willing to lie and manipulate the truth in new, and to an extent, unprecedented ways, which have been facilitated by social media platforms that enable the fast and wide dissemination of unverified information. Within this evolving media ecology, the role of journalists as gatekeepers has been inadvertently undermined. It is the re-establishment of this role that journalists see as a way of fighting disinformation. In these efforts, the audience is perceived as another challenge news media need to deal with. The public is partially seen as having lost the attention span or appetite for ‘good journalism’ or even ‘the truth’, and approaching truthfulness through a partisan lens.

However, by trying to re-establish and strengthen their institutional identity in the face of disinformation within the digital information ecology, journalists also draw boundaries and social distance that further separate them from the public, whose trust they are trying to gain (Koliska and Assmann 2021, 2743). Trying to adapt to the new technological and sociopolitical environments, journalists largely focus their efforts on re-establishing their role in relation to politicians rather than their audiences. When audiences are considered enablers or even perpetrators of disinformation, it is likely that the distance between journalists and the public will increase. This distance can undermine efforts to re-establish public trust in journalism. At the same time, by defining disinformation as only an external threat to the profession, and placing responsibility for it on politicians, social media and the public, the risk is that journalists will distance themselves from any form of self-reflection. This can make them oblivious to possible weaknesses and blind spots in their work that have contributed to public criticisms and mistrust.

Ultimately, if there is an increasing distance between journalists and their audiences it will undermine efforts to re-establish journalistic legitimacy. As we discussed in the introduction, this needs to be understood as a constant negotiation between journalists and the public. If journalists become disenchanted about the ability or willingness of the public to engage with them, journalists could end up shielding themselves against not only partisan attacks but also legitimate critique and possible introspection. In doing so, they run the risk of misunderstanding their audiences and further alienating them. In an evolving news landscape, where not only news consumption patterns but

also audience expectations might have changed, trying to uphold and reinforce institutional roles through old practices seems insufficient. This disconnection with the public can further undermine journalistic efforts to challenge disinformation.

Audience Understandings of Disinformation

The role of the audience in academic debates about disinformation, so-called ‘fake news’ and post-truth politics has been largely understood in terms of two contrasting narratives of agency and vulnerability. On the one hand, news audiences have been seen as engendering disinformation by sharing it; on the other hand, they have been viewed as its victims in need of media literacy and journalistic interventions. As discussed in the previous chapter, journalists often approach audiences as another challenge for newsrooms, as their attention is fragmented within multi-choice communication environments, or they can become inadvertent perpetrators of disinformation. In academic research, questions about news audiences have largely focused on how disinformation spreads through people that are more likely to get exposed to social media content, believe and share it (Nelson and Taneja 2018; Guess et al. 2019; Pantazi et al. 2021) or how misinformed opinions can be corrected by journalists, fact-checkers or social media companies (Martel et al. 2021; Ecker et al. 2022). However, less academic attention has been paid to how news audiences understand the phenomenon of disinformation, and how this understanding mediates their relationship with news media and journalism.

It is this question we address in this chapter. Our aim is to illustrate how audience understandings of disinformation further reflect their evaluations of news sources, as well as their practices of news consumption. In this approach we draw upon the theoretical underpinnings of a broader audience turn in journalism studies (Swart et al. 2022) that moves beyond ‘researcher-defined understandings’ (Knudsen et al. 2021, 2) and takes as a starting point the perspectives of audiences. This research has foregrounded folk theories of journalism, namely popular beliefs of what journalism is and what it does (Nielsen 2016). It has thus unpacked audience understandings of hitherto theoretically

and largely normatively defined concepts, such as trust (Coleman 2012; Knudsen et al. 2021), time spent on news (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2020), or even the meaning of news (Edgerly and Vraga 2020). This 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).

The chapter starts with an overview of how audiences understand disinformation, drawing upon the limited number of empirical studies that have been conducted on the topic, which nevertheless provide significant insights at a global level. We move on to illustrate how both politicians’ manipulations of the truth as well as mainstream media coverage are integral in these understandings. Disinformation, therefore, as understood by audiences, includes instances of misinformation and information gaps. Furthermore, it is being seen as a taken-for-granted and expected part of routine news consumption. In this context, we explore the practices that audiences have developed to navigate and verify information in their engagement with news. We argue that, although mainstream journalism is critiqued and not necessarily separated from the problem of disinformation, audiences do not fully mistrust it. Instead, they approach it with a sense of pragmatic scepticism, which expresses both the belief that disinformation is inevitable in news media and that these media can still provide information that is necessary for understanding politics (Kyriakidou et al. 2023).

The discussion draws upon three audience studies we have conducted in the UK. The first is an online diary study with 175 participants over a period of six weeks – 16 April to 27 May 2020 – which was during the first critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The diaries included questions and probes that allowed us to explore people’s thoughts and attitudes about specific issues that were covered in the media in that period. The second set of empirical material stems from a study with fourteen focus groups that included 52 participants in total and were conducted online between 22 April and 26 May 2021. We conducted focus groups online due to COVID-19 restrictions that limited group interactions. The final study included two surveys conducted in May 2021. The first survey included 1,065 respondents from a representative mix of ages, gender and news consumption habits. The second follow-up survey included 542 respondents from the first survey who largely consumed news through television, which was the medium we wanted to explore in detail.

Defining Disinformation

Disinformation, as well as the related concepts of ‘fake news’, misinformation and post-truth politics, have not only preoccupied academic and journalistic

debates alike but have also infiltrated contemporary vernacular. When Collins named ‘fake news’ word of the year in 2017, the usage of the term had increased by 365 per cent since 2016 (Flood 2017). How the public understands these concepts, and how these understandings affect their relationship with the news, are questions we focus on in this chapter. In a global survey that included the US, the UK, Netherlands, Germany, France, Poland and India, van der Meer and Hameleers (2024) found that news audiences assumed that the majority of their news (about 53 per cent) included misinformation, which they perceived as a serious threat to their information environment. This was more prevalent in the US and India, where media trust was lower. The authors concluded that people were concerned about misinformation at disproportionate levels, likely because of the constant attention to the phenomenon by media and public debates (*ibid.*, 3).

This perceived ‘disproportionate’ concern, however, might be explained if we further explore how audiences understand the phenomenon of misinformation. As we evidence later in this chapter, we make the case that audience understandings of disinformation, and the related concepts of misinformation and fake news tend to be far broader than academic or journalistic definitions. Previous research has also indicated this. Nielsen and Graves (2017) combined a survey with eight focus group discussions with online users in the US, the UK, Spain and Finland, and discovered that for audiences the difference between ‘fake news’ and news was one of degree rather than a clear-cut distinction often applied in academic typologies. The wide spectrum of what audiences understood as ‘fake news’ included examples of poor journalism, political propaganda and advertising, more often than explicitly false information. The authors concluded that such audience definitions were expressive of a generalised scepticism and a ‘wider discontent with the information landscape’ (Nielsen and Graves 2017, 1). In their focus groups and interviews with news audiences and journalists in Chile, Nuñez-Mussa et al. (2024, 10) also found that for some participants news organisations, and in particular television news, were part of the misinformation problem. What news audiences saw as problematic was not the fact that information was not truthful but the way it was framed and presented emphasised specific aspects at the expense of others, which by extension enabled specific understandings of events.

Van der Linden et al. (2020) found that in the US the tendency to associate the concept of ‘fake news’ to the ‘media’, including mainstream media, was underpinned by ideological assumptions. In a survey-based study, Republicans were more inclined to identify media, and in particular mainstream media, as ‘fake news’, whereas for liberals it was mostly politics, and unsurprisingly Donald Trump, that was equated with the concept. Ultimately, ‘fake news’

seemed to be employed by partisans to discredit sources ideologically opposed to their own beliefs. Although these conclusions can be easily attributed to the hyperpolarised US political context, the association of disinformation with mainstream media is a persistent finding in audience research.

In an Israel-based study, Yadlin and Klein Shagrir (2021, 2541) argued that ‘fake news’ as a concept was ‘an identifier of an overall loss of trust in traditional civic gatekeepers, such as offline legacy media institutions and democratic state institutions’. Analysing audience online reactions to content manipulations in a docu-reality series on Israeli public service broadcasting, the authors found that audience discussions blurred the lines between mistrust in the media and mistrust in state institutions. These expressions were an important indicator of an overall critical stance by the public.

Schwarzenegger (2020) further unpacked such expressions of mistrust in his German-based study, which explored the consequences of ‘fake news’ and post-truth era narratives for news users, through in-depth interviews. He used the concept of pragmatic trust to describe how news users relied on specific news sources, even if they were suspicious of the media to varying degrees, adopting the belief that one simply cannot question everything. Expressions of such pragmatic trust, Schwarzenegger argued, ranged from naïve 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).

Our UK-based studies also explored both how audiences understood disinformation, as well as the implications of these understandings for their relationship with the media. Above all, disinformation was discussed by our research participants as a grave social and political problem. In our second survey in 2021, which included people that mostly consumed their news through television, almost all respondents – 93 per cent – believed that disinformation was to some extent ‘a problem’ for the UK (see Table 2.1). There were no consistent differences in these evaluations according to respondents’ political affiliation.

When we explored disinformation more qualitatively, respondents largely understood it in line with academic definitions of the concept. This was broadly viewed as the manipulation of information, most often with the intention to deceive. Descriptions of the phenomenon varied from simple definitions of disinformation as ‘information that is not correct’, ‘propaganda’, ‘information

Table 2.1 The proportion of survey respondents who believed disinformation was a problem in the UK (N in brackets)

Definitely not	0% (1)
Not really	6% (29)
Yes, definitely	35% (192)
Yes, to some extent	58% (312)
Don't know	1% (8)
Total	100% (542)

Note: The percentages in tables throughout the book may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

pretending’ and ‘a politer word for lying’ to more sophisticated accounts of disinformation as framing and attempts to set the agenda by ‘sway[ing] the truth just enough’. As one survey respondent described:

To me, disinformation is either untruths or carefully selected truths which are woven together to create a narrative which does not convey the whole story. In either case the intention is to tell people what, or how, they should think.

Another respondent elaborated on how disinformation

can be spread by a variety of actors: some deliberately lying in order to deceive people and gain influence and others sharing what they believe is the truth. Often it plays on people’s fears (e.g. disinformation about vaccine or cell tower risks), prejudices, or craving for simple narratives (e.g. by masking itself as ‘common sense’ in contrast to evidence supported findings that are potentially more difficult to understand or reconcile).

This distinction between deliberate lying and sharing false information because one believes it to be true did not appear important for some of our research participants. Although for most of them intent was central to their understanding of disinformation, others described that sometimes people would unwittingly spread disinformation by sharing false information that they believed in. This type of response was particularly present in our online diaries conducted at the height of the pandemic, where many participants referenced how prevalent disinformation was ‘in messages apps, especially between older generations and people who have limited education’. In that respect, disinformation was occasionally conflated with misinformation, namely the circulation of false content that is not intended to harm (Wardle 2018, 954), or general confusion, caused by the lack of accurate or authoritative information.

The concept of ‘fake news’, as well as conspiracy theories, were often mentioned by research participants in relation to disinformation. A lot of the examples of such conspiracy theories that participants brought up related to COVID-19, and included, for example, the idea that 5G technology played a role in the spread of the virus, the manipulation of COVID-19-related deaths, the hidden risks of vaccinations or Donald Trump’s claim that injecting disinfectant could protect one from the virus. This was particularly prominent in the online diary entries. Some of our research participants linked their descriptions of disinformation to myths about the origins and treatment of the virus, as well as confusion related to conflicting information about health measures and death numbers. Disinformation, in this context, was understood in relation to public health. This further highlighted the time-specific nature of disinformation, which was related to events and examples that were prominently debated in mainstream media and appeared significant for people at specific moments. This temporal dimension was highlighted by a couple of participants in the focus groups. As a young woman described:

I think it’s 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.

Brexit was another example that was frequently mentioned by research participants in relation to disinformation. For example, when survey respondents were asked to think about the consequences of disinformation, a few of them mentioned Brexit as an illustration of how disinformation can ‘change the world’ and ‘have a profound impact on the future of the country for everyone’. One respondent referred to ‘the 350 million for the NHS for Brexit’ as ‘the perfect example’ of disinformation because it ‘causes people to get worked into a frenzy and act against their best interests. It is often about topics people are passionate about, so emotions take over and doing their own research goes out the window’.

Besides misleading the public and influencing their voting, social division and polarisation were among the consequences of disinformation that survey respondents mentioned, when asked to think about the problems that it causes. US politics and the divisive discourse instigated by Trump and his supporters were mentioned as examples, as was racism and the rise of far right and xenophobic ideas. One respondent described how ‘many people are disinformed

about religions like Islam and as a result often hold Islamophobic views and are misinformed on Islam in general. This creates a culture of fear around Muslims and perpetuates things like hate crimes.’ The erosion of public trust was another consequence mentioned in the surveys. What respondents described was that disinformation promotes a general culture of mistrust, which breeds further doubts about the authenticity of credible information and ultimately undermines the public’s ability to make reasoned decisions.

Similar to journalistic discourses discussed in the previous chapter, social media featured extensively in audience understandings of disinformation. Twitter (now X) and Facebook, and to a lesser degree Instagram and WhatsApp, were often mentioned when research participants described disinformation. The ‘easiness’ and speed with which information is shared on these platforms, the ‘democratisation of information’ that allows anyone to share their views, no matter how erroneous or misleading they might be, with no fear of repercussion or challenge, and the ‘difficulty’ of checking the validity of sources, rendered social media platforms a prolific ground for the spread of disinformation. They created an environment where personal opinions and political lies can be shared as truths, and fact can be distorted through rumours.

Taking Political Information ‘With a Slight Pinch of Salt’

Disinformation, as is evident in some of the responses highlighted throughout the chapter, was largely described in relation to politicians and their messages. This was the case in the surveys, online diaries and focus groups. In this sense, audience understandings were once again very similar to journalistic definitions of disinformation. Ostensible lies and political propaganda were mentioned by research participants as being intrinsically connected to disinformation. Donald Trump’s outrageous health claims, for example, were mentioned by several participants. His assertions that he had won the 2020 US elections, as well as his reference to a non-existent terrorist attack in Sweden during a speech about protecting US borders, were also mentioned in the focus groups as examples of disinformation. The UK government’s handling of the pandemic, such as its initial claims that face masks did not make a difference to the spread of COVID-19, and their lack of clarity in relation to lockdown measures, were also brought up.

These particular examples were most commonly referenced in the online diaries during the pandemic, although they were also present in our later surveys and focus groups. In their diary entries, participants pointed out the lack of clarity from government officials about lockdown rules and health announcements. In some of these accounts, this was seen as intended political manipulation in order to deflect criticism from the public. In others, this lack

of clarity was not deliberate but due to the general lack of understanding of the pandemic itself. Overall, disinformation was viewed as a result of political messaging and the overall government confusion about how to manage COVID-19. The confusion surrounding the number of COVID-19 deaths as communicated by the UK government was mentioned by about a fifth of the participants in the online diaries, when asked to reflect on disinformation. The general sense was that, as one participant put it, 'The government and politicians in general are trying to hide their bad decisions and incompetence.' This led to misinformation about 'the number of deaths, the risk that the virus really imposes, about ending of lockdown because it is safe (not to save the economy, which is very obvious), etc.' If conspiracy theories about COVID-19, such as the responsibility of G5 technology, or the pandemic originating in a Chinese lab, were easy for the public to detect, this was not the case with what was perceived as incoherent political information. According to one research participant, if conspiracy theories were 'easily dismissed by any rational person', the misinformation caused by the fact that 'while the prime minister is saying one thing, his executives are saying something different' was more dangerous, as it was 'sending a very unclear message and makes people feel anxious about what's actually going to happen'.

Besides the pandemic, such political manipulations were seen as part of political life, especially during election campaigns. This was evident in the example of the 2016 EU referendum campaign that was brought up both by focus group participants and survey respondents in 2021. Examples from the 2019 general election campaign were also discussed in the focus groups. One participant, for instance, brought up a pledge in the manifesto of the Conservative Party to hire 50,000 nurses, which was an exaggerated number and not entirely accurate, as will be further discussed in Chapter 7. Another focus group member, a Conservative voter, remembered that the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson had also pledged to hire 20,000 policemen. As he described, 'none of it struck me as being, I don't want to say not honest, but it's kind of the thing you hear in every speech, we're going to have 50,000 extra of that and 20,000 extra of that'. He went on to explain that he would

kind of take it all with a slight pinch of salt because that's politics. They always seem to over-promise and under-deliver. So I wouldn't necessarily believe any politician as to exact figures because I think, inherently, they're there to encourage you.

Ultimately, political disinformation was broadly described by research participants as being typical and somewhat predictable. It was not necessarily thought

of as reflecting outward lies, exemplified by the extremities of Donald Trump or claims made during the EU referendum campaign, but as a form of routine political manipulation and spin.

Remarkably, this acknowledgement of disinformation as integral to political life was not always accompanied by explicit arguments about lying politicians. As such, it was expressive of a pragmatic albeit sceptical understanding of politics as intentional strategic communication. A focus group participant gave such a description of politics, when asked to reflect on whether journalists do enough to challenge politicians that might be not telling the truth:

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. They drive the attention of everyone into one specific topic because they want people to focus on that. But then, I think, journalists should actually try to give the bigger picture. I actually actively and proactively look for this kind of information that covers a bit more.

It seems, therefore, that audiences understood political disinformation as operating at different levels. There was the level of outward lies and conspiracies that were easy to identify and challenge. There was the lack of clarity in political statements, deliberate or not, that could lead to confusion and further misinformation. But there was also the level of daily political spin that did not necessarily spread lies but stretched the truth or framed it in ways that were convenient to politicians. If the two first levels had grave consequences, as survey respondents described, the last type of political spin was to be expected in politics. However, what was repeated in the surveys, focus groups and online diaries was that the media did not do a good job dissecting and challenging this spin. In other words, the media were viewed as being complicit with disinformation produced by politicians.

Disinformation as Inherent in News Work

Although, as discussed above, social media were extensively described as perpetrators or aggravators of disinformation, they were not seen as the only platforms for the creation and circulation of untruthful information. Instead, disinformation was constructed in the diaries, surveys and focus groups as a

taken-for-granted part of daily encounters with news media. In the surveys, for example, some audience definitions of disinformation included legacy media as well as politicians or social media, as illustrated below:

Disinformation means information that is false and that is publicised or spread with the deliberate intention to mislead, particularly where that information is released by those in a position of power, such as governments, political parties or large media organisations.

Normally, it seems that this type of information is spread through social media but even in mainstream media headlines are often framed in ways that do not represent the data in context which causes outrage and clicks which make money.

The fact that social media gives you information as ‘facts’ when they aren’t actually fact-checked. Also, when new channels give conflicting news or explanations about the same event.

This understanding of news media as perpetrators of disinformation and misinformation was justified on two grounds, namely the inherent limitations of contemporary reporting and the perceived collusion between journalists and politicians. In some respondents’ definitions, news media were seen as deliberately attempting to mislead the audience by distorting facts or obscuring parts of a story for financial reasons. They were criticised for exaggerating and sensationalising headlines, and distorting stories for ‘clickbait’. Participants in the focus groups discussed how news stories would sometimes differ considerably from their headlines. The tabloid press, and in particular *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, were most commonly referenced in this context.

A second and most common way news media were seen as perpetuating disinformation was media bias. This was understood both in terms of the explicit political bias of the press, as well as the broader ideological bias of British media. When it came to the former, news reporting was criticised as being ideologically driven. As one survey respondent described it, ‘the main information is political bias. This is when news is reported favouring one side politically, which alters the credibility, as they will negatively talk about the other side.’ The broader ideological bias was discussed in focus groups mostly in relation to Brexit and the Israel-Palestine conflict. These discussions included criticism of the otherwise highly trusted BBC as ‘pushing a horrific narrative against the Palestinian people’, as a participant argued. The juxtapositions between Russian and Western media were also mentioned in three of

the discussions as illustrations of how media work within and support different ideological frameworks. One participant, for example, whose husband was Russian, and would therefore consume Russian media, criticised the British coverage of Russia as caricatured. She understood disinformation as framing, in relation to omissions and emphases that reflected broader ideologies:

But that is 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.

Related to political bias, but not expressed in explicit ideological terms, was the perceived relationship of complicity between journalists and politicians. This was mostly seen as the failure of news media to challenge political spin or even politicians' lies. Such comments were extensively made across the diaries, surveys and focus groups in relation to the coverage of COVID-19. One participant in the online diary study, for instance, described his disappointment in television news coverage of the pandemic:

I've stopped watching a lot of the main TV broadcasters' reports as they are letting off the ministers very lightly without properly questioning the misinformation they spout. I much prefer reading online newspapers and online journalists' social media accounts where they can dig deeper and respond/inform people about a certain government statement.

This excerpt echoed other diary entries that expressed frustration about how the news media 'blindly listen to what the government is saying', including information about how safe it was to ease the lockdowns, even before any vaccination was available. Similar points were made in the focus group discussions both in relation to COVID-19 announcements and the EU referendum campaign. In both cases, audiences felt that political claims that were false or distorted were uncritically reproduced by news media, turning journalists into amplifiers of political disinformation.

At the same time, it was acknowledged that this complicit relationship with politicians and the concomitant misinformation it contributed to were not always the outcome of a deliberate effort to mislead or of political bias. Instead, it was described as part of the daily practices of journalists, and a consequence of the limitations that were inherent in the nature of reporting in a cycle of

24/7 news. Some focus group participants talked about how journalists had a ‘very limited attention span’ and they sometimes focused ‘on what’s very hot right now’. One participant talked about the limitations and constraints under which journalism operated:

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.

These observations reflected a rather sophisticated understanding of the challenges inherent in producing accurate and informative reporting. Journalism was not explicitly criticised as biased or untrustworthy. What was pointed out by research participants were the gaps that were sometimes left in reporting, which would undermine the public’s ability to fully comprehend political claims and developments. According to a focus group participant:

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

In these understandings of disinformation, intent was irrelevant. What mattered and was pointed out by some research participants, was that disinformation was something to be expected in news media not only due to deliberate distortions or bias, but because of the information gaps that were inherent in journalistic reporting. The contextual information necessary for people to understand politics was described as missing from daily reporting. Research participants alluded once again to misinformation, as the unintentional spread of confusion and misunderstandings. They also seemed to point out the consequences of what former BBC Westminster Editor, Katy Searle, described as the ‘presumed knowledge’ journalists attributed to the public, as discussed in the previous chapter. Assuming knowledge that the public did not have, our participants believed journalists did not provide them with adequate political background and context.

Navigating Disinformation and Misinformation

Taken together, our findings reinforce the findings of van der Meer & Hamelaers’s (2024) study about the perceived prominence of misinformation among news audiences. If, however, audiences believe it to be so prevalent to

the point that they expect to find it even in mainstream news, how do they deal with it? Tandoc et al. (2018, 2745) have argued that people routinely employ practices to validate information found on social media, what the authors define as ‘audience acts of authentication’. Drawing upon a representative survey in Singapore, the authors distinguished between ‘internal’ (Tandoc et al. 2018, 2753) and ‘external’ acts (2755). Whereas internal practices involved the exercise of personal judgement, along with evaluations of the sources and the characteristics of the message itself, external acts of authentication, as a second step, were only taken when people’s scepticism was not satisfied and entailed resorting both to institutional resources, such as searching on Google, and interpersonal ones, such as asking friends and family or even experts. The authors emphasised the ‘strong social element to what is trusted and the way in which it is authenticated’ (Tandoc et al. 2018, 2758) in these external steps. Similarly, on the basis of focus group discussions in Singapore, Waruwu et al. (2021) highlighted the social aspects of the ways people authenticate information, arguing that they should be conceived as a collective endeavour and, therefore, research should account for the social context of these practices.

Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) have suggested that these audience practices were illustrative of novel ritualised patterns of news consumption consisting of personalised information systems. They reflected people’s attempts to 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 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. However, 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 tactics 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.

Similar practices of verification of information were employed by the research participants across our focus group, survey and news diary audience studies. These varied and included both internal and external processes, as well as passive and active forms of authentication. They can be analytically separated into three broader categories, namely what participants called ‘personal fact-checking’, resorting to trusted sources and cross-referencing across multiple media.

The first category included participants that claimed to actively look for information or conduct their own ‘independent research’ by using further

online sources. This was the most common tactic, with participants claiming to resort to this proactive approach mostly on topics they considered important and that potentially had a personal impact on them, such as elections or COVID-19. The sources used mainly included Google searches, where people would look up information about stories they had read or about the sources mentioned in news stories. Different media were employed for this ‘personal fact-checking’. For some respondents, information on social media, and in particular Twitter (now X), was not to be trusted; for others, Twitter (now X) was used to provide background and additional information for news stories that could not be thoroughly covered in evening news bulletins. For example, one participant in the diary study described how he employed Twitter (now X) during COVID-19:

I used my self-curated list of Twitter academics to identify and follow for sources of useful modelling, and in turn who they recommended. Yes, I am sure I am in a ‘bubble’ but it is science-led.

A less active strategy of authentication was to resort to trusted, or what one participant labelled ‘more reputable’, sources to verify information that would be found either on social media or other news sources. The BBC news and its website were the most common among these ‘reputable’ sources, which reflected representative surveys demonstrating how trust in the BBC was strengthened during the pandemic (Newman et al. 2021). Other broadcasters, such as Sky News, would also be considered to be reputable.

Some participants mentioned that they would cross-reference information on 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 woman, who claimed to be a heavy television news consumer, put it ‘I don’t really believe anything that I read until I’ve heard it from a range of sources, or it’s been fact checked or whatever.’ For other participants, however, cross-referencing information on different news media was an active way of overcoming the inherent political bias of media organisations. It allowed them to get exposed to different ideological viewpoints. Recognising that factual reporting was not necessarily inclusive of all information around a topic, they found it necessary to get news ‘coming in from lots of different sources, because they [media] all seem to have their own take on it and not necessarily the correct or true take’, as one of the older participants explained.

These tactics for dealing with disinformation were not mutually exclusive and participants would occasionally employ a range of them to understand and

interpret the accuracy of news stories. For example, some claimed to both verify information themselves and also talk to friends about it, as a young woman describes in her diary entry, when contemplating the steps she took when she encountered information that she was uncertain about:

Initially I would use other news sources to verify the story, in particular those that I view as more trustworthy so I would initially use the BBC. If I am still unsure as to whether the story is false/misleading I would check with other news stories before discussing it with my friends and family in order to obtain their opinions to help me decide for myself whether I believe it or not.

Other participants 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. Finally, a number of respondents, when asked what they did when they thought a news story was false or misleading, claimed to 'use their common sense' and just 'ignore it'.

We acknowledge that it is important to remain sceptical of self-reported audience practices, as what people actually do is often different from what they claim to do (Prior 2009). Furthermore, it is safe to assume that such proactive approaches to news consumption were not regular and habitual but were employed in relation to topics that were critical to participants' interests. As a young focus group participant that consumed most of his news through social media explained:

I might go and check, if there's significant relation to my life, for example to my safety or my health. [...] If there's something related to something I care about then, yes, I would go and check. I would do thorough research looking for reliable sources. But most of the information I don't follow them, and I don't go and check, simply because I'm not interested.

However, even if self-reported or limited, these practices revealed that news consumption in an environment that news audiences perceive as fraught with disinformation is at times a complex and multilayered process. The news people consume on either legacy or social media constitutes just a starting point, which tends to be further discussed with friends and trusted sources, double-checked with other media and ultimately approached through a generalised prism of scepticism. These 'personalised information systems' (Wagner and Boczkowski 2019, 881) do not necessarily signal the end of news consumption but novel forms of it, whereby journalistic practices are partially performed by audiences

themselves. This was illustrated in the following quotes by two focus group participants that were quite different from each other. A young woman, who was a supporter of the Liberal Democrats, claimed that:

I don't really read a certain newspaper or a certain news organisation, I just read the news for learning about things. If I want to know more about something, then I will end up Googling it and just read about it in general terms. I get most of my information from my Google feed or, literally, Instagram plays a massive part for me as well, or Snapchat and I read the news on there.

She then went on to explain how she appreciated reading the comments on social media, especially Instagram, as she liked to get other people's perspectives and opinions on news stories. One of the older participants and a Labour voter described a similar process of how he would get his daily news:

Reuters gives you factual information to read. A couple of YouTube channels just to get the other side of what the mainstream are saying. Even Yahoo, for example, if I'm working on my laptop, I'll just skim through the headlines and see if there's anything and then just go elsewhere to see if there's any truth in it, see if there's anything else to verify if it's true or false, because you do get a lot of false stuff on the mainstream media and on the online media, so Yahoo, Google, etc.

This was an effective way, he said, of getting useful information, as 'you don't have to sit for an hour watching ITV News to hear it being spun, to entertain, and be told how to think and what to do'. In other words, some audiences actively scanned a range of media in order to make sense of issues they encountered in the news.

Pragmatic Scepticism and News Consumption

The discussion above illustrated the diversity of practices through which audiences consume their news on a daily basis. At the same time, it also indicated that, despite criticism of news media as being complicit in reproducing or failing to challenge disinformation, they were still part of the news consumption habits of the public. Indeed, similar criticisms were voiced both by research participants that heavily relied on mainstream media for their news and those that avoided them. We, therefore, suggest that media criticism does not necessarily entail an explicit lack of trust in news organisations, but instead revealed a pragmatic scepticism in the way audiences approached journalism and the

news. We define this as a form of media engagement that is underlined by the tension between, on one hand, the acceptance of disinformation and misinformation as inevitable in various media and, on the other hand, a reliance on these media as a source of making sense of the world. Pragmatic scepticism, put another way, combines expressions of particularised trust with critical readings of news media both as texts and institutions.

One expression of this pragmatic scepticism was that trust in particular media did not necessarily entail the use of these media. When we asked respondents in our first survey what their main source of news was, the majority of them claimed to mostly consume news online (see Table 2.2 below).

When, however, the same people were asked how much they trusted different news sources, television and radio news were ranked far higher than online news (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.2 The proportion of survey respondents that use different media as news sources (N in brackets)

Newspapers	4% (39)
Online media	53% (567)
Radio	3% (33)
Social media	23% (240)
Television	17% (177)
Other	1% (9)
Total	100% (1,065)

Table 2.3 The proportion of survey respondents who trusted different sources in terms of the news they provided (N in brackets)

	Media in general	TV news	Radio	Newspapers	Online	Social media
A fair amount	56% (599)	59% (631)	59% (626)	38% (408)	45% (483)	15% (160)
A lot	5% (50)	13% (140)	12% (132)	5% (58)	4% (43)	2% (18)
Don't know/unsure	1% (13)	1% (7)	4% (42)	1% (11)	1% (15)	2% (16)
Not at all	4% (42)	5% (56)	4% (38)	12% (129)	7% (70)	34% (360)
Not very much	34% (361)	22% (231)	21% (277)	43% (459)	43% (454)	48% (511)
Total	1,065	1,065	1,065	1,065	1,065	1,065

Even those people we surveyed that consumed their news mainly online (N = 567) still trusted television and radio news more than online and social media sources, as evident in Table 2.4 below:

Table 2.4 The proportion of online news consumers who trusted different sources in terms of the news they provided (N in brackets)

	Media in general	TV news	Radio	Newspapers	Online	Social
A fair amount	57% (323)	60% (340)	60% (339)	41% (232)	55% (314)	8% (45)
A lot	5% (26)	11% (65)	11% (61)	5% (26)	5% (27)	1% (5)
Don't know/unsure	1% (5)	1% (3)	4% (23)	1% (4)	1% (3)	1% (7)
Not at all	4% (22)	5% (30)	4% (21)	12% (69)	4% (21)	41% (235)
Not very much	34% (191)	23% (129)	22% (123)	42% (236)	36% (202)	49% (275)
Total	567	567	567	567	567	567

Tsfati and Capella (2005) explored this paradoxical relationship between media sceptics and their news consumption, which was not necessarily diminished by their lack of trust. They found that scepticism negatively affected news consumption only for those people that did not have a high 'need for cognition' (NFC), namely those that did not need to or did not enjoy thinking about social situations in an integrated way (Tsfati and Cappella 2005, 264). On the contrary, people that 'enjoyed deliberating and solving puzzles' (*ibid.*) continued to consume news media despite their scepticism.

What we have also argued is that scepticism does not necessarily dovetail with full mistrust or rejection of mainstream media. Instead, pragmatic scepticism, as illustrated in our audience studies, was expressed largely as a critical reading of the way news media function and journalists operate editorially. This scepticism consisted, on the one hand, of a pragmatic trust and confidence in specific news sources, despite generally questioning the media (Schwarzenegger 2020). On the other hand, it was expressive of rather sophisticated critical readings and understandings of political news. These readings included an acknowledgement of the political economy of media institutions and the conditions under which journalism operates. Pragmatic scepticism, viewed in this light, was 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.

This approach towards news media was further reflected by the practices audiences employed in order to deal with disinformation, which they understood to be part of their routine experience with news and information. They would behave as news nomads, moving between different platforms and sources, or rely on trusted mainstream sources, especially on topics that concerned them. This further illustrated that audiences' 'need for cognition' (Tsfati and Cappella 2005, 264) or desire to fully comprehend the complexity

of a situation had a temporal dimension. Overall, these practices of cross-referencing and verifying information, expressive of pragmatic scepticism, represented novel ways in which audiences engaged with the news. We have argued that they have not necessarily been driven by a lack of trust in news sources but enabled by the contemporary multi-choice and multi-platform media environment.

Pragmatic Scepticism and Journalistic Legitimacy

In this chapter we discussed how audiences understood disinformation and how these understandings mediate their relationship with news media. We argued that audience definitions of disinformation go beyond so-called ‘fake news’, conspiracy theories or outright political lies. Instead, our research revealed audiences viewed it as an intrinsic part of daily encounters with news media, due to both contemporary politics being dependent on spin, and the inherent and expected journalistic bias. In short, audiences largely conflated disinformation with misinformation and approached it as a normalised and routinised part of news consumption. These findings, however, should not be seen as an alarmist conclusion about the ubiquity of disinformation and its threat to public discourse and democratic politics. Instead, we would make the case that they were illustrative of the pragmatic scepticism through which audiences approach contemporary complex information environments. Our findings indicated that the majority of people do not explicitly mistrust or reject journalism. Instead, they largely acknowledged the political economy of media institutions and the challenging structural conditions under which journalism operates. However, they also expressed trust in specific news sources, despite questioning the media overall. This pragmatic scepticism was further reflected by the practices people employed when consuming news in complex information environments. Audiences purposely moved between different platforms and sources, while also heavily relying on mainstream sources, such as the BBC. These novel practices of engagement were not necessarily driven by a lack of trust but by the affordances of contemporary media technologies.

At the same time, it is important to contemplate these findings in relation to the discussion in the previous chapter and the ways journalists understood disinformation. Chapter 1 illustrated that, according to journalists, disinformation was seen as an external threat to their profession, mostly generated on social media and by politicians, with the public often participating in the process, if not actively perpetuating it. However, what this chapter has revealed is that for audiences not only is disinformation not external to journalism, but it is integral to how they view journalism. News media were seen by audiences

as being complicit with the reproduction of political disinformation by either failing to acknowledge it or amplifying it by reporting on it extensively. This means that, if journalists were to be seen as effectively tackling disinformation, they need to reconsider their own established practices and ways of reporting. More contextual information, for example, and more direct challenges of politicians' claims, were appreciated by audiences in our focus groups, surveys and diaries.

Unlike journalists' fears, however, the gatekeeping role of journalism has not become completely obsolete in contemporary multi-choice news environments. Despite their critical engagement with mainstream media, news audiences still employ them as largely credible sources of information, albeit not exclusively. It is often legacy media that were the first source of information that would be then further explored, unpacked and even challenged by other sources. In the case of crises, as the one illustrated by the global pandemic of COVID-19, it was mainstream media that were the primary source of information for the public. What our research findings illustrated in relation to journalistic legitimacy is that, although journalistic authority was often challenged by audiences, the place of journalism as a source of valuable information was still largely accepted, although it was constantly negotiated. In this negotiation, audiences need to be listened to and understood, rather than dismissed as another challenge good journalism has to tackle in order to survive.

In order to further explore the relationship between news audiences and mainstream news, the next chapter moves on to specifically explore how people made sense of disinformation and misinformation during the pandemic in relation to news reporting. We draw more substantially on our online diary study alongside a systematic analysis of television news reporting during the first months of the pandemic in 2020.

Beyond Disinformation: Interpreting Misinformation from Mainstream Media

The role and influence of disinformation was brought into sharper focus during the height of the coronavirus pandemic with widespread concerns about false and misleading information emanating from a wide range of online sources and across social media networks. It led to the spread of conspiracy theories, such as the pandemic being deliberately created from Chinese laboratories or how people could be instantly cured from COVID-19 by home-made recipes (Mian and Khan 2020). One of the most prominent false claims was that 5G technology played a role in circulating the virus, which led to reports that people were attacking cell phone towers and setting them on fire (Hamilton 2020). The mainstream media covered many of these ‘fake news’ stories, reinforcing long-standing debates about the dangers that can spread from the internet and, most recently, social media. Yet, as Chapters 1 and 2 established, when news coverage focuses on the impact of blatant instances of disinformation it can distract from debates about how the mainstream media can themselves spread misinformation. This is not to downplay the serious impact that false and misleading information about the pandemic can have online and across social media networks, adversely influencing the behaviour or knowledge of millions of people around the world (Aimeur et al. 2023; Gottlieb and Dyer 2020; Shu et al. 2020). But looking through a narrow lens of blatant acts of disinformation ignores a growing body of scholarship that has revealed how mainstream media have helped initiate, spread and reinforce ‘fake news’ from dubious information sources.

The aim of this chapter is to enter into broader debates about the subtle but significant influence mainstream media can have in spreading misinformation by exploring how the public made sense of the coronavirus pandemic. It begins with a review of the limited academic literature, to date, exploring the

role mainstream media have played in disseminating disinformation and misinformation. While debates about public engagement with ‘fake news’ have principally focused on online and social media spreading disinformation, this chapter will put the spotlight on the role played by professional journalists, particularly since the pandemic began. It explores the influence mainstream media have over alternative information sources, considering whether professional journalists exacerbate misunderstandings of fake news when they cover it, or if they effectively debunk it and raise public understanding. Finally, the chapter considers the few studies examining how mainstream news media comparatively reported how governments managed the pandemic. In doing so, we explore whether any misinformation may have been spread by television news coverage of national lockdown measures across different countries.

The academic literature drawn upon at the start of the chapter sets the wider context to understanding our UK-based study, which was designed to explore media coverage about and public understanding of disinformation and misinformation during a critical point in the health crisis. A six-week online news diary with 200 participants was conducted at the start of the pandemic. This explored participants’ knowledge and understanding of COVID-19, as well as how the UK government was managing the crisis, in order to investigate the information environment during that time period (Cushion et al. 2022a). Specifically, we examined whether research participants were able to identify instances of disinformation or not, along with their knowledge about how the UK government handled the crisis compared to other nations.

The chapter then explores the extent to which television news bulletins comparatively reported the UK government’s decisions about managing the pandemic by analysing how often other nations were covered, such as by comparing the implementation of lockdowns cross-nationally. Needless to say, we cannot assume a relationship between what diary participants watched on television news and their understanding of the pandemic. But we can get insights about what information they were exposed to and interpret the informational opportunities television news provided in order to help them understand political decisions domestically and in comparison with other nations. The diary study explored how participants understood how different national governments managed lockdowns, while the content analysis study revealed the extent to which broadcasters reported how foreign countries managed the pandemic, as well as comparative data about COVID-19 related deaths. Since the pandemic was managed differently by many nations, comparing the UK government’s approach with foreign nations would allow news audiences to understand their contrasting political choices as well as helping them know if certain policies were effective or not. For instance, a government’s

performance could be examined by decisions about lockdown measures and the number of people that lost their lives due to the pandemic.

But before our study is introduced, we begin by contextualising debates about the role and impact of mainstream media disseminating both disinformation and misinformation over recent years.

From Disinformation to Misinformation: The Role and Impact of Mainstream Media

Over the last decade, the growing threat of mis/disinformation has been studied from a wide range of perspectives. But the overwhelming focus has been on the influence of alternative online and social media sites rather than mainstream media, including their digital and broadcast platforms. As mentioned in the opening chapters of the book, academic and journalistic debates have largely focused on disinformation in the form of conspiracy theories and fabricated information on news sites, with warnings about their democratic dangers and harm to public safety. But, in doing so, we argued that the potential impact of disinformation – a deliberate intent to deceive people through nefarious sources – had marginalised debates about the importance of mainstream media inadvertently spreading misinformation. After all, many people will be more exposed to dubious or misleading news and claims across broadcast, online, print and social media than highly blatant acts of disinformation across a wide range of sources. Furthermore, as we illustrated in the previous chapter, research around the world, including our own audience studies, has found that audience understandings of ‘fake news’ and misinformation often include mainstream media.

Allen et al.’s (2020) study of exposure to fake news via mainstream media in the US revealed just how far the influence of online and social media was consuming scholarly attention. They found a voluminous set of studies related to misinformation in ‘online news’, ‘Twitter’, ‘Facebook’ and ‘social media’, whereas there was just one related to television news – ‘an article about the unrealistic survival rates of cardiopulmonary resuscitation on TV shows’ (Allen et al. 2020, 5). Allen et al. (2020) argued that this weight of scholarly interest in fake news on digital platforms was inconsistent with the reality of most Americans’ media diets. They pointed out that while Americans increasingly relied on the media in their everyday lives, it was not widely used to access news and current affairs. When news was consumed, many people continued to watch through television programming as opposed to content produced online or across social media networks. Allen et al. (2020, 4) then generously estimated the degree to which Americans were routinely exposed to ‘fake news’, including hyperpartisan media, and what they called ‘outright fraudulent sites’

compared to mainstream media organisations. They concluded that fake news made up a miniscule level of news consumption when compared with the public's reliance on mainstream broadcast and online media. Taken together, they argued that when debating the impact of fake news:

concerns regarding possible threats to democracy should be much broader in scope than deliberately engineered falsehoods circulating on social media. In particular, public ignorance or misunderstanding of important political matters could also arise out of a combination of ... ordinary bias and agenda setting in the mainstream media ... and ... the overall low exposure of many Americans to news content in general, especially in written form. (Allen et al. 2020, 6)

In other words, while the influence of disinformation should not be downplayed across online and social media, nor should the impact of misinformation spreading across mainstream media, particularly on television news, which still represents one of the most widely consumed information sources. This chapter addresses this concern with a study focused on misinformation across television news during the coronavirus pandemic.

Over very recent years, a small but growing body of scholarship has begun to recognise the influence of legacy news media spreading disinformation. For example, a review synthesising this academic literature concluded with a striking observation 'that mainstream news media ... play a significant and important role in the dissemination of fake news' (Tsfati et al. 2020, 168). Rather than ignoring or marginalising fake news emanating from dubious information sources with often limited audience reach, Tsfati et al. (2020) suggested these have moved up the news agenda due to the inherent news value in re-reporting new and novel instances of disinformation. While some news outlets covered fake news with a well-intentioned aim to challenge them, their study found partisan media often reported stories because they reflected their ideological agenda. Taken together, Tsfati et al. (2020) argued that egregious acts of disinformation had become amplified on mainstream media.

By elevating fake news to the mainstream agenda, Tsfati et al.'s (2020) comprehensive review of academic literature concluded that many people were more likely to be exposed to 'fake news' than they would have otherwise encountered. Their assessment of the literature concluded that 'more people learn about these stories from mainstream news media than from social media' (Tsfati et al. 2020, 168). But their review also revealed the degree of influence was moderated by contextual factors such as people's prior knowledge or which news media platform they routinely read, watch or listen to that re-reports 'fake

news'. As the research throughout the book reveals, mainstream media do not just repeat disinformation, they often try and debunk it. It therefore follows that if the public regularly encountered fake news being corrected, it would make them more informed. But, of course, that depends on whether they were previously aware of the instance of fake news being reported. In other words, when mainstream media report disinformation stories do they do more harm than good even if they correct specific instances of 'fake news'? Tsftati et al. (2020) conceded that their review on the literature was based on a relatively limited set of studies, making it hard to draw clear-cut conclusions.

In the wake of false claims circulating about the coronavirus pandemic, in very recent years there has been more research produced about the impact the mainstream media have in misleading audiences. Altay et al. (2023), for example, carried out a two-wave panel survey in Brazil, India and the UK between January and February 2022, examining the influence of news and digital platforms on their knowledge and beliefs in Covid-related misinformation. They explored if people's awareness of false claims grew over time with news use and, if so, whether they believed or rejected them according to their news use. The study also examined participants' broader political knowledge and relationship with their news consumption habits. Overall, Altay et al. (2023) found that while knowledge of specific false claims increased with greater news use, it did not exacerbate beliefs in 'fake news'. While there was some variation between media platforms, the study found evidence of reducing false knowledge among participants and, on some sites, an enhanced understanding of political issues. There were also instances – in online Indian news – where false claims were reported and believed. When Altay et al. (2023) asked survey respondents specific questions about popular Covid-related falsehoods, they discovered that false news was not widely accepted, but there were cross-country differences that related to the broader media and political environment. In Brazil and India, roughly a third of respondents believed the falsehoods were more than slightly accurate, while in the UK just one in ten did. This suggests the character of the news media system – which, in the case of the UK, included a high-quality public service broadcaster – influenced the degree to which people rejected fake news and improved their political knowledge. Altay et al. (2024, 479) concluded by observing that:

Despite a boom in insightful studies on the spread of misinformation across digital platforms and sometimes some news media, we still have much less work on whether, when, and under what conditions using these different sources of information impacts people's awareness of and, most importantly, belief in misinformation.

Not only have scholars tended to have a relatively narrow focus on people being exposed to disinformation beyond mainstream media sources, they have also tended to overlook the role news media may play in disseminating either disinformation intentionally or misinformation unintentionally.

To date, most content-based studies since the start of the coronavirus pandemic have focused on interpreting disinformation online and across social media networks. Few studies have investigated whether mainstream media have inadvertently spread misinformation from either re-reporting instances of ‘fake news’ or by their own coverage of the pandemic, such as reporting on how governments have taken measures to mitigate its impact. For example, a double special issue in *Digital Journalism Studies* and *Journalism Studies* (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen 2022) about the pandemic largely featured articles about how people had responded to news media coverage, or how journalists felt and responded to the health crisis, rather than systematic studies about the output of mainstream news produced during the pandemic. Where studies have been carried out, the findings have pointed to the importance of the context in which reporters covered the health crisis. So, for example, one study of 2,572 pandemic-related items in *The New York Times* in the US and *China Daily* in China revealed how national framing shaped how the pandemic was interpreted (Yu and Liu 2023). It found that each nation reported the other as being affected by the pandemic to a greater extent, comparatively downplaying the impact in their own countries. In doing so, Yu and Liu (2023, 17) warned that ‘Representing the pandemic in one’s own country as less negative and less severe than that in other countries may lead the audience to pride themselves on living in a country with the best containment measures’. In addition, the authors argued that coverage of other nations was viewed as reflecting the political aims of their national governments. For example, US newspaper coverage largely featured Western nations, while China reflected a wider range of countries around the world but in ways that showed the Chinese government pro-actively pursuing international collaboration, with the exception of America. Taken together, Yu and Liu (2023, 1273) concluded that:

While it is impossible for journalism to be hermetically sealed from politics and power plays, the findings of this study show that it is compelling to find ways to prevent news coverage from falling victim to nationalism and political antagonism in times of global health crises.

Since the consequences of the pandemic were downplayed in domestic news coverage, it may have led to misinformation about how foreign nations were handling the health crisis as well as the actions taken by governments to

mitigate its impact. Needless to say, adopting a national domestic lens in political coverage, while marginalising or ignoring foreign affairs, has long been identified in news reporting. It was also identified in our audience studies as a way through which news media reproduce misinformation, as discussed in the previous chapter. But there has been limited academic debate about how this applies to discussions about mainstream media spreading misinformation about political events and issues.

Lwin et al. (2023) explored how newspapers in Singapore corrected COVID-19 misinformation at the start of the pandemic. Their study of 164 articles discovered that false or misleading news about science and health were most prominently covered, including topics like treating COVID-19 or remedies for it, with stories about specific cases. When it came to reporting government policy, Lwin et al. (2023) argued that newspapers quickly corrected any misinformation relating to it because of the close relationship the media have with the state, which they contrasted with the more critical watchdog role in Western media. But when newspapers countered misinformation about health and science, the study found rebuttals were relatively direct and straightforward. According to Lwin et al. (2023, 167): ‘Close collaboration between the press and the state might, however, also come at the expense of having necessary checks and balances, especially in contexts where governance is marked by inefficiency, corruption, and lack of transparency.’ In that sense, the study suggested that mainstream media did not sufficiently scrutinise or challenge the government about its measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Without this accountability, the public may have been misled about the government’s decisions and how successful they have been in tackling the health crisis.

Our UK-based study further develops this line of inquiry by examining how television news reported the UK government’s handling of the pandemic compared to other nations. But before we introduce the study, the chapter first explores how far the public were aware of acts of COVID-19 disinformation in the opening months of the health crisis.

Identifying Fake and Factual News

Our diary study of news audiences was carried at the start of the pandemic (specifically, between 16 April and 27 May 2020). We employed this method to examine public knowledge and attitudes within the information environment they inhabited in this specific time period. After all, it would have been difficult to measure people’s understanding and feelings after events and issues of public debate had long passed. For this chapter, we focus on two specific

periods (16 and 19 April and 11 and 13 May) because they reflected points in time when governments across the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) were making crucial decisions about mitigating the impact of the pandemic. During this period, over eight out of ten of our news diary participants watched television news either every day or most days in the preceding week. This was broadly consistent with Ofcom's (2020a) representative surveys about news consumption in the UK conducted in roughly the same time period. The focus of our questions was on television news reporting, which we examine in the second half of this chapter, comparing participants' responses with television news reporting at the time.

In order to explore whether respondents could recognise any instances of disinformation we asked them if they thought 5G had played a role in spreading COVID-19. Needless to say, this was widely rejected as fake news. When respondents answered the question, we showed them a BBC News headline entitled: 'BBC News – Mast fire probe amid 5G coronavirus claims.' Despite the claims not being explicitly questioned in the BBC news headline – which gave the story some degree of legitimacy – almost all diary respondents refuted any suggestion that the spread of COVID-19 was linked to 5G technology. Many respondents revealed they rejected it as disinformation because of reading, watching or listening to mainstream media coverage, such as BBC News. To further explore whether respondents were susceptible to disinformation, we presented them with examples of fake news and asked if they were true or false. These stories were selected on the basis of false claims reportedly associated with disinformation (Ofcom 2020a). Other factual-based questions about how the UK government had managed the pandemic were also put to participants. The responses from our diary respondents should be interpreted in light of ongoing media coverage at that period of time, which was regularly drawing attention to so-called 'fake news' about COVID-19 (Wright 2020). For example, one survey revealed that many people in the UK had encountered disinformation about the pandemic (Ofcom 2020b). Our interest is in the relationship between this exposure to fake news and public misunderstanding of the pandemic and COVID-19.

Overall, almost all respondents did not believe any of the disinformation presented to them, as Table 3.1 reveals.

But while respondents clearly identified instances of 'fake news', when asked about how the UK government was dealing with the pandemic we identified gaps in public knowledge. For example, three in ten respondents did not know that the UK government had not met its testing targets, while just under that number of respondents did not realise living in more deprived areas of the UK enhanced the likelihood of catching COVID-19. Put simply,

Table 3.1 Diary participants' knowledge about COVID-19 false claims (in May 2020)

	Drinking more water kills the coronavirus.	Gargling with saltwater cures COVID-19.	Increasing use of natural remedies such as colloidal silver, essential oils, garlic, MMS (chlorine dioxide) or vitamin C helps avoid getting COVID-19.
True	2	1	20
False	159	166	127
Don't know	10	4	24
Total	171	171	171

participants easily recognised so-called fake news stories, but did not appear knowledgeable about the UK government's handling of the health crisis.

We decided to further explore people's understanding of the UK government's management of the pandemic compared to other nations around the world. We began by asking them to rank which nation – including the UK – had the highest COVID-19-related death toll, including Iran, South Korea, the UK, France and China. As Table 3.2 shows, over four in ten – 43 per cent – falsely believed China had the highest death rate. Participants might have been influenced by media coverage of China, which reported that the coronavirus began there and spread around the world. But while 4,632 people had reportedly died in China at that point in time, France and the UK had three-to-four-time times more Covid-related casualties. Meanwhile, a third of respondents falsely believed Iran had either the highest or second highest death rate. In fact, Iran recorded just over 300 more deaths than China. It was only South Korea that had fewer recorded deaths than China at that point in time.

Table 3.2 Diary participants' knowledge about the nations who have recorded the most deaths due to COVID-19 (from highest to lowest in April 2020)

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
China	86	27	38	37	12
France	58	51	48	33	10
Iran	19	46	39	61	35
South Korea	0	12	17	37	134
UK	37	64	58	32	9
Total	200	200	200	200	200

While the official records of the Chinese government might be questioned, the UK’s own counting figures have been open to dispute, since they have excluded many deaths in care and nursing homes. Half of our diary participants did not rank the UK as having either the first or second highest death rate among the five nations they were asked about. The consequences of this information gap at this point in the pandemic were that many people had not comprehended the impact of the pandemic in the UK, specifically when compared to other nations. Discombe (2020), for instance, pointed out that ‘There is huge public debate over how the UK is faring in terms of deaths compared to other European nations and the government and its advisers have constantly referred to the “global death comparison” data to defend their position.’ Without widespread knowledge of the UK’s comparative management of the pandemic, people were not equipped with the information to provide an informed interpretation of the UK government’s performance and handling of the pandemic.

How the UK government developed its lockdown measures – whether they were strict or lenient – was another policy we asked respondents to rank compared to other nations. A University of Oxford study (2020) concluded that, in rank order, Italy, Spain, South Korea, the UK and, finally, the US had developed the most stringent lockdown measures. At first glance, participants appeared to appreciate that Italy and Spain pursued the strictest lockdowns at that point in time, with the US pursuing the least robust approach (see Table 3.3).

However, almost half of our diary respondents wrongly believed that South Korea adopted either the first or second most stringent of lockdowns. South Korea did not implement the same type of restrictions around freedom of movement as many European nations, including the UK, but instead tested widely, used GPS tracking and asked those affected to quarantine.

Table 3.3 Diary participants’ knowledge of the countries which implemented the strictest lockdown measures (from highest to lowest in April 2020)

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Italy	104	72	17	7	0
UK	1	13	52	114	20
South Korea	77	21	43	28	31
Spain	17	90	76	16	1
USA	1	4	12	35	148
Total	200	200	200	200	200

A month later we asked respondents once again about the UK’s death toll compared to five other nations. This question was asked because the UK government had just decided to no longer use international comparative death figures in its daily briefing (from 12 May). This decision was criticised by commentators for trying to conceal the government’s relative handling of the pandemic (Jones 2020). Table 3.4 shows the vast majority of participants now correctly ranked the US as having the most COVID-19-related deaths, with two-thirds rightly putting the UK second. Public knowledge had clearly improved over time, with our participants perhaps paying more attention to public debates and media coverage.

Over this period of time, too, journalists were debating how to comparatively measure the different death rates among countries. Comparing the number alone, of course, may simply represent the population of a country rather than the relative scale of casualties. The *Financial Times*’ data journalist, John Burn-Murdoch (2020), argued that the ‘gold-standard for international comparisons of Covid-19 deaths’ was the excess death rate. This calculated the estimated number of deaths expected in that period and compared it to the actual deaths recorded. This allowed proportional comparative differences between nations to be identified. If this measure had been used in May 2020, the UK – not the US – would have had the highest excess death rate in the world. Given that this represented a more accurate measure than the death count alone, we asked participants to rank the excess death rates in the US, UK, Italy, Spain, Netherlands and Belgium. The US was, by far, considered to have the highest excess death rate, with just over one in ten rightly believing the UK had the highest excess death rate (see Table 3.5). Further still, close to four in ten participants considered the UK to have a relatively low excess death rate, since it was widely ranked either fourth, fifth or sixth in the list of six nations.

Table 3.4 Diary respondents’ knowledge about the nations who have recorded the most deaths due to COVID-19 (from highest to lowest in May 2020)

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
China	23	23	13	24	27	61
France	0	0	14	61	64	32
Iran	1	11	11	26	51	71
UK	10	108	38	9	4	2
Spain	3	11	85	45	22	5
USA	134	18	10	6	3	0
Total	171	171	171	171	171	171

Table 3.5 Diary respondents’ knowledge about the nations who have recorded the highest excess deaths due to COVID-19 (from highest to lowest in May 2020)

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Spain	2	6	40	99	19	5
US	125	21	10	9	5	1
Belgium	4	5	5	16	93	44
UK	21	90	34	18	8	4
Netherlands	1	3	4	6	42	115
Italy	18	46	78	23	4	2
Total	171	171	171	171	171	171

The final part of the diary directly asked participants to reflect on how well they thought TV news bulletins had covered the UK death toll in comparison with other nations. Above all, there was widespread mistrust in government communication as well as reporting by journalists. There was scepticism about how the UK was compared to other nations; as one participant put it:

I think originally when they started to announce the deaths on TV, they were only counting people that had died in hospitals which made it very unreliable and unfair. People had started to think the number was lower, but these were only what was being accounted for. Then when they introduced deaths that had come from care homes also it hit home as to how real and how high the deaths were!

While many participants understood that interpreting and communicating statistics was not always straightforward, they felt that comparative figures relating to the UK and other nations could have been more accurately reported. For some respondents, as discussed in the previous chapter, information from the UK government was often re-reported without challenge or interrogation. In effect, this meant that the government was not held to account and the many casualties of COVID-19 were underestimated. At the time the diary was completed, the UK government decided not to continue reporting cross-national death rates in their press briefings (Jones 2020). But many of our participants valued these comparative figures. As one explained:

I think it is fair for TV news bulletins to compare the UK death rate to that of other countries. It enables us to gauge the effect lockdown measures

are having in different countries as they have all implemented lockdown differently and to varying degrees.

In short, many of our diary respondents wanted journalists to not just cover the comparative data around COVID-19-related deaths, they wanted these numbers to be uncovered in order to help scrutinise the UK government's decision-making.

But how far did broadcasters report the pandemic from an internationally comparative perspective? The next section of the chapter systematically examines the amount of domestic and foreign news coverage in TV news during the opening weeks of the pandemic, with a focus on how death rates cross-nationally were reported by different broadcasters.

Reporting the Pandemic from a Domestic and Foreign Perspective

Over four weeks (14 April to 10 May 2020 excluding Easter Monday), all news on the *BBC News at Ten*, *ITV News at Ten*, *Sky News at Ten*, Channel 4 at 7pm and Channel 5 at 5pm was comparatively examined, isolating all COVID-19-related coverage. In total, 1,259 items were analysed, including (with sample size in brackets) 307 from BBC (24.4 per cent), 247 from ITV (19.6 per cent), 190 from Sky News (15.1 per cent), 222 from Channel 4 (17.6 per cent) and 293 from Channel 5 (23.3 per cent). The focus was on the geographical prominence of an item (UK or international), the degree of international comparisons, the inclusion of specific nations, and the visual use of statistics to compare and contrast the death rate of countries.

Across all UK national broadcasters, domestic news made up the vast majority of the coverage related to the pandemic – 86.7 per cent in total – between April and May 2020 (see Table 3.6), leaving just 13.3 per cent about international affairs. However, the BBC stood out for producing the most foreign news about COVID-19, making up almost a fifth of its pandemic coverage. By contrast, for Channel 4's agenda it made up 6.3 per cent of news items and 4.5 per cent on Channel 5.

Foreign news coverage about the pandemic often just focused on a particular country, such as Italy, China or the US. We identified only 8.2 per cent of news items that included a comparison between the UK and another nation. However, these stories largely focused on examining the UK with other countries as opposed to closely examining the records of other nations and comparing them to the UK (see Table 3.7).

Once again, the BBC provided the most news items that included international comparisons with the UK, while Channel 5 produced the least.

Table 3.6 The percentage of international and UK news items (N in brackets)

Bulletin	International	UK	Total
5 at 5pm	4.5% (10)	95.5% (212)	100% (222)
BBC at 10pm	19.5% (60)	80.5% (247)	100% (307)
Channel 4 at 7pm	6.3% (12)	93.7% (178)	100% (190)
ITV at 10pm	16.2% (40)	83.8% (207)	100% (247)
Sky News at 10pm	15.7% (46)	84.3% (247)	100% (293)
Total	13.3% (168)	86.7% (1091)	100% (1259)

Table 3.7 The percentage of UK and international television news items with an international comparison (N in brackets)

Bulletin	UK	International	Total
<i>BBC News at Ten</i>	56.7% (17)	43.3% (13)	100% (30)
<i>ITV News at Ten</i>	71.4% (15)	28.6% (6)	100% (21)
Channel 4 News at 7pm	94.4% (17)	5.6% (1)a	100% (18)
Channel 5 at 5pm	81.8% (9)	18.2% (2)	100% (11)
<i>Sky News at Ten</i>	73.9% (17)	26.1% (6)	100% (23)
Total	72.8% (75)	27.2% (28)	100% (103)

But, overall, most people relying on television news during the start of the pandemic would not have been exposed to reporting that explored how the UK government handled the pandemic compared to other nations around the world.

The lack of comparative reporting was brought into sharper focus when we examined every international comparison and assessed if it was just a brief, in a passing reference or if it had more depth and detail about how a nation was handling the pandemic (see Table 3.8). The BBC provided the most detailed comparative coverage, with close to a quarter of its international news coverage exploring an issue in some depth. While just under a fifth of Channel 5 and ITV news supplied detailed comparative reporting, they also had a relatively small amount of news contrasting national records on managing the pandemic.

We defined detailed comparative reporting as news items where the UK and another nation were explored in some depth, such as comparing their COVID-19-related death tolls. For instance, one BBC news item – which included an on-screen graph – examined the death tolls of Italy and the UK, with its science editor stating that:

Table 3.8 The percentage of television UK-related news items with detailed or passing references to other countries (N in brackets)

Bulletin	Detail	In passing	Total
Sky News at 10pm	10.9% (5)	89.1% (41)	100% (46)
BBC at 10pm	22.5% (9)	77.5% (31)	100% (40)
Channel 4 at 7pm	9.4% (3)	90.6% (29)	100% (32)
Channel 5 at 5pm	19.0% (4)	80.9% (17)	100% (21)
ITV News at 10pm	18.2% (2)	81.8% (9)	100% (11)
Total	15.3% (23)	84.7% (127)	100% (150)

The official numbers confirm that Italy has lost 29,315 people, and the UK now slightly more, at 29,427 (...) There are important differences between the two countries. The UK has more people than Italy, and London is far bigger than any Italian city. On the other hand, the population of Italy is older and more generations live together, which increases the risk to grandparents. (BBC *News at Ten*, 5 May 2020, detailed international comparison)

But, as Table 3.8 reveals, in the majority of news items, broadcasters made relatively brief references to other nations when comparing them to the UK, such as a Channel 5 report about lockdown measures in the UK, France and Germany:

Meanwhile teachers [in the UK] question how social distancing could work in schools: morning and afternoon sessions perhaps, like France and Germany from next week. For the UK so far, there is no road map. There is fear of getting it wrong and U-turning back to lockdown. (Channel 5 News at 5, 27 April, in passing international comparison)

Without unpacking any cross-national differences, overall we found that television news did little to enlighten viewers about the decisions and performances of national governments in handling the pandemic.

To further explore the degree of context and depth of television news coverage of the pandemic, we examined every item that included some kind of an on-screen statistic, such as the latest COVID-19-related death toll (see Table 3.9). We found 17.0 per cent of items featured a visual figure, but there were major differences in the use of statistics between broadcasters.

The BBC supplied the most on-screen statistical references, featuring in just over a quarter – 25.1 per cent – of all news items examined. Channel 5, by contrast, used visual statistics in 8.1 per cent of news items. Some

Table 3.9 The percentage of television news items featuring an on-screen statistic (N in brackets)

Bulletin	N of items featuring at least one visual stats	N of items with no visual stats	Total
5 at 5pm	8.1% (18)	91.9% (204)	100% (222)
BBC at 10pm	25.1% (77)	74.9% (230)	100% (307)
Channel 4 at 7pm	20.0% (38)	80.0% (152)	100% (190)
ITV at 10pm	12.1% (30)	87.8% (217)	100% (247)
Sky News at 10pm	17.4% (51)	82.6% (242)	100% (293)
Total	17.0% (214)	83.0% (1045)	100% (1259)

broadcasters – including the BBC, Channel 4 and Sky News – tended to visually use charts and data sets about the latest data at the start of their news bulletins. This often included key debating points at the time, with the majority of them being about the number of COVID-19-related deaths.

We also explored whether data about casualties related to excess mortality figures or comparisons between the UK and other countries. Approximately 10 per cent of references to mortality conveyed the ‘excess death’ figure, with two thirds not supplying any comparative data with other nations. Sky News was the broadcaster which included the most references to excess death rates and produced some international comparisons with the UK.

Identifying Mainstream Media Misinformation and Raising Public Understanding

While new online and social media platforms have dominated debates about spreading so-called fake news and blatant instances of disinformation (Aïmeur et al. 2023; Gottlieb and Dyer 2020; Hamilton 2020; Shu et al. 2020), this chapter has contributed new evidence about more subtle forms of misinformation emanating from mainstream media that have not been subject to a great deal of empirical inquiry. A small but significant body of scholarship was drawn upon that revealed the role and impact mainstream media have in covering ‘fake news’, as well as evidence about whether they help or hinder countering disinformation (Tsfati et al. 2020). In the previous chapter we illustrated how audiences think of disinformation as inherent in news media and journalistic reporting. The focus on the dangers of disinformation were exacerbated at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, as fake news about health and science, along with conspiracy theorists about the causes and impact of COVID-19, became a focal point for concerns about the spread of false and misleading information

(Hamilton 2020; Mian and Khan 2020). But, as the chapter further explored, far less attention was paid to how mainstream media reported the health crisis, including any misinformation that may have flowed from reporting the measures taken by national governments to handle the crisis. And yet, a comparative understanding of how different countries implemented policies at a time of a global pandemic would allow audiences to make more informed judgments about the decision-making of their own elected governments. After all, they could compare and contrast the effectiveness of different health measures and assess the records of how far each national government kept the public safe from COVID-19.

In order to further explore the role and impact of mainstream media spreading disinformation and misinformation, an original UK-based case study was drawn upon at the start of the pandemic that explored public understanding of COVID-19 and government decision-making, along with an analysis of television news bulletins over a similar time period (Cushion et al. 2022a). We first established that the vast majority of our news diary participants easily spotted ‘fake news’ about the pandemic, with some evidence that they had seen it rebutted on mainstream media. However, many participants had limited knowledge about how the UK government was managing the crisis, most strikingly that the UK’s death rate was far higher than many other nations. When asked specifically about what confused them during the pandemic, many of our participants referred to the UK government’s use of statistics and statements about its handling of the health crisis. Our analysis of television news helped explain why many people lacked any knowledge and understanding of how other countries had experienced the pandemic. We found that the coverage was overwhelmingly domestically focused, with very few comparisons between the UK and other nations. When there were references to specific countries, they tended to be in passing rather than developing any comparative assessments about respective government decisions. Broadcasters did not regularly use any supportive statistical data to visually compare and contrast records – such as different lockdown measures or death rates – among different countries.

Taken together, our findings help explain why many of the research participants were not able to evaluate the UK government’s decisions internationally. While we cannot account for every information source they were exposed to over this period of time, for many people television news was the primary and most trusted medium they used to understand what was happening in the world during the pandemic. Given the reliance on television news, the lack of internationally comparative coverage had consequences, in our view, that go beyond the dangers of disinformation and point towards the

influence of more subtle forms of misinformation. Since many people believed that the UK had a relatively low death rate compared to other nations, it follows that they could have been misinformed about the success of the UK government's policies, including believing – incorrectly – that a stricter lockdown approach was implemented in comparison with different countries. In other words, without the informational background and context to understand the UK's record in comparison with other nations during a global health crisis, it could lead to a misunderstanding about the government's performance and handling of the crisis.

But our findings do not point towards the mainstream media deliberately attempting to deceive audiences or conceal information. Instead, they represent editorial decisions to focus primarily on the UK which then left gaps in people's understanding of the pandemic on a global scale. In doing so, misinformation can spread because audiences may inadvertently be misled about the UK government's performance and its accountability to decision-making. This form of misinformation can emanate from impartial public service broadcasters with high standards in journalism because of editorial decisions to include and exclude information that help audiences make sense of the world.

The next chapter further examines how journalists report political powers and decisions. It considers how media attribute responsibility and accountability for government policies, exploring public (mis)understandings and identifying whether news reporting can better enhance knowledge and, more broadly, the legitimacy of journalism.

(Mis)understanding Government Responsibility

During the coronavirus pandemic, local, regional and national governments took different political decisions about how to mitigate the risks of spreading COVID-19. As with any health crisis, the news media played a critical role in reporting the latest scientific advice designed for public safety, such as covering political decisions about lockdown measures (Lewis et al. 2021). As well as communicating information, reporters had the job of scrutinising government policies, interpreting their effectiveness and, where necessary, challenging any false or misleading claims. In holding power to account, journalists had a difficult job in navigating where political decisions should be attributed. Needless to say, political systems can be complex to understand and interpret across local, national and international contexts. This was openly acknowledged by an OECD (2020) report, which pointed out that ‘Subnational governments – regions and municipalities – are responsible for critical aspects of containment measures, health care, social services, economic development and almost 60% of public investment, putting them at the frontline of crisis management.’ This was because political accountability during the pandemic was not just the responsibility of federal governments around the world, but could relate to national, regional and local bodies.

This chapter advances debates about how the media attribute power and responsibility in news reporting. Since political systems vary in their scope and power, we argue that it is important that the news media fulfil a normative role of informing the public about different rules and regulations that might be relevant to specific regions within a country rather than being uniform across a nation (Christians et al. 2009). By failing to do so, the media might produce public confusion and ultimately spread misinformation. We draw on a case study of how television news attributed who was responsible for the decisions

made by political bodies in the UK during the pandemic, along with how well-informed the public were about judgements made by different legislators (Cushion and Carbis 2024).

The UK's political landscape changed significantly in 1999. The UK government devolved powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in key areas such as health and education. Over time each national government has acquired more powers, but there have been debates about a so-called democratic deficit – particularly in Wales – because many people do not have access to news, information and analysis about the devolved institutions (Cushion et al. 2020). During the pandemic, the devolved nations rose to prominence because they had responsibility for managing lockdowns and COVID-19 related policies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, while the UK government took decisions in England. Against this backdrop, this chapter explores how effectively television news framed who was responsible for the decisions made by political bodies in the UK during the pandemic, along with how well-informed the public were about judgements made by different legislators. In doing so, we draw on two complementary methods – a news diary study that explored people's knowledge about the pandemic over a six-week period during the height of the pandemic, along with a content analysis that examined 181 television news items between March and June 2020 on BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News (Cushion and Carbis 2024).

The chapter begins by drawing on the broader academic literature that has explored how the media have attributed power and responsibility in coverage of politics and public affairs. We then explain that this body of scholarship represents an important but under-researched part of misinformation research that could help develop a more accountable form of journalism which informs the public about the political institutions that govern them. Since there has been limited academic focus on how media report political affairs in devolved and federal political systems, the chapter shows how journalists can open up new opportunities to enhance public understanding by more effectively holding power to account. In doing so, we draw attention to how gaps in reporting policy decisions can inadvertently spread misinformation and offer editorial solutions about how journalistic legitimacy can be enhanced by reporters more accurately reflecting governmental accountability.

Reporting the Attribution of Political Power and Responsibility

The media play a central role in helping the public understand who is responsible for making political decisions. Academic studies have long revealed how the selection and exclusion of different actors and institutions can influence

public knowledge about where accountability and responsibility lie in politics (Kim 2015). Weiner (1995), for example, theorised that responsibility can be interpreted in contradictory ways. It can be attributed to individual behaviour and decision-making, as well as broader societal and institutional forces, such as governments and businesses. Iyengar's (1991) book *Is Anyone Responsible?* examined how US news media attributed power according to individual or institutional reasons. While episodic framing attributed responsibility to either a specific event or an individual act, thematic framing attributed power to institutions, such as governments at different levels. The study discovered journalists favoured episodic framing of political reporting, which in turn had an influence on public understanding. Iyengar's (1991) follow-up analysis with audiences revealed that audiences exposed to episodic framing tended to attribute power to individuals, overlooking the role played by legislators, businesses and other external influences.

However, Iyengar's (1991) analysis of American media and audiences does not necessarily reflect how other national media and political systems operate. There have, for instance, been comparative studies of how politics is reported in the US and other nations, particularly across Europe. Unlike much of American journalism, they have shown that news coverage in other countries spends more time reporting policy issues rather than individual or specific events (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2006). The issue being reported can also shape the framing of responsibility. Kensicki's (2004) study found that newspaper reporting of pollution, poverty and incarceration referenced the role played by the tobacco industry and the government, explicitly connecting their responsibility. Meanwhile, Kim et al.'s (2010) research identified societal factors shaping the coverage of poverty in the US, rather than attributing responsibility to individuals. Meanwhile, Zhang et al.'s (2015) study of Chinese newspaper reporting revealed coverage of depression was linked to wider social forces. Feezell et al. (2019) have shown how audiences can interpret episodic and thematic framing differently according to the issue being reported. They explored the response of audiences to media coverage of poverty, which has tended to be reported by episodic rather than thematic framing. Their survey of Americans broadly found audiences believed that responsibility lay to a greater extent with individual behaviour rather than wider social influences. However, on the issue of religious radicalism audiences did not respond in a uniform way, partly due to personal perceptions of individual-level beliefs towards Muslim Americans. Taken together, the evidence from studies across several nations is that specific issues and actors influence how the media report political responsibility, as well as how audiences interpret coverage.

In comparing how news media report responsibility and accountability, it is important to highlight the long-held influence of different media and political systems shaping coverage. Political powers and governance can operate in unique ways locally, nationally and internationally, and vary among countries. From a US context, Deli Carpini et al. (1994) examined how well informed citizens were about state politics and government across different parts of Virginia. When they examined people's knowledge in Richmond, the state capital, they discovered that local media served people well with political reporting, but in the metropolitan area of Washington coverage was fairly minimal. In doing so, they argued:

citizens living outside of state capitals, and especially those living in areas that border other states, are less informed about state politics than they would otherwise be. Despite the increasing importance of state politics, news coverage of state government and politics varies widely in amount and quality, and is generally less extensive and detailed than coverage of local and national government. (Delli Carpini et al. 1994, 453)

In other words, media systems help shape public understanding of politics, decision-making and governance.

In the UK, the media system is dominated by UK-wide news providers that serve all four nations, including England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Cushion and Thomas 2022). Despite devolution, many people continue to rely on network broadcast media rather than just turning to national media in their respective devolved nations. Since England is by far the most populous nation, it is often the centre of attention. It is also the home of the UK government which – despite political devolution in 1999 – continues to hold significant reserved matters in key areas like controlling the public's finances, dealing with foreign affairs and immigration issues. Given this political and media context, the devolved institutions often struggle to gain media attention, limiting public access to information and analysis about their policies, let alone their political responsibilities.

However, the main UK broadcasters, in particular the BBC, have public service obligations that require them to reflect the nations' and devolved politics. Whether the BBC and other broadcasters have met these conditions has been the subject of several systematic reviews. The BBC Trust, which regulated the BBC up until 2017, carried out four reviews of news media between 2008 and 2016. Taken together, it concluded that 'The Trust believes that, to remain fully effective as a network news broadcaster in an increasingly devolved UK, the BBC's journalism must increasingly examine, understand,

illuminate and contrast the different challenges and priorities of each of the four Nations' (BBC Trust 2016, 4). In 2022, an Ofcom-commissioned study examined all the major UK network news providers across their nightly news bulletins and online coverage (Cushion and Thomas 2022). Due to the media focus on managing the pandemic, it found a high proportion – approximately 40 per cent – of all items were relevant to devolution because issues such as lockdowns in schools and workplaces were the responsibility of governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In order to assess the accuracy of reporting political responsibility, both the BBC Trust and Ofcom studies informing the reviews measured the extent to which broadcasters reported the geographical relevance of stories to specific nations (BBC Trust 2016; Cushion and Thomas 2022). In all the studies, the BBC news provided the most accurate signposting of the different nations online and on television news compared to other broadcasters. However, it was concluded that all news providers had missed opportunities for journalists to provide greater clarity about devolved differences. Less attention has been paid to how much audiences understand media coverage of devolution and where specifically journalists can fill in gaps in public knowledge. How the lockdowns were reported and how much the public understood news coverage represents an important case study about framing political responsibility and misinformation in news reporting.

After all, the coronavirus pandemic put devolution to the fore of UK politics, demonstrating the importance of accurately reporting the UK's political system during a health crisis. Without doing so, the public could be misinformed about the health measures being taken and not hold the correct government accountable for their decision-making. As we now explore, at the start of the pandemic our news diary study revealed a lack of public knowledge about the role the devolved administrations were playing in managing the lockdown.

News Diary Knowledge of Devolution and Confidence in News Coverage

In order to explore public knowledge about political responsibility, we examined how well informed people were about the policy responsibilities of the UK government and Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish devolved governments at the start of the pandemic. This was achieved through our news diary study, which examined their understanding of the coronavirus pandemic over six weeks in the beginning of the health crisis (16 April to 27 May 2020). As already explained, our respondents were asked to complete two diary entries

per week (twelve in total) on a range of issues related to their understanding and knowledge about the pandemic. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on entries 8 and 9 between 7 and 14 May 2020, which explored participants' attitudes towards local news and specifically their understanding of who was responsible for health measures that affected them during the pandemic. We selected this time period because it was at a critical point when decisions by the UK government, which applied to England only, began to diverge further from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. On 10 May, for example, the UK prime minister announced new plans to allow people in England to exercise more freely, to consider opening schools from 1 June and to change health guidance from 'staying home' to 'staying alert'. Within a couple of days of these measures being announced, our diary was able to explore people's knowledge about whether they understood the policies related to England only or not.

In the weeks where we examined people's knowledge about UK and devolved government decision making, 170 and 164 participants submitted diary entries. At this point in time, about one in five participants were from the devolved nations outside of England. At the start of the diaries and just a few days before entry 8 (in mid-May), we asked respondents about their media consumption habits, including how often they watched the news. We found in entry 1 that 159 respondents – eight in ten in total – watched TV news every day or most days in the last week. When asked which TV news bulletins they most regularly watched and trusted, seven out of ten people chose the BBC. By entry 7, almost six in ten respondents watched TV every day or most days in the last week. Once again, the BBC was the most consumed TV news bulletin, with half of the respondents watching it every day or most days in the last week. Our respondents' news consumption habits were broadly in line with representative surveys conducted throughout this period that showed television news was the biggest source of news during the pandemic, with the BBC reaching the most people (Ofcom 2020c). Our sample represented a demographic mix of the population who routinely tuned into UK television news bulletins, notably the BBC, during the pandemic. Overall, our diary study was able to examine how well informed people were who regularly tuned into television news at a unique point in time when different health measures were being pursued across the four administrations of the UK.

Between 7 and 10 May, we asked our respondents who was in charge of the UK's lockdown measures, requiring them to choose either the UK government, the devolved administrations, the European Union or the World Health organisation. We found that a majority – just over half the sample – incorrectly

said the UK government, with just under half correctly stating the UK government and devolved administrations. Given the low level of public knowledge about who had responsibility for making decisions about the lockdown affecting their lives, our next entry – between 11 and 15 May – asked a series of more detailed follow-up questions about who had relevant powers in the UK. On 10 May the prime minister announced specific measures in England about being able to exercise more freely, changing the health guidance from ‘staying home’ to ‘staying alert’ and floating the idea that schools might open from June. Given that this announcement was widely reported by the news media and that we had previously asked participants about who had responsibility for making lockdown decisions across the UK – therefore priming them about this issue – we anticipated that the diary entries would display some reasonable knowledge about political power across the nations. We did find that most participants – eight in ten – realised schools may open from 1 June in England, while three in four knew they could meet one other person in a park or public place in England.

But there was some confusion about how and where they could exercise across the UK. The new measures allowed people in England to use their car to exercise, but six in ten participants did not know that in Scotland and Wales they had to remain in their local environment. We found that nearly a quarter of respondents thought rules about exercising were UK-wide. Part of the UK government’s announcement included its guidance to ‘stay alert’ rather than ‘stay home’ for people in England. An image displaying this new guidance was emblazoned on lecterns in the days after the prime minister’s statement and widely shared on social media. But in the other nations – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – the message to stay home remained unchanged. Despite the shift in messaging, we found only eleven in twenty respondents correctly identified the advert as being relevant to England only. Almost a third thought it was UK-wide government guidance.

Finally, we asked participants if they felt confident that the media was giving them the correct information about decisions that affected their life and community during the pandemic. We received a wide range of reactions, including references to unclear government messaging rather than news reporting being responsible for their confusion. As one participant put it: ‘The government have been very vague which has led to a lot of confusion, but the media are only reporting on the information they have been given by the government.’ While many respondents acknowledged that journalists tried to be informative, they also said they could do more to reflect their local environments. These were notably among those living outside England. As one respondent pointed out: ‘I live in Wales, the information provided by the

news is mainly for England and the rules which apply to those in England and not much information is given about Wales.’ One participant referenced stories about people in England travelling to Wales illegally because they were not aware that across the border there were laws asking people to stay within five miles of their home. It was further suggested this was due to the news media emphasis on England rather than the devolved nations:

I believe that the main news stories are about England only with Scotland, Wales and NI added as an afterthought. The number of stories regarding people in England trying to come to Wales for day trips or to book holidays confirms this as it would seem there are many people in England who have no idea that England has different rules to Wales, Scotland and NI.

Many participants admitted they struggled to understand the UK’s devolved powers. One said: ‘I am finding it confusing with there being different rules for different areas of the UK so I am not sure if the news I am receiving is totally correct.’ Another observed that journalists could more effectively communicate who had responsibility for different rules: ‘Distinguishing between rules for different parts of the UK has been difficult, with reporters sometimes omitting which rules apply where. These rules should be stated explicitly as to who they apply to.’

We now examine how well broadcasters attributed responsibility for political decisions made about the UK’s lockdown measures.

Reporting Which National Government is Responsible for Policy Decisions

In the early months of the pandemic, we examined five key policy announcements made by the UK government about the health guidance the public should follow. When the first major lockdown decision was announced by the UK prime minister on 23 March 2020, it reflected a four-nation agreement between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Over time, the governments of each nation took different approaches to managing the risks associated with the public mixing and spreading COVID-19. Our content analysis of coverage in these five selected periods was designed to assess the clarity in which the UK’s main evening television news bulletins communicated the political responsibilities of governmental decisions across the four nations. Television news was one of the most widely consumed and trusted sources of information throughout the pandemic. For example, in the early weeks of the pandemic – when the public were the most attentive to the

health crisis – the BBC 6pm and 10pm bulletins alone attracted audiences of 20 million.

We examined UK national bulletins – including the BBC *News at Ten*, ITV *News at Ten*, Sky *News at Ten*, Channel 4 at 7pm and Channel 5 at 5pm – on 23 March, 16 April, 11 May, 28 May and 10 June in 2020 (Cushion and Carbis 2024). Each date was chosen because of reported major UK government announcements about health measures which affected either the whole of the UK or England only. In total, 181 items were examined (35 on BBC News, 30 on ITV, 40 on Sky News, 44 on Channel 4 and 32 on Channel 5). Our main analytical framework centred on whether broadcasters attributed the relevant policy responsibilities to each government across the four nation(s). This included assessing if journalists referenced the whole of the UK, England, Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland. After recoding 10 per cent of the sample, there was a high level of agreement with all the content analysis variables (Cushion and Carbis 2024).

In coverage of all five announcements, our analysis revealed that in March and April 2020 there were few references to the four nations of the UK in television news coverage (see Table 4.1). Instead, the most common reference was to the UK generally, making up 58.6 per cent of all geographical references in television news coverage in March 2020 alone. By reporting the lockdown through the prism of the UK, network coverage failed to acknowledge the four-nation agreement to adopt the same health measures between the governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Or, put more bluntly, devolution was invisible at the start of the pandemic when the public were most attentive to the news and the reporting of health guidance. The headlines of coverage in this phase focused on the prime minister's statement, which did not acknowledge the role of the devolved governments either. For instance, on 23 March the BBC News headline read: 'The Prime Minister announces the toughest restrictions on our way of life in living memory.' A later report went on to add that: 'Boris Johnson and his advisors ... felt they had no choice but to have a much more drastic approach.' Channel 5 likewise reported that the 'Government will be ready to go further', while a Channel 4 anchor put it to a guest that 'The population, citizens of the UK, want the Government to go further; do you agree with that?' In other words, the first major lockdown was narrowly framed as a UK-government decision rather than a four-nation agreement among four governments serving their respective nations.

However, in May and June broadcasters started to reflect and contrast the lockdown measures across the nations, with fewer references to the UK generally (see Table 4.1). For instance, when the UK government

Table 4.1 The percentage of geographical references in UK television news coverage of the major lockdown announcements (N in brackets)

Dates	With UK	Without UK	Total	With England	Without England	Total	With Scotland	Without Scotland	Total
23 March	58.6% (34)	41.4% (24)	100% (58)	12.1% (7)	87.9% (51)	100% (58)	13.8% (8)	86.2% (50)	100% (58)
16 April	37.5% (9)	62.5% (15)	100% (24)	8.3% (2)	91.7% (22)	100% (24)	4.2% (1)	95.8% (23)	100% (24)
11 May	44.8% (26)	55.2% (32)	100% (58)	67.2% (39)	32.8% (19)	100% (58)	37.9% (22)	62.1% (36)	100% (58)
28 May	30.8% (8)	69.2% (18)	100% (26)	80.8% (21)	19.2% (5)	100% (26)	30.8% (8)	69.2% (18)	100% (26)
10 June	46.7% (7)	53.3% (8)	100% (15)	80% (12)	20% (3)	100% (15)	/	100% (15)	100% (15)
Total	46.4% (84)	53.6% (97)	100% (181)	44.8% (81)	55.2% (100)	100% (181)	21.5% (39)	78.5% (142)	100% (181)

Dates	With Wales	Without Wales	Total	With NI	Without NI	Total
23 March	13.8% (8)	86.2% (50)	100% (58)	5.2% (3)	94.8% (55)	100% (58)
16 April	4.2% (1)	95.8% (23)	100% (24)	4.2% (1)	95.8% (23)	100% (24)
11 May	37.9% (22)	62.1% (36)	100% (58)	25.9% (15)	74.1% (43)	100% (58)
28 May	15.4% (4)	84.6% (22)	100% (26)	11.5% (3)	88.5% (23)	100% (26)
10 June	13.3% (2)	86.7% (13)	100% (15)	/	100% (15)	100% (15)
Total	20.4% (37)	79.6% (144)	100% (181)	12.2% (22)	87.8% (159)	100% (181)

announced up to six people could meet in a public place in England, over two thirds of all items referenced England. Similarly, when the UK government announced new rules about support bubbles and schools opening, over eight in ten items specifically mentioned England. But while England was namechecked, it was not spelt out that the changes did not relate to either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. By not referencing the responsibilities of the devolved nations, once again their powers were often invisible in television news coverage. For example, Channel 5 contrasted the health measures across the UK in one headline: ‘The lockdown in England is easing ... the rules are now different across the UK with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland sticking to the ‘stay at home’ message’. However, Table 4.2 shows there was some variation among broadcasters in how regularly one or more of the four nations were namechecked. Above all, the BBC made more specific references to the four nations compared to commercial television news bulletins.

To provide an overall assessment about how clearly the attribution of political powers was communicated by broadcasters, we assessed whether any geographical reference was supplied, if there was an implicit reference (name-checking England), or if there was an explicit reference to one of the devolved nations (see Table 4.3). We found that in March and April 75.9 per cent and 95.8 per cent of news items respectively did not attribute powers to a specific nation. For example, Channel 4 referenced the government generally without reference to the UK or England: ‘Now life under lockdown will continue for at least another three weeks as the government detailed the five things that will need to change before measures can be relaxed’ (Channel 4, 16 April 2020).

By contrast, in two separate announcements in May 2020 over a third of news items – 37.9 per cent and 34.6 per cent respectively – included explicit references to devolution. For instance, ITV News on 28 May explicitly spelt out the differences at this time with supporting on-screen graphics:

New rules mean that from Monday people in England will be able to gather in groups of up to six people at once. That must be outdoors, but can, for the first time, include private gardens. And social distancing rules will still apply, so different households must remain at least 2 metres apart at all times. Scotland announced its own easing will begin from tomorrow, up to eight people across two households can meet outdoors. In Wales, an announcement on loosening restrictions is expected tomorrow. While Northern Ireland plans to enter the second phase of lifting its lockdown a week on Monday.

Table 4.2 The percentage of geographical references in UK television news coverage of the major lockdown announcements (N in brackets)

Channel	With UK	Without UK	Total	With England	Without England	Total	With Scotland	Without Scotland	Total
BBC	62.9% (22)	37.1% (13)	100% (35)	51.4% (18)	48.6% (17)	100% (35)	25.7% (9)	74.3% (26)	100% (35)
ITV	26.7% (8)	73.3% (22)	100% (30)	40% (12)	60% (18)	100% (30)	20% (6)	80% (24)	100% (30)
Sky	45% (18)	55% (22)	100% (40)	32.5% (13)	67.5% (27)	100% (40)	17.5% (7)	82.5% (33)	100% (40)
Channel 4	50% (22)	50% (22)	100% (44)	47.7% (21)	52.3% (23)	100% (44)	25% (11)	75% (33)	100% (44)
Channel 5	43.7% (14)	56.3% (18)	100% (32)	53.1% (17)	46.9% (15)	100% (32)	18.7% (6)	81.3% (26)	100 % (32)
Total	46.4% (84)	53.6% (97)	100% (181)	44.8% (81)	55.2% (100)	100% (181)	21.5% (39)	78.5% (142)	100% (181)

Channel	With Wales	Without Wales	Total	With NI	Without NI	Total
BBC	28.6% (10)	71.4% (25)	100% (35)	25.7% (9)	74.3% (26)	100% (35)
ITV	20% (6)	80% (24)	100% (30)	6.7% (2)	93.3% (28)	100% (30)
Sky	5% (2)	95% (38)	100% (40)	5% (2)	95% (38)	100% (40)
Channel 4	22.7% (10)	77.3% (34)	100% (44)	9.1% (4)	90.9% (40)	100% (44)
Channel 5	28.1% (9)	71.9% (23)	100% (32)	15.6% (5)	84.4% (27)	100% (32)
Total	20.4% (37)	79.6% (144)	100% (181)	12.2% (22)	87.8% (159)	100% (181)

Table 4.3 The percentage of implicit, explicit or no references to devolution in UK television news coverage of the major lockdown announcements (N in brackets)

Dates	Percentage of items with just an implicit reference to devolution	Percentage of items with an explicit reference to devolution	Percentage of items with no reference to devolution	Total
23 March	8.6% (5)	15.5% (9)	75.9% (44)	100% (58)
16 April	4.2% (1)	/	95.8% (23)	100% (24)
11 May	25.9% (15)	37.9% (22)	36.2% (21)	100% (58)
28 May	46.2% (12)	34.6% (9)	19.2% (5)	100% (26)
10 June	66.7% (10)	13.3% (2)	20% (3)	100% (15)
Total	23.8% (43)	23.2% (42)	53% (96)	100% (181)

Despite the increase in explicit references in May 2020, a month later broadcasters tended to attribute powers implicitly namechecking England without referencing the irrelevance to the devolved nations. For example, a Channel 5 headline on 10 June read: ‘The Prime Minister defends the schools’ U-turn in England; zoos and safari parks will open on Monday, but plans to reopen schools are on hold. The Labour leader says the government needs to get a grip.’ By not stating that the opening up of schools, zoos and safaris will not apply to either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, it could lead to public misunderstanding since viewers may not have been aware of this policy distinction. Indeed, our diary study during this period suggested that this distinction was not always picked up, leading to potential misinformation about which nation was responsible for managing the pandemic.

Enhancing Journalistic Attribution to Political Powers

This chapter explored how well informed the public were about many conflicting health measures at the start of the pandemic and assessed how well broadcasters rose to the challenge of attributing power to the relevant UK political bodies in television news coverage. We found many of our diary participants were confused about which government had responsibility over the different lockdown measures during the height of the pandemic. Moreover, many of them revealed they were not confident in the news media accurately informing them about the powers of the four nations and wanted journalists to explain the different policy responsibilities across the UK’s devolved political system.

Our systematic analysis of television news coverage after major UK government announcements in March and April 2020 discovered that broadcasters did not regularly reference the four nations (Cushion and Carbis 2024). Instead, the focus was on decisions made by the UK government or prime minister, rather than explaining it was a four-nation agreement that had legislated for the lockdown measures. In May and June coverage began to reflect differences between the nations, but the focus still tended to be on England rather than namechecking the relevance of all four nations. By not explicitly signalling the (ir)relevance to specific nations, reporting could potentially lead to misinformation in relation to power responsibilities. Our diary study, for example, suggested that many viewers did not pick up on geographical references about the attribution of powers and were confused about how the rules were applied between the four nations. As journalists did not regularly signpost the relevance of health measures to audiences across the UK, viewers may not have understood where powers applied across the four nations. While we cannot claim cause and effect, our audience study suggested many viewers were not just confused but misinformed about the relevance of lockdown measures across the UK.

Our case study about how television news attributed responsibility to political decisions advances wider debates about how mainstream media can inadvertently spread misinformation. As the chapter began exploring, scholars have examined the attribution of responsibility in news reporting in different ways. Above all, scholarship has found that the ways media frame attribution matters (Iyengar 1991; Kim 2015). These framing effects can lead to audiences often (mis)interpreting coverage in different ways, demonstrating the profound impact journalistic choices can have on public understanding. As Starr and Oxlad (2021, 703–4) put it when they reflected on their study of how people attributed responsibility for cancer in media coverage:

These findings highlight the importance of news organisations understanding the power they wield regarding perceptions of responsibility. News organisations need to be aware of the potential for creating an imbalance of blame and responsibility, depending on how they tell a story.

When examining news reporting and exploring media influence, we would argue that empirical studies need to develop more effective ways of analysing responsibility framing and measuring people's responses to it. In our view, more research is needed to identify how audiences respond to the attribution of power across different layers of government. Put simply, how journalists frame the attribution of power and responsibility can help counter misinformation and advance public knowledge.

The next chapter focuses in micro detail on how journalists counter misinformation across different media platforms and types of news. In doing so, it considers how the application of impartiality in reporting election campaigns in different national contexts can both prevent as well as perpetuate false, misleading or vague political claims.

Comparing the Impartiality of Cross-National and Cross-Platform Fact-Checking

When BBC sports presenter, Gary Lineker, tweeted criticism of the UK government's migration policy in 2023 – conflating the language ministers used with that of Nazi Germany – it prompted an existential crisis at the world's best-known public service broadcaster. The story dominated the news agenda over the following week, leading to Lineker being forced off air and causing an internal staff strike because of the BBC's treatment of the former footballer. The heated and extensive reaction to a social media post was not just a product of the BBC's influence and significance in the UK and beyond. It was motivated by vocal critics questioning its political independence and impartiality, particularly right-wing politicians and commercial media who have struggled – historically – to compete with the BBC's editorial power and reach. The public service broadcaster has long claimed that impartiality is central to its identity not just in news and current affairs programming, but across every facet of its output, including the social media accounts of its high-profile employees. When just a sports presenter – not even a news journalist – was seen to have breached its impartiality, BBC management responded immediately to defend the public service broadcaster from accusations of political bias.

The Lineker story represents a wider pattern of attacks over recent years on the impartiality of public service broadcasters around the world. Holtz-Bacha (2021), for example, has examined how European public service media have become a moving target of right-wing political populists. In doing so, she observed that 'criticising ... [public service] media is on politicians' daily agenda' and that 'allegations of biased and unbalanced reporting directed at the [public service] media are widespread in the political field and usually culminate in the run-up to an election' (Holtz-Bacha 2021, 222). Likewise,

attacks on Australia's main public service broadcaster – ABC – have intensified over recent years, with politicians using social media to allege bias or question its journalistic standards (Wright 2021). Needless to say, this has long been evidenced in the US, where public broadcasters, such as PBS and NPR, have been singled out by right-wing media and the conservative political class for producing a far left-wing agenda even when its output was considered free from partisanship by independent analysis and American audiences (Pickard 2020; Rauch 2021).

But while public service broadcasters now routinely face criticism about their impartiality, this tends to focus on isolated moments – a provocative tweet by a high-profile presenter, an antagonistic interview with a particular politician or a television programme tackling a contentious issue – rather than being based on a systematic and rigorous analysis of output over time. For example, the BBC's internally commissioned thematic reviews over recent years – designed to raise questions about its impartiality in coverage such as tax and spending – have largely been based on anecdotal examples rather than a thorough and comprehensive assessment of content (Blastland and Dilnot 2022). And, as this chapter will explore, even when scholars have examined the impartiality of journalism, they often centre on interpreting the broad political balance of coverage – the allocation of time to parties during an election campaign (Cushion and Thomas 2018), for instance – rather than developing a nuanced understanding of the intricacies behind the editorial judgements driving impartial reporting. In the case of the BBC and UK broadcast media specifically, they have always had to abide by 'due impartiality' requirements that police the nature of their journalism (Cushion 2015).

As the episode with Lineker's controversial tweet revealed, the BBC is highly sensitive about its impartiality and puts it at the heart of its public service credentials. Its latest editorial guidelines boldly assert that 'The BBC is committed to achieving due impartiality in all its output and services including broadcast and online.' In the BBC's 2022 'Impartiality plan' – designed to further enhance the public service broadcaster's impartiality – the director general emphatically re-affirmed its editorial ambitions, which forms its relationship with the public (BBC 2022). He stated that 'The BBC is consistently rated as the most trusted news source by audiences – but we take nothing for granted. That's why ensuring extraordinarily high standards of impartiality across our content is vital' (BBC 2022). In practice, this means impartiality should be applied with the same robustness in *all* its news coverage, such as in domestic and international affairs, as well as in journalism produced across different media platforms, programmes and websites. This chapter will empirically assess whether the BBC's application of 'due impartiality' is consist-

ently applied by interrogating how the broadcaster deals with political claims. In doing so, we will ultimately question how impartiality relates to the reporting of disinformation, and how it helps challenge or perpetuate it. Specifically, we draw on a forensic study that was designed to evaluate the degree of rigour that is applied to fact-checking political statements in UK (domestic) and US (foreign) election campaigns across BBC television news bulletins, online news and dedicated fact-checking websites (Hughes et al. 2023).

The UK's bespoke 'due impartiality' guidelines for broadcasters may differ to how impartial journalism, or even political balance and objectivity, have been constructed and applied by news organisations around the world (Barkho 2012). As this chapter will explore, unlike crude definitions of journalistic impartiality, the caveat of 'due' allows journalists to exercise editorial discretion and judgement about how news is reported. This includes making assessments about the veracity of claims made by competing sides of a story, which – as the opening chapters of the book established – is central to fact-checking journalism. We develop the first ever cross-national assessment of fact-checking reporting during the US and UK elections. This involved a close textual analysis of how far political claims were scrutinised by BBC News during the 2019 UK general election and the 2020 US presidential election (Hughes et al. 2023). The analysis allowed us to explore how due impartiality shaped the ways political disinformation was dealt with.

The chapter begins by contextualising how impartiality in journalism is applied. It then specifically considers the BBC's 'due impartiality' guidelines and how they apply to its journalism across media platforms and different online news sites, and when reporting domestic and international issues. We draw upon a systematic content analysis study of almost 1,000 journalistic interactions (Hughes et al 2023) with claims made by the four main party leaders during the 2019 UK and 2020 US election campaigns (Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, and Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the US). This involved assessing whether journalists corrected any instances of dubious statements made by politicians.

Taken together, this chapter develops one of the most forensic studies to date about how fact-checking is comparatively applied to counter false and misleading claims (Hughes et al. 2023). In doing so, it considers the influence of the UK's 'due impartiality' guidelines in the editorial choices and judgements of news media when dealing with claims and counterclaims. The study was designed to better understand how misinformation was countered in routine reporting through an original cross-media content analysis study of domestic and foreign news reporting. As we suggest throughout the chapter, the findings highlight the value of fact-checking in promoting journalistic

legitimacy at a time when political misinformation can confuse audiences and undermine the integrity of democratic debates.

Understanding the Impartiality of BBC Fact-Checking Cross-Nationally

The concepts of impartiality, balance and objectivity have long been applied by news organisations around the world (Barkho 2012). They were developed as editorial practices to professionalise journalism by mitigating the risk of bias and partisan reporting (Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1972). Needless to say, not all editors and journalists subscribe to this perspective. After all, partisan and campaigning forms of journalism can effectively hold power to account and champion causes in the public interest. And, as this section will explore, it should not be considered axiomatic that following impartial, balanced or objective journalism will deliver high standards of journalism that effectively counters misinformation.

But, across many different countries, either governments or media organisations have created editorial codes that attempt to ensure that news is impartial, objective or balanced (Barkho 2012; Sambrook 2012). While these concepts have often been used interchangeably, they represent conflicting journalistic goals and, in practice, can be applied differently between media and political systems (Hopmann et al. 2011). For example, being impartial, in theory, means not taking a position on a debate, while representing conflicting perspectives to an issue or event reported. By contrast, objectivity assumes there is a ‘truth’ to a story even when it may be contentious and difficult to establish what is – and is not – accurate. Meanwhile, balanced journalism broadly and sometimes crudely reflects granting equal time to opposing positions on a story or issue being reported. Yet, few empirical studies have systematically examined how each concept has been applied in different political contexts and across media platforms. Hoppman et al. (2011) conducted a review of how political balance was conceptually defined and interpreted by different scholars. They found it was operationalised in different ways because of the diverse characteristics of competing political and media systems. For example, in countries with a two-party system often political balance was based on contrasting the proportion of time and nature of election coverage granted to each party, rather than a broader reflection of political debates during a campaign. By contrast, in nations with multi-party systems political balance was not measured as crudely, with the types of issues and their associations with particular parties used to assess coverage during an election campaign.

The concept of impartiality incorporates political balance because it includes reflecting and representing different sides of a story or issue. Ahead of

an election, for example, allocating broadly equal time to parties has historically represented an impartial approach to covering a campaign (Cushion and Thomas 2018). But constructing political balance as impartial journalism without interpreting the relative weights of competing positions can have implications for spreading rather than countering misinformation. It can create what is known as ‘false balance’, where opposing positions shape the reporting of a story despite the fact that one side of the debate is far more credible than the other. This is most commonly associated with the reporting of climate change, when those who contest the science have appeared as a counterpoint to environmentalists despite the overwhelming scientific consensus that it is an urgent and man-made problem that needs addressing.

Another criticism of constructing balance as impartiality has focused on adopting a ‘he said, she said’ approach to political reporting (Wahl Jorgensen et al. 2017), which was introduced in Chapter 1. This is voiced most vociferously in two-party political systems when journalists cover the competing views of the main parties, but do not always uncover whether their respective claims were accurate or convincing. Without a journalist acting as a referee in a political dispute, reporting can allow misinformation to filter through because vague or even misleading claims may go uncontested. In a study examining television news coverage of the 2016 European Union Referendum campaign, for example, Cushion and Lewis (2017) found that Leave and Remain voices were broadly balanced by the UK’s leading broadcasters. But coverage often ended up as a statistical tit-for-tat between competing positions, with rival campaigners trading claims about the relative benefits and pitfalls of remaining or leaving the European Union without any journalistic challenge. This was well articulated by Emily Maitlis (2022), a former senior BBC journalist, who covered the EU referendum campaign. In a speech to the Edinburgh Festival in 2022, she remembered back to when:

The UK is beginning to debate the big questions around Britain’s potential exit from the EU. It is complicated stuff: we are trying to offer our viewers both sides of a fiendishly difficult debate. And that intention was right. But we still got it wrong. We fell into what we might call ‘the Patrick Minford paradigm’. In other words, it might take our producers five minutes to find 60 economists who feared Brexit and five hours to find a sole voice who espoused it. But by the time we went on air, we simply had one of each; we presented this unequal effort to our audience as balance. It wasn’t. I would later learn the ungainly name for this myopic style of journalism: ‘both-sideism’, which talks to the way it reaches a superficial balance while obscuring a deeper truth. (Maitlis 2022)

At face value, reporting both sides of an issue equally might be considered the most impartial way of covering a referendum campaign, with journalists not taking a position. Yet, as Maitlis acknowledged, it meant that viewers were often left with many dubious claims that they had to work out if they were true or false. Perhaps the famous misleading instance was the Leave campaign's claim that the UK government spent £350m per week on EU membership, which – if the country left the EU – could be spent instead on the National Health Service (NHS). Independent bodies, such as UK The Statistics Authority, repeatedly warned politicians and broadcasters about the misleading nature of this claim, yet it was often allowed to be said on-air without challenge. Just days after the UK voted to leave the EU, a representative opinion poll found that almost half of people polled believed the claim that the UK spent £350m per week on EU membership (Ipsos MORI 2016) – illustrating how 'false balance' can result in spreading disinformation, misinforming the public and influencing democratic decisions. This claim was often brought up by our research participants in the audience studies, as discussed in Chapter 2.

The 'he said, she said' approach to reporting is a reflection of news media conveying the political voices of representative democracies. Rather than relying on journalists to construct political balance, they proportionally select parties democratically voted for by the public. While this may appear a fair and balanced method of delivering impartiality, it relies on competing sides to be well intentioned with their respective positions. But in an era defined as 'post-truth', the changing political landscape has raised doubts about the accuracy and honesty of political parties and actors. In doing so, the credibility of political leaders has become the subject of considerable debate, given their track record of making false or misleading statements. This has been associated with populist leaders such as Donald Trump in the US, Boris Johnson in the UK, the late President Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías in Venezuela, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and many more around the world. For example, *The Washington Post* fact-checker revealed that over 30,000 statements by Trump during his term of office could be classified false (Kessler 2021), while political journalist, Peter Osborne (2021), wrote a book spelling out, in detail, Johnson's dishonest and deceiving claims over his political career.

Debates about how journalists should counter false and misleading statements by elected politicians have intensified over the last decade or so. A small but significant body of scholarship has emerged about the value of fact-checking journalism and how it can be used to challenge politicians and hold them more accountable (Graves 2016 – see also Chapter 6). Needless to say, while journalists have always sought to establish the facts behind a story, more

news media organisations have begun – as mentioned in Chapter 1 – to either invest in dedicated fact-checking teams or draw on them to interpret the veracity of political claims. But there remains limited research about precisely how and where fact-checking is used and integrated into routine editorial practices, while delivering impartial journalism.

This chapter offers a UK case study that examines how the BBC applied its ‘due impartiality’ in its domestic and foreign reporting of the 2019 UK and 2020 US election campaigns on television, online and by its fact-checking service, Reality Check (see also Chapter 6). Since the BBC claims that its impartiality is applied to the same high levels of editorial standards across all of its news output, it follows that ‘due impartiality’ should be applied equally in US and UK election campaigns as well as in different formats of news, such as television news bulletins, its online news and Reality Check websites. We focused on how far each news platform scrutinised the claims of the main party leaders from the UK and US, including Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, who have been associated with debates about spreading disinformation.

The BBC was selected for close scrutiny because of its continued influence on politics and public affairs in the UK and worldwide (Newman et al. 2023). While the news media has fragmented over recent decades with the emergence of online and social media platforms, the BBC’s broadcast and online news services continue to attract domestic and international audiences. But not only does the public service broadcaster have significant reach, it remains – as Chapter 3 established – widely trusted by audiences and viewed as a far more reliable information source than online and social media platforms. Its long-held reputation for impartial journalism has largely shaped the public’s appreciation of its reporting, including in the US, where it is more trusted than many US domestic news media outlets (Newman et al. 2020). Unlike the US, the BBC – and all UK broadcasters – have always been subject to regulation – currently by Ofcom – that requires them to produce impartial journalism. But the BBC also has its own set of editorial guidelines on ‘due impartiality’, including how it should report election campaigns in the UK and internationally. They boldly state that ‘The BBC should make, and be able to defend, editorial decisions on campaign coverage on the basis that they are reasonable and carefully reached, with due impartiality’ (BBC 2024). While the guidelines state the interpretation of an overseas election may affect coverage if ‘there are questions about the openness or fairness of the democratic process’, they also make it clear that ‘The principles of fairness and due impartiality that underlie the BBC’s coverage of UK votes should also inform reporting in other countries’ (BBC 2017). In other words, unless specific events or issues relate to the integrity of how an election is democratically conducted,

BBC impartiality should be applied with equal gusto in the UK and foreign reporting, including the US.

The BBC's (2024) election editorial guidelines further state that 'The way in which due impartiality is achieved among parties will vary, depending on the format, output and platform', but this relates to the balance of party coverage rather than scrutiny of claims made by the main political leaders. It also points out that 'content producers must take responsibility for achieving due impartiality in their own output without necessarily relying on other BBC content or services' (BBC 2024). In practice, this means that BBC's television news bulletins, and its online news and Reality Check websites, should all produce impartial journalism without assuming other programmes and platforms will feature perspectives and question claims they did not address. Our study was designed to assess whether the BBC applied the same rigour in challenging any instances of false or misleading claims by political leaders in domestic and foreign election news coverage, as well as across television, online and its dedicated fact-checking service.

Applying More Scrutiny in Foreign than Domestic BBC Fact-Checking Journalism

In order to explore the degree to which the claims of political leaders were challenged in domestic and foreign news reporting, election-related items were examined on the BBC News and Reality Check websites during the 2019 UK General Election (28 November and 11 December 2019) and the 2020 US presidential election (1 September– 3 November 2020) campaigns. Within every item, claims made by party leaders – where their accuracy could be corrected or challenged – were examined. US coverage was examined over ten weeks as opposed to two weeks to generate a comparable number of political claims with the UK across both campaigns (Hughes et al. 2023). In total, 301 items were examined, including 128 items and 47 claims made by either Boris Johnson or Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, and 173 items and 46 claims made by either Donald Trump or Joe Biden. The BBC *News at Ten* was also examined between 28 November and 11 December 2019 for the UK election campaign and, for the US election campaign, a slightly longer period was chosen – 30 September and 3 November 2020 – in order to generate a similar sized sample.

Items were broken down by conventions rather than stories, generating seventy-two election items and twenty-four political claims in the UK, and forty-nine items and twenty-seven claims in the US. On both television and online news, every political claim was labelled a journalistic interaction, including

whether it was corrected, validated or left unchallenged. All items and claims were subject to robust inter-reliability check, which overwhelmingly showed high agreement rates and Cohen Kappa scores (Hughes et al. 2023).

The comparative study of leaders during the 2019 UK and 2020 US election campaigns discovered that the BBC supplied more scrutiny in foreign (US) than domestic (UK) reporting. As Table 5.1 reveals, of the 967 interactions journalists had with the party leaders, above all the most – 73 per cent – related to Trump, followed by 70 per cent for Johnson, 50 per cent for Corbyn and 38 per cent for Biden. Trump had the least amount of claims that went either unchallenged or supported – 12 per cent – compared to 38 per cent for Biden, 32 per cent for Corbyn and 22 per cent for Johnson. When a claim was completely or partially validated, Biden had the highest proportion supporting him at 24 per cent as opposed to 18 per cent for Corbyn, 15 per cent for Trump and 7 per cent for Johnson. Of course, these proportions should be viewed in the context of the level of coverage for each candidate (see Table 5.1). Claims by Trump nearly doubled those made by Biden and Corbyn combined in coverage, and were over 130 more than Johnson.

On the face of it, an incumbency bonus might explain the greater focus on correcting Trump especially, as well as Johnson, because they were leaders of governments and naturally generated news. But the coverage of both candidates was predominantly about their campaign claims rather than how they were governing the nation. Almost three quarters of interactions about Trump – 73 per cent – focused on correcting him, compared to 70 per cent for Johnson, 50 per cent for Corbyn and 38 per cent for Biden. The most explicit rather than implicit correctives directed at any leader was Trump – 71 per cent in total – followed by 65 per cent for Corbyn, 53 per cent for Johnson and 50 per cent for Biden.

Taken together, the findings suggests that journalists felt far more emboldened to robustly challenge Trump than other candidates. So, for example, when Trump claimed the US has ‘one of the lowest mortality rates’ (27 October 23)

Table 5.1 The percentage of interactions with claims made by UK and US political leaders during election campaigns (N in brackets)

	Biden	Corbyn	Johnson	Trump	Total
Corrective	38%	50%	70%	73%	65%
Validation	24%	18%	7%	15%	14%
No corrective or validation	38%	32%	23%	12%	21%
Total	100% (119)	100% (110)	100% (303)	100% (435)	100% (967)

during the pandemic the Reality Check item responded: ‘Verdict: That’s not right. The US ranks high globally in terms of covid deaths per person.’ Of the 187 unique claims Trump made, he received 315 corrective interactions – higher than any other party leader. At face value, it might be concluded that Trump was challenged more than other candidates simply because he made more provocative claims. But, as explored below, there were many vague and dubious claims by UK candidates that could have been directly called out by journalists. Claims made by UK party leaders were also dealt with differently to US presidential candidates. For when UK leaders were explicitly corrected, they tended not to be challenged directly by journalists. Instead, news items mostly featured a counterclaim from a rival political party, adopting the ‘he said, she said’ convention of balance.

For example, when Johnson claimed there would not be any checks for goods travelling from Northern Ireland to Great Britain under the Brexit deal, a Reality Check item stated: ‘Labour said the PM’s claims about his deal with the EU were “fraudulent”.’ We found that coverage of the UK election campaign featured more direct quotations than the American presidential campaign. When US leaders were challenged, just over half of correctives – 52 per cent for Biden and 51 per cent for Trump – were by BBC journalists, whereas for UK leaders it was just 27 per cent for Johnson and 21 per cent for Corbyn. In coverage of US leaders, the reporting challenged claims immediately in the item, whereas when the story was about UK politicians the challenge would appear later in the story and was often preceded by contextual paragraphs. From a reader’s perspective, this meant that claims about UK leaders were not instantly called out, but they were for the US Presidential candidates.

Taken together, the comparative study revealed subtle but significant differences in how US and UK leaders were fact-checked in election coverage. US leaders were more directly and instantly corrected by journalists in comparison to political coverage in the UK, which often left it to rival politicians to challenge claims from a distance. In other words, there appeared to be greater journalistic reluctance to robustly scrutinise UK than US politicians.

The varying levels of scrutiny become even more striking when broken down by the platform across BBC *News at Ten*, BBC online or BBC Reality Check (see Table 5.2). Above all, Reality Check issued the most correctives across each platform, with over three quarters of all claims – 76 per cent – contested in some way, while the remaining 24 per cent validated political statements. By contrast, two thirds of online news included correctives, with 14 per cent validations of statements and a fifth of claims involving no challenges. Meanwhile television news did not challenge 40 per cent of all political claims, with just half – 55 per cent – including a corrective and 5 per cent pro-

Table 5.2 The percentage of interactions according to the BBC platform (online news, television news and Reality Check) (N in brackets)

	Online	Television news	Reality Check
Interactions			
Corrective (CI)	66%	55%	76%
Validating (VI)	14%	5%	24%
Null (NI)	20%	40%	/
Total	100% (665)	100% (168)	100% (134)
Corrective interactions (Strength)			
Explicit (ECI)	65%	59%	62%
Implicit (ICI)	35%	41%	38%
Total	100% (436)	100% (92)	100% (102)

viding validations. Many of the correctives on Reality Check’s site were more decisive – including verdicts, for example – than online sites, and especially television news, which often relied on politicians to give counter-perspectives.

The analysis of how each platform and website reported a 2019 Conservative Party claim to build 40 new hospitals during the UK election revealed the levels of scrutiny comparatively applied to a key Conservative manifesto promise. This claim attracted attention because it was unclear whether the hospitals were ‘new’ or would be built in the time period promised. Four years after the 2019 election campaign, the UK government acknowledged that this manifesto pledge would not be met (Walker 2023). While television news featured Johnson emphatically claiming ‘there will be forty new hospitals’, it then offered a counter-perspective from the Labour Party suggesting the number had moved from promising forty, to twenty and then six. In other words, broadcast news provided a ‘he said, she said’ style of reporting without any journalistic judgement about the merits of either position. By contrast, Reality Check explicitly labelled the claim as misleading and inaccurate, drawing on NHS Trust sources to verify their fact-checking. At the end of one Reality Check it was decisively stated: ‘so it’s not correct to suggest that 40 new hospitals are currently being built’. While BBC online did not directly call out the claim, it provided a hyperlink to a Reality Check article which read: ‘Boris Johnson is constantly championing the 40 new hospitals he wants to see built.’ In other words, an online reader would only be exposed to an explicit journalistic challenge if they were motivated enough to click through to the Reality Check item. It was only a specific fact-checking news item that challenged the dubious claim rather than allowing politicians to argue between

themselves during a heated election campaign. We will further discuss how audiences engaged with this lack of explicit fact-checking on television news in Chapter 7.

Interpreting the Impartiality of Cross-National and Cross-Platform Fact-Checking

The concepts of impartiality, objectivity and balance have long been used within the news media industry to editorially explain a professional approach to the production of fair and even-handed journalism free from partisan influence (Barnett 2011; Barkho 2012; Cushion 2012; Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1972). In more recent years, they have become terms used to help counter false or questionable claims, mitigating the impact of populist politicians spreading misinformation. But, as this chapter has argued, terms such as impartiality, objectivity and balance have often been broadly invoked concepts and used interchangeably despite the fact they represent conflicting editorial practices and journalistic goals. Moreover, they can be applied differently in subtle but significant ways across media and political systems around the world (Barkho 2012; Hopmann et al. 2011). And yet, beyond isolated moments when the news media are under fire for producing so-called biased output – such as Gary Lineker’s tweet criticising the language of the UK government’s migration policy – there has been limited detailed empirical scrutiny of content which, over time, rigorously interrogates how balance, impartiality and objectivity have been applied and interpreted by different news media.

This chapter offered an original case study of how the BBC interpreted the UK’s ‘due impartiality’ guidelines in its fact-checking of political statements in domestic and foreign reporting during the 2019 UK and 2020 US election campaigns. It compared the level of scrutiny of claims on BBC television news bulletins, its online news and fact-checking websites. As explained in the introduction, the BBC prides itself on ensuring all its output – including domestic and foreign reporting, and broadcast and online content – is subject to the same level of impartial rigour. Our study represented, to date, one of the most forensic examinations of how impartiality affects the way political claims are reported and challenged by a news organisation to different degrees in its output, and across news platforms and websites (Hughes et al. 2023). We offered a new and unique approach to examining the correction of disinformation at a micro level rather than at a broad, macro level. This involved examining not stories but almost 1,000 individual claims by political leaders in news coverage and assessing whether they were questioned and, if so, the degree to which they were comparatively challenged.

Above all, our findings demonstrated that political claims were corrected more robustly in coverage of US than UK reporting of election campaigns, as well as on fact-checking sites compared to online news and especially television news bulletins. In our view, this suggests that the editorial boundaries of fact-checking were policed by how journalists' constructed impartiality according to whether they were reporting domestic or foreign elections, or on television, an online news site or a dedicated fact-checking website. At face value, it might be assumed that impartiality would be more robustly applied in a domestic context. After all, academic literature about journalistic sources and indexing theory has long suggested it would be easier for journalists to access domestic than international sources that could facilitate greater scrutiny of claims (Bennett 1990; Fishman 1980; Gandy 1982). But the more robust treatment of US rather than UK politicians is, in our view, a symptom of how impartiality is applied. Given how sensitively national politicians monitor the BBC and its reporting of domestic politics – the Lineker debacle being a case in point – reporters would understandably feel more emboldened to challenge the claims of foreign over national politicians. This can also explain why claims made by UK politicians were often left to domestic political rivals rather than journalists interrogating their respective statements. This meant that impartiality was applied by the construction of political balance rather than directly questioning the claims of a domestic politician. In the same vein, we found that television news largely adopted a 'he said, she said' approach to election reporting when compared to online news and a dedicated fact-checking website.

Since television news bulletins remain one of the most widely consumed information sources, journalists may be more reluctant to challenge claims than online news and fact-checking sites. Needless to say, television editors might retort that fact-checkers probe claims more vigorously because they have the time and resources to investigate and scrutinise political statements. But many of the claims television news could have challenged – such as correcting Conservative manifesto promises or several of Trump's egregious statements – had already been called out by BBC Reality Check or other fact-checking organisations. In other words, television news and, to a lesser extent, online news could either have drawn more effectively on the BBC's own internal fact-checking service or reviewed analysis in the public domain to challenge and counter false or misleading statements during the election. In our view, it is an editorial choice to stick to the 'he said, she said' style of reporting because it is a long-held convention of maintaining impartiality, which limits any allegations that journalists have taken political sides. As discussed in Chapter 1, however, this type of reporting can also create uncertainty and confusion and,

by extension, leave the public vulnerable to disinformation. Directly correcting claims, by contrast, represents a more aggressive application of impartiality because it risks upsetting the political class. Yet it results in holding politicians far more accountable for their statements and serves audiences more effectively because they are told more bluntly what is accurate, false or unclear.

Our study has broader relevance to debates about the journalistic use and value of impartiality and fact-checking in countering disinformation. While the concept of impartiality tends to have relatively fixed definitions both in academic literature and in editorial codes (Barkho 2012), we would argue it is a fluid term shaped by the political context in which it is interpreted and applied. More finely tuned research studies are needed to understand the nuances behind editorial choices, such as the degree to which false and misleading claims are comparatively dealt with by journalists and, where necessary, corrected to different degrees across news media. In doing so, empirical research can provide evidence-based interventions into how misinformation can be effectively countered by journalists.

The next section further develops the book's focus on the value of fact-checking journalism. It assesses the type of journalism produced by fact-checking online news sites and compares them with how conventional news on flagship broadcast programming report the same stories and issues during an election campaign and in routine coverage. In doing so, we further compare how the same claims were assessed by journalists working on fact-checking sites and television news bulletins, as well as the extent to which fact-checking is employed in television news bulletins.

Fact-Checking in News Reporting

During the 2019 election campaign in the UK, the BBC came under heavy fire from critics questioning the impartiality of its reporting. As discussed in the previous chapter, accusations of so-called political bias in BBC editorial decision-making have long plagued the public service broadcaster over its 100-year history. But this attack nonetheless prompted a high-profile response in the middle of the campaign from the Head of BBC News, Fran Unsworth. Writing in *The Guardian*, she began her defence of BBC coverage by emphatically stating ‘We’ve ramped up our Reality Check service, fact-checking campaign claims’ (Unsworth 2019). The article ended with a fierce rebuke to critics: ‘And to those who have suggested we are somehow cowed or unconfident, let me assure you – we are not’ (Unsworth 2019). By putting Reality Check at the heart of her defence of BBC impartiality, the head of the BBC News revealed – at a highly sensitive moment in time – the editorial significance it placed on using fact-checking as a means of holding parties to account and upholding impartial journalism. After all, during any democratic election campaign, journalists and editors face considerable scrutiny, including greater media regulation of its output (Cushion and Thomas 2018). But how far did Reality Check inform BBC journalism during the 2019 election campaign and beyond? And more broadly, how much does fact-checking around the world routinely inform newsrooms inside and outside election campaigns?

This chapter answers these questions, as well as developing a broader review of the evidence to date, about how far and in what ways fact-checking has been used to effectively challenge political claims and inform audiences about what is factually accurate or dubious. It is split into three parts. The first part begins by briefly contextualising the fact-checking literature, identifying how research has explored the role and value of fact-checking. In doing so, it shows that

much of this focus has been on the role of dedicated fact-checking organisations and the influence of partisan fact-checkers, strikingly from a US perspective. Less attention has been paid to how different political and media systems shape fact-checking. For example, there is a lack of fact-checking studies in non-Western nations where authoritarian governments influence editorial decisions, or among public service broadcasters, where there is a requirement to be impartial. We unpack the few studies that have examined how news media have incorporated fact-checking into their daily output, identifying how fact-checking has been produced across different media and political systems.

The rest of the chapter then draws on case studies about the fact-checking practices of UK public service broadcasters, including an analysis of news output and interviews with senior broadcasters who helped explain editorial judgements behind the selection and exclusion of stories and sources. As we discussed in Chapter 5, the UK has an overarching public service broadcasting system that is required to be impartial, allowing us to consider how fact-checking journalism operates within the rules on impartiality. The second part of the chapter focuses on news produced by dedicated fact-checking sites during the 2019 general election, including BBC Reality Check, Channel 4's FactCheck and an independent organisation, Full Fact. The third part of the chapter explores the same fact-checking sites in 2021 through a more routine period, examining the degree to which their claims informed coverage on BBC and Channel 4 television news, and if they were covered by other flagship bulletins (ITV, Channel 5, Sky News). When the same claims were identified, we then compared the rigour and robustness of reporting to identify any differences between how broadcasters and fact-checkers held power to account. Taken together, we examined almost 1,000 articles between 2019 and 2021, alongside more than 2,500 claims, in order to systematically assess the extent and nature of how fact-checking informed journalism. The final part of this section then examines the first seven months of 2024 to assess how far fact-checking informs the BBC's *News at Ten* in routine coverage and during a UK general election. Since fact-checking has been championed as an important part of challenging claims and upholding impartiality – as the Head of BBC News claimed – our analysis can shed light on how impartiality was applied by fact-checking sites and broadcasters between 2019 and 2024.

The Adoption of Fact-Checking as a Solution for Journalism around the World

Over recent decades, dedicated fact-checking organisations have gained notoriety for helping to counter false information and dubious claims. Fact-checking

research has predominantly focused on examining the impact correctives to political statements have on more effectively informing voters during election campaigns and improving public confidence and understanding of politics (Amazeen et al. 2018; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Nyhan and Reifler 2015a; Nyhan et al. 2020). There has also been a recent growth in studies exploring the type of fact-checking sites, and their selection of topics, dissection of claims, and the degree to which they challenge statements (Amazeen et al. 2019; Graves 2016; Graves 2018; Graves and Cherubini 2016; Lim 2018a; Uscinski and Butler 2013). But the diverse range and formats of fact-checking sites has made it difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions about their role. For instance, a study of two US sites, Fact Checker and PolitiFact, discovered that they pursued a radically different agenda of topics to scrutinise, making it difficult to compare how they examined the same claims and reach particular judgements (Lim 2018b). At the same time, fact-checking studies have been quite narrow in design and focus. Above all, most research has centred on the US – a nation with a highly partisan political culture and media system – which makes it difficult to generalise about how fact-checkers operate and how the public respond to political claims being corrected.

In the US, Graves (2016) has observed a distinctiveness between professional and partisan fact-checkers. While there is a long-standing tradition of highly professional impartial American fact-checkers, over recent years sites driven by partisan interests have grown. This is a reflection of the US's highly polarised media and political system, with audiences increasingly turning to sites that reinforce rather than challenge their ideological perspectives. But there is a risk in fact-checking research of interpreting trends through a narrow American prism. After all, a meta-analysis of fact-checking studies discovered that, up until April 2018, 77 per cent of all research exclusively focused on the US (Neiminen and Rapeli 2019). Over very recent years, a small but significant body of scholarship about fact-checking has grown beyond the US, from across Africa and Europe, such as France, Norway and the UK (Barrera et al. 2020; Birks 2019a; Brandtzaeg et al. 2018; Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018).

But there remain differences in fact-checking on a global level that need to be understood in their political and media context. As Feng et al. (2021, 1373) have argued, 'With the increasing trend of fact-checking intervention in undemocratic and semi-democratic societies ... we ... call for more studies on fact-checking practices beyond the context of Western democracies.' There has been evidence of states with authoritarian political systems using fact-checking to propagate their political support rather than to challenge misinformation and enhance public understanding. As Vinhas and Bastos (2022, 459) observed in a Turkish context, 'Instead of independently authenticating

sources or photographs, Fact-Checking Turkey supports the government line and seeks to discredit perceived criticism of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.’ Meanwhile, Feng et al.’s (2021) analysis of two fact-checkers in Hong Kong – Kauyim and TrueNews – during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement between 2019 and 2020 found their coverage was driven by partisan editorial biases. Their content analysis revealed stories were selectively chosen to suit their narratives, with limited explicit criticism and engagement of false or misleading claims. They also discovered that one site – Kauyim – had a veneer of professionalism associated with it having gained media industry recognition. This may have helped deliver credibility and legitimacy when, in reality, it was helping to spread government misinformation which, in theory, it was designed to counter. This illustrates, according to the authors, that ‘partisanship and elements of professionalism can co-exist. It [Kauyim] could be seen as a fact-checker with a clearly discernible political value orientation and a commitment to professionalism’ (Feng et al. 2021, 1371). In other words, it cannot be normatively assumed that fact-checkers represent an independent and impartial service. Conversely, in authoritarian states where the government control news media, Zeng et al. (2019) argued that Chinese citizen-based movements have more effectively fact-checked than mainstream journalism, delivering more accurate accounts of the 2015 Tianjin explosions – which killed 176 people and injured several thousand more – than state officials. Their systematic and comparative analysis of police, media and independent citizen web posts concluded that

user comments demonstrated that the official narratives about the Tianjin blasts were widely challenged, and the credibility of the official rumour-debunking messages was commonly questioned. In order to verify the police’s and state-media’s rumour-debunking messages, Weibo users exhibited dedication and skill in curating information to accurately fact-check. (Zeng et al. 2019, 30)

Once again, it is important to acknowledge how political systems can influence media systems and, in turn, shape how fact-checking is carried out along with its wider effectiveness.

The value of fact-checking has been recognised by news media with long-standing journalistic principles of producing objective, accurate and balanced journalism. Many newsrooms – especially in Northern and Western Europe – have adopted their practices over recent years in order to develop their fact-checking journalism (Graves and Cherubini 2016, 8). But while fact-checking has been swept up in debates about reforming and revitalising

news reporting by encouraging more accountable journalism and upholding news standards in accuracy (Amazeen 2019; Graves 2016; Graves and Cherubini 2016), there has been limited empirical research examining how news organisations have developed new fact-checking conventions and practices. Moreover, few studies have explored how the topics and judgements of dedicated fact-checking organisations compare to how journalists working for news media have developed them across their online and broadcast journalism. In order to understand how fact-checking informs news media, we now unpack the limited number of studies around the world that have systematically examined content, including comparing journalistic practices with dedicated fact-checking organisations.

Humprecht (2020) carried out a cross-national study of independent fact-checkers and news media fact-checking across four nations – the UK, US, Germany and Austria – in order to explore any editorial differences between organisations. The focus, in particular, was on the degree of journalistic transparency and accountability in comparative fact-checking. This was measured in four ways, including if there were any links to: (1) external documents or sources, (2) news sites, (3) a data set or (4) visual evidence. They examined 651 fact-checks between 2016 and 2017, and discovered major differences in levels of transparency not just between different organisations, but cross-nationally too. Above all, the study found independent fact-checkers were ‘more likely to make their sources transparent and thereby enable users to understand and trace back the process of correction’ (Humprecht 2020, 322) than news organisations. Cross-nationally, the study revealed that American fact-checking was the most transparent with links to external documents and news sites, whereas Germany and Austria provided more information graphics and boxes than the UK or US. Overall, Humprecht (2020, 323) concluded that: ‘Although online disinformation is a global phenomenon, practices of correction still seem to be shaped by national news cultures – in newsrooms as well as in independent organizations.’

A large study of different types of fact-checkers in the US – including news media organisations – further revealed the diverse range of conventions and practices that shape fact-checking within and across different organisational types. Drawing on 78 sites and 384 posts between 2010 and 2021, Kim and Buzzelli (2022) discovered a hybrid mix of styles and conventions in how they fact-checked. They found a higher standard of fact-checking in non-profit organisations because output was more informed by evidence, such as statistical reports, officials and expert sources. Kim and Buzzelli (2022) further uncovered that independent fact-checking organisations provided more transparent practices than news media organisations, which was interpreted as them needing to legitimate their fact-checking credentials in ways that jour-

nalists did not have to prove. Overall, their study suggested that there was a journalistic logic in news media that led to a lack of clear fact-checking judgements, source transparency and a narrative-led approach to story-telling. Or, put more bluntly, fact-checking among American news media sites was not delivered to the same high standards of many stand-alone, not-profit and dedicated US fact-checking organisations.

Another US focused study painted a longitudinal picture about the destructive influence of a journalistic logic shaping fact-checking output between 1992 and 2013. Examining the posts of ninety-eight sites over selected periods, including comparisons between news media organisations and dedicated fact-checkers, Lowrey (2017) suggested that declining standards in traditional mainstream journalism had a corrosive influence on the form and style of fact-checking. He argued that over time:

We see fact-checking moving into spaces that are less strongly shaped by a traditional journalistic logic – that are less detached, more personally expressive, and more integrated with entities outside the organization. Fact-checking on TV news is an example, as TV news is often more sensationalized and tightly coupled with market demands ... These trends suggest a rise in network logic and a waning of traditional detached journalistic logic. (Lowrey 2017, 390)

From this US perspective, when news media have adopted ‘traditional’ conventions from dedicated fact-checking organisations, their fact-checking has not been considered as robust and rigorous because of a commercial logic shaping editorial decision-making.

In the UK, two dedicated fact-checking editorial teams have been established at the public service media organisations, the BBC and Channel 4. They were both originally set up to cover election campaigns, but (as explored throughout this chapter) they have since expanded their agendas (Graves and Cherubini 2016; Kyriakidou and Cushion 2021). Channel 4’s FactCheck, for example, launched in 2003 in the run-up to the 2005 general election, and has become a permanent fixture on its website (Graves and Cherubini 2016; Birks 2019b). Meanwhile, the BBC’s Reality Check was launched ahead of the 2015 election campaign with its resources expanded after the EU referendum a year later (Samuels 2017). Both Reality Check and FactCheck compete with Full Fact, the largest independent fact-checker in the UK, launched in 2010 (Graves and Cherubini 2016). Needless to say, there are other fact-checking organisations in the UK along with fact-checking that informs news media. But, taken together, Reality Check, FactCheck and Full Fact represent perma-

nent fact-checking services, and claim to be independent and impartial in their judgements. For UK broadcasters, this is consistent with their own editorial standards and commitments to report news with ‘due impartiality’ (Kyriakidou and Cushion 2021).

To date, there has been little attention paid to how new dedicated fact-checkers have editorially operated compared to conventional news coverage of an election campaign or in routine reporting. Birks (2019b) carried out a content analysis of 176 articles and 232 tweets from FactCheck, Reality Check and Full Fact during the 2019 UK general election. She identified, above all, that factual claims were the most checked form of coverage, while theoretical claims and social facts were also covered but without much authority. Birks’s findings showed over two thirds of fact-checks supplied a clear judgement about the veracity of claims checked, with other articles focused on explainers and background analysis. She also observed that claims featured on fact-checking sites reflected the wider election news agenda, with a focus on senior politicians. The findings help paint a broad picture of how fact-checking was carried out across three UK fact-checking sites.

However, in order to develop a more comprehensive assessment of fact-checking journalism, more research is needed to understand its production processes, its comparative output, and to more broadly interpret to what extent and in what ways its reporting is distinctive from conventional forms of mainstream news. Our brief review of the academic literature suggested that debates about fact-checking needed more comparative analysis of output and an interpretation of the editorial judgements that inform decision-making. The second section of the chapter now draws on an original case study that examines how fact-checking sites operated during the 2019 UK general election (Soo et al. 2023).

The Role of Fact-Checking During the 2019 UK Election Campaign

The role and value of fact-checking has grown stronger over the last decade, with more scholarly recognition of how it can enhance journalism and counter political misinformation. But, as the previous section explored, further research is needed to identify more precisely how fact-checking is being used by broadcasters, how it informs reporting and holds parties and politicians to account. This chapter considers these questions by drawing on interviews with senior broadcasters from the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News, which we introduced in Chapter 1. The interviews included discussions about how fact-checking shaped routine journalism. This was particularly the case

in our interviews with the then editors of BBC Reality Check and Channel 4's FactCheck. In addition, we then draw on a systematic content analysis of the websites of BBC Reality Check and Channel 4's FactCheck during the campaign (between 6 November and 12 December 2019), as well as of Full Fact. This site was included in order to compare and contrast the editorial decisions of professional fact-checkers with fact-checking carried out by journalists working for public service broadcasters. We examined how articles were fact-checked, the claims under investigation, the topics addressed, the sources selected, the degree to which claims were interrogated and the type of judgement delivered (Soo et al. 2023).

The value and significance of fact-checking was recognised by all senior editors at BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News. While they all, in different ways, acknowledged that fact-checking has always been part of a reporter's job, they agreed that a dedicated fact-checking service could enhance the scrutiny of claims. But, as several interviewees pointed out, this was not always possible in routine reporting given the time and resource constraints of newsrooms. Paul Royall, then editor of the BBC 6 and 10 television news bulletins, believed that there was

a really high premium now on that [fact-checking], for obvious reasons. I think that it's a real key core function for BBC News to be able to rigorously check and contextualise information and I definitely think that audiences, because they're surrounded now by a world of information from multiple sources and places, and particularly in the digital space where you literally might skim over something but you might still absorb the statement that you're just literally flicking through.

Likewise, Jon Snow, the veteran Channel 4 News anchor, considered fact-checking 'Fundamental. It's one of the new resources we do have. We have invested in fact-checking and at least then you have an objective truth which you can work to.' However, the disparity in fact-checking resources between broadcasters was pointed out by several interviewees. Above all, the BBC's small army of fact-checkers were often referenced enviously by editors across more commercially orientated broadcasters. The then BBC Reality Check editor, Rupert Carey, told us that he had a fixed team of thirteen editors and fact-checkers, which included those involved in fact-checking internationally. During the 2019 election campaign, he also revealed they had recruited someone from the Office of National Statistics on secondment to help them interpret data. Of the permanent members of the Reality Check team, Carey explained they were all journalists but had expert knowledge with

different specialisms. So there's a guy who's from business but is very good with stats. I'd say actually a lot of the team, because they have to do their own original research, are really good with reading Excel spreadsheets and they're all quite numerate as well, but we've also got people whose expertise is public policy or health. There's expertise within the team and obviously Chris [Morris, the main presenter of Reality Check] has been a Brussels correspondent in the past.

While BBC Reality Check had ample resources and expertise at its disposal, Channel 4's FactCheck employed a permanent editorial team of just two staff during the election campaign. At the time, this included the editor, Patrick Worrall, and full-time researcher Georgina Lee. As we now explore, the resources available to fact-checking departments help explain the amount of claims they were able to examine and analyse during the campaign.

Several studies have tracked the topics of fact-checking stories (Birks 2019a; Birks 2019b; Uscinski and Butler 2013). But our analysis went beyond the issues being assessed in order to develop new ways of categorising the format and function of fact-checking coverage (Soo et al. 2023). We created five categories. First, a conventional fact-checking article, which takes claims and delivers some form of judgement about them. Second, a brief article which in roughly five sentences or fewer addresses a claim or issue. Third, an analysis article, which breaks down a claim but does not deliver a verdict about it. Fourth, an explainer article, which provides context and background to claims but with no verdict or analysis of them. Fifth, a question asked by a member of the public, which Full Fact included on its website. We analysed all election fact-checking items over the campaign and categorised them according to these variables.

Table 6.1 shows a total of 211 election-related articles that were identified over the campaign period, including ninety from Reality Check, twenty-three from FactCheck and ninety-eight from Full Fact.

Table 6.1 The format of articles featured on fact-checking sites during the 2019 UK general election campaign

Types of article	BBC Reality Check	Channel 4 Fact Check	Full Fact	Total
Fact-checking	26	11	56	93
Brief	47	/	8	55
Analysis	16	12	8	36
Explainer	1		7	8
Audience question	/	/	19	19
Total	90	23	98	211

Due to the size of the editorial team and their resources, Reality Check and Full Fact supplied far more fact-checking coverage than Channel 4's FactCheck. While Full Fact featured the most dedicated fact-checking articles, Reality Check supplied the most briefs. We examined all articles to establish if they were based on a single claim or multiple claims, and found that, across all three sites, most – approximately two thirds – involved investigating a specific claim.

Across the three sites, there was a range of topics addressed during the election campaign. But, above all, many of the articles related to the parties' agendas. This was most explicitly evidenced by roughly a third of all articles focusing on the parties' manifesto promises, while many of the policies fact-checked – notably on health, taxation, the economy and Brexit – reflected the specific pledges of parties. In contrast to the broadcasters, the independent fact-checking site, Full Fact, featured dubious claims found on social media, with nearly all of them about party politics and the election campaign. Both editors of Reality Check and FactCheck in 2019 acknowledged it was difficult to broadly explain how stories were selected, but they were open about their agendas being driven by responding to the parties' claims during the campaign. Patrick Worrall, editor of Channel 4 FactCheck, revealed his team

focused on looking for a lie to expose, that's essentially what we're doing. Somebody's told a lie and we're going to try and expose it ... So we're sitting there scanning the airwaves and we're looking at the big set-piece speeches and we're trying to look at things that are bubbling up on social media, all kinds of things, the things that people are Tweeting ... And the kind of questions we'd be asking ourselves are, is it a big lie, is it consequential? Is it like a tiny little slip? Is it a deliberate lie, is it seen to be something that's deliberate? ... And the other thing we'd have in mind, to a slight extent is, are we being even-handed? Obviously the question would be like, have we just been fact-checking stories carried out by the Labour Party, the Conservative Party?

When asked about how his team selected fact-checking stories, BBC editor of Reality Check, Rupert Carey, singled out being

heavily involved with the manifesto launches. So if you get a manifesto being launched, a key policy, someone stands up and says 40 new hospitals, 20,000 more police, that's unavoidable and you know that's a claim that you have to fact-check, that warrants being fact-checked. I think, even aside from those big moments, there were still phone-ins. Boris, Jeremy

Corbyn did phone-ins to Five Live and Five Live and News channels hooked up and simulcast them. We did all those as well. We had a team, a smaller team monitoring digital ads. So I got a producer from here to work with a producer from BBC Monitoring to monitor what was going out beyond the airwaves. So I'm not sure there was ever a moment where I was sat back in my chair thinking what are we going to do today?

The interviews with the fact-checking editors further revealed how they selected sources used to verify claims. They both said the process was similar to routine reporting, with authoritative expert sources used to interpret the veracity of claims and supply wider context and analysis. For example, in the words of the Reality Check Editor:

It's most straightforward if there are stats involved. We would go to ONS [Office of National Statistics], we go to the OBR [Office for Budget Responsibility], we go to the IFS [Institute of Fiscal Studies] – we tend to use those an awful lot. We would go to obviously individual Government departments. If it's crime, you go to the Home Office for the latest stats. If it's health, NHS Digital ... when you come to economics, you've got the IFS, you've got the OBR. I don't think we would necessarily just use one in isolation. So you might in an article about the gig economy or something, you might use the IFS, you might use the Resolution Foundation. In a sense, we've got the stats that we've got ... I would class all of those as pretty much the gold standard, if you like, and they're used across the BBC. I'm less comfortable, for example, with going to individual bits of academic research because you never quite know where they're getting their funding from, whether they've reached a conclusion that isn't supported by other research. So, particularly if you're trying to do things in a limited time period, I wouldn't deviate from that pattern.

The relatively narrow range of sources used to inform fact-checking reflects long-standing research that has shown it tends to be elite, institutional actors that inform journalism (Franklin and Carlson 2011). In other words, fact-checking that is embedded in broadcast media reproduced well-established journalistic practices.

The content analysis study revealed that the sources used by Reality Check, FactCheck and Full Fact during the campaign were from UK government departments and politicians (see Tables 6.2 and 6.3) (Soo et al. 2023). It shows, above all, that fact-checkers drew heavily on data from non-ministerial government departments (which operate at arm's length of the UK government),

Table 6.2 The percentage of sources used in 2019 election-related articles with single claims in UK fact-checking sites (N in brackets)

Source category	BBC Reality Check	Channel 4 FactCheck	Full Fact	Total
Non-ministerial government department/statutory agency/public body	21.1% (12)	11.9% (5)	34.4% (45)	27.0% (62)
Ministerial government department	8.8% (5)	14.3% (6)	19.8% (26)	16.1% (37)
Politician/Political party	19.3% (11)	35.7% (15)	6.1% (8)	14.8% (34)
Think tank	8.8% (5)	16.7% (7)	9.2% (12)	10.4% (24)
Journalist/Media	5.3% (3)	9.5% (4)	6.9% (9)	7.0% (16)
EU Institution/regulations/MEP	8.8% (5)	/	6.1% (8)	5.7% (13)
Charity	7.0% (4)	2.4% (1)	4.6% (6)	4.8% (11)
Academic	1.8% (1)	7.1% (3)	3.8% (5)	3.9% (9)
Non-UK Politician/government	/	2.4% (1)	2.3% (3)	1.7% (4)
Pollster/Opinion polls	5.3% (3)	/	0.8% (1)	1.7% (4)
Local council	1.8% (1)	/	1.5% (2)	1.3% (3)
Business	/	/	2.3% (3)	1.3% (3)
Campaigner/Pressure Group	1.8% (1)	/	1.5% (2)	1.3% (3)
Economist	1.8% (1)	/	0.8% (1)	0.9% (2)
Other/Unknown	3.5% (2)	/	/	0.9% (2)
Trade union/Association	3.5% (2)	/	/	0.9% (2)
IGO/NGO	1.8% (1)	/	/	0.4% (1)
Total	100% (57)	100% (42)	100% (131)	100% (230)

public bodies, or statutory agencies (as officially defined by the UK government), such as the House of Commons Library and Office of National Statistics, followed by ministerial government departments (such as the Department of Work and Pensions), politicians or political parties, then think tanks, journalists or the media, and EU institutions or regulators. It was the broadcasters – rather than Full Fact – that relied most extensively on political sources, suggesting their coverage was institutionally tied to formal party politics compared to the independent fact-checking site.

The final part of the study examined the verdict of all claims addressed by the three fact-checking sites, asking whether they were challenged or

Table 6.3 The percentage of sources used in 2019 election-related articles with multiple claims in UK fact-checking sites (N in brackets)

Source category	BBC Reality Check	Channel 4 FactCheck	Full Fact	Total
Non-ministerial government department/statutory agency/public body	27.8% (30)	20.0% (4)	26.5% (72)	26.5% (106)
Ministerial government department	20.4% (22)	5.0% (1)	24.3% (66)	22.3% (89)
Think tank	14.8% (16)	10.0% (2)	12.1% (33)	12.8% (51)
Politician/Political party	12.0% (13)	25.0% (5)	7.4% (20)	9.5% (38)
Charity	3.7% (4)	5.0% (1)	5.9% (16)	5.3% (21)
Academic	1.9% (2)	5.0% (1)	5.1% (14)	4.3% (17)
Journalist/Media	1.9% (2)	/	4.4% (12)	3.5% (14)
EU Institution/regulations/MEP	1.9% (2)	/	3.3% (9)	2.8% (11)
IGO/NGO	4.6% (5)	/	2.2% (6)	2.8% (11)
Non-UK Politician/government	2.8% (3)	/	1.5% (4)	1.8% (7)
Trade union/Association	1.9% (2)	5.0% (1)	1.1% (3)	1.5% (6)
Pollster/Opinion polls	2.8% (3)	5.0% (1)	0.7% (2)	1.5% (6)
Law enforcement agencies	0.9% (1)	/	1.8% (5)	1.5% (6)
Business	0.9% (1)	/	1.5% (4)	1.3% (5)
Other/unknown	/	10.0% (2)	1.1% (3)	1.3% (5)
Campaigner/Pressure group	1.9% (2)	/	0.7% (2)	1.0% (4)
Economist	/	10.0% (2)	0.4% (1)	0.8% (3)
Total	100.0% (108)	100.0% (20)	100.0% (272)	100.0% (400)

verified, or whether their verdict was unclear. It found more than two thirds of fact-checking or analysis articles challenged claims (see Table 6.4), with Channel 4 by far delivering the most decisive verdicts. Approximately a fifth of articles had an unclear verdict across the three sites, while between 4 per cent and 17 per cent of fact-checking claims once viewed as suspicious were verified as being accurate.

The editor of Reality Check and FactCheck believed it was important to be impartial when investigating a claim – rather than being too ‘gung-ho’ when

Table 6.4 The percentage of articles with different verdicts by fact-checking sites during the 2019 UK general election campaign

Verdict	Fact-Checking	Analysis	Total
BBC Reality Check			
Challenged	73%	56%	67%
Unclear	8%	44%	21%
Verified	19%	/	12%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Channel 4 FactCheck			
Challenged	91%	67%	78%
Unclear	/	33%	17%
Verified	9%	/	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Full Fact			
Challenged	63%	75%	63%
Unclear	18%	25%	19%
Verified	20%	/	17%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Total for all sites			
Challenged	69%	64%	67%
Unclear	13%	36%	19%
Verified	18%	/	13%
Total	100%	100%	100%

delivering fact-checking verdicts. Patrick Worral, then editor of Channel 4's FactCheck, explained that the site does not subscribe to a conventional way of fact-checking. In his words:

... what a lot of fact-checking sites do is they have a kind of template, and they often do a kind of thing where they'll award like a claim like three stars out of five. So we've very deliberately not done that because we just kind of realised after a while this is silly, we're just trapping ourselves into an artificial kind of framework here that doesn't necessarily aid the reader very much. And sometimes it is just a case that the claim is so complicated that it really is just too simplistic to try and say it's straightforwardly a lie or the opposite of that, or even any kind of rating. So this probably sounds very pompous but it's somewhat like a coroner delivering a narrative verdict, where the only way that you can explain it to

the best of your ability is to write an explanation of what you think has happened.

Similarly, Reality Check editor, Rupert Carey, questioned an American-style approach to fact-checking and admitted: 'I'm not particularly a fan of the truthometer ... Trump is great for US broadcasts because it's either ten, he's completely wrong, or one or two, he's quite but not completely right.' This editorial resistance to being clear-cut with fact-checking decisions helped explain why roughly a fifth of verdicts were unclear (see Table 6.4).

Taken together, our election study found that broadcasters largely centred their fact-checking on party political agendas during the campaign, drawing on a narrow range of institutional sources to interrogate dubious claims (Soo et al. 2023). Full Fact, an independent fact-checking site, were less tied to party campaigns or political sources, questioning many claims from social media. In order to further explore the use of fact-checking by broadcasters, we now examine how integrated they were with other news divisions within the organisation and consider in more detail how claims were analysed and judgements delivered outside of election time.

Fact-Checking across Online and Television Platforms: The Case of UK Broadcasters

The chapter began by referencing the Head of BBC News's claim that its fact checking service, Reality Check, was 'ramped up' during the 2019 UK general election campaign, playing a crucial role in holding parties to account by challenging any dubious political claims (Unsworth 2019). But how much value do editors place in Reality Check and how much does it inform BBC journalism? And, more broadly, how much is fact-checking used by broadcast media in their coverage? In this section, we first explore these questions through our interviews with senior broadcasters. We then draw on a systematic content analysis of three fact-checking sites – BBC Reality Check, Channel 4 FactCheck and the independent site, Full Fact – throughout 2021 to explore the claims they checked, how they verified and challenged them, and – most importantly – how far these fact-checks informed television and online coverage more broadly. Or, put more simply, how much do the claims dedicated fact-checkers investigate inform routine news reporting?

At face value, senior editors at the BBC considered Reality Check to be a vital and much-needed journalistic service at a time of widespread political misinformation. But our interviews suggested that the Reality Check team was not at the front and centre of the BBC's main newsroom, driving editorial

decision-making about the latest stories. Reality Check, instead, was used in a more reactive way, and was called upon when it was editorially needed. For example, Katy Searle, then Head of Politics at the BBC, explained how during the election campaign the Reality Check team would be contacted after morning or afternoon editorial meetings when it was felt an issue needed to be investigated in detail, such as the claims put out by parties in their manifesto promises. Once the Reality Check examined a claim, its judgement would then go online and across social media, which could then inform BBC output more generally. Paul Royall, then editor of the BBC's 6pm and 10pm bulletins, revealed that the BBC Reality Check team changed their working hours to ensure they were better equipped to fact-check later in the day when parties put out contentious claims, which they could analyse for the next day's news cycle. But Katy Searle acknowledged there were limitations of prominently fact-checking in real time or in live programming. In her words:

You can't stop every five seconds and say hang on a minute, what we really mean is this. You have to try to the best of your ability within the structure of programme, headlines and all the challenges within that to be very clear about the questions surrounding any claim.

The editor of Reality Check, Rupert Carey, admitted his team received 'a steady stream of emails' from BBC colleagues about exploring dubious claims during the election campaign. But while there was a lot of demand for the main Reality Check presenter, Chris Morris, to appear on BBC radio programmes and its news channel, Rupert Carey went on to reveal that:

I wouldn't say in terms of the 6 and 10, the mainstream bulletins, that's one area where we could have got on more [BBC Reality Check], but then I think it's always quite difficult for those bulletins ... which have a certain amount of time. Once you've factored in, we've got to run something on Labour, we've got to run something on the Tories, we've got to do right by the nations, we've got to get a people piece, we've got to get three chunks of live analysis; it does narrow down the window for a bit of fact-checking. That's a consideration, I think.

In other words, while fact-checking was considered to be a valued part of BBC journalism, mainstream programmes found it difficult to integrate it into their routine conventions and practices. This was partly driven by the impartial approach to storytelling – in balancing competing party political claims and correspondent live analysis – which ultimately limited the space for dedicated

fact-checking. The BBC would need to deviate from these norms of impartial reporting in order to more prominently elevate fact-checking above the competing statements of politicians. But whether there is the editorial appetite to restructure political reporting is debatable. Katy Searle, for example, believed that it was not up to the BBC to ‘decide what the public should hear from political parties in terms of what their messages are, particularly in a campaign ... in a democracy they have the right to say what they want to put’, which can then be challenged. From this perspective, it would appear difficult for fact-checking to be routinised into political coverage, especially at election time.

More broadly, the lack of integration between Reality Check and the main BBC newsrooms and programme production teams arguably limited the degree to which fact-checking can regularly inform output across broadcast media. This separation often meant dedicated fact-checking services operated in isolation, with their output used on social media, online and fleetingly in certain broadcast programmes. However, Channel 4’s FactCheck Editor, Patrick Worrall, pointed out that his team’s work informed anchors and reporters privately, which then had an impact on broadcast programming. When specifically asked about how his fact-checking shaped TV content, he responded:

there’s a mutual thing where that happens where, let’s say for example, Jon Snow [former Channel 4 News Anchor] is interviewing a government minister – in fact Government Ministers won’t be interviewed by him at the moment, as you probably know, but theoretically. He might come across to us and say I believe you’ve written a fact-check blog about this and we’ll end up giving him a briefing, of setting him up with the right questions that we think he ought to be asking, or aiding him understanding, or if the Minister comes out with this, this is the right question to ask because they’ve used this line before and we think it’s not true. So it feeds in like that.

In other words, fact-checking might not directly shape news output, but indirectly it can inform anchors and correspondents when reporting issues and events.

Throughout 2021, we examined just how far dedicated fact-checking on the BBC Reality Check and Channel 4 FactCheck informed either their television news or online coverage. Drawing on a content analysis, we examined 355 items across the UK’s three main UK fact-checkers including BBC Reality Check, Channel 4 FactCheck and Full Fact, and assessed whether five different television news bulletins over the same time period reported the same political claims and, if they did, whether they subjected them to the same journalistic

rigour and scrutiny (Morani et al. 2024). Taken together, we assessed 705 news items on UK television news and specialist fact-checking websites and examined 2,373 political claims between 20 April and 31 July 2021.

Of the 355 fact-checking items we examined, 59.7 per cent (N = 212) were produced by Full Fact, 33.2 per cent by BBC Reality Check (N = 118) and 7.0 per cent by Channel 4 FactCheck. Once every fact-checking item and all the claims in them were identified, we examined the UK's five flagship television news bulletins – the BBC *News at Ten*, ITV *News at Ten*, Channel 4 at 7pm, Channel 5 at 5pm and Sky *News at Ten* – over the same time period. We assessed whether television news had covered the same claims as dedicated fact-checking teams and whether they treated them in the same way. In doing so, every claim was systematically examined and quantified according to the type of source scrutinising the claim, the nature and degree of scrutiny by a journalist or a source, and the clarity of the journalistic verdict. In order to assess the degree with which different claims were scrutinised in coverage, we interpreted them as 'interactions' where either a journalist or an external source explicitly or partially/implicitly challenged or validated a claim. When a claim featured in coverage, but was not challenged or validated, this was labelled a null interaction.

Our analysis of the UK's fact-checking sites reinforced the findings produced during the 2019 election campaign, with contrasting topic agendas and editorial approaches between Reality Check, FactCheck and Full Fact. Full Fact, for example, largely focused on countering disinformation on social media – making up 83 per cent of its articles – in contrast to the broadcasters' fact-checking sites which examined a broader range of topics related to public health, Brexit and the environment. Meanwhile, Full Fact produced conventional fact-checking items – reflecting 93.9 per cent of its articles – BBC Reality Check went beyond standard fact-checking (21.2 per cent), including 'analysis' pieces (22.9 per cent), 'explainers' (36.4 per cent) and brief posts (19.5 per cent). In doing so, just one in ten – 9.7 per cent – Reality Check claims had a verdict at the heart of its story, whereas 85.2 per cent of Full Fact items had a decisive judgement at the top of the article. On investigating the comparative level of scrutiny further, we discovered that 83 per cent of Full Fact interactions with claims were explicit challenges, while just over half – 56 per cent – were on Channel4's FactCheck and 40 per cent on Reality Check. The BBC had the highest proportion of implicit/partial instances of challenges (33 per cent), suggesting a reluctance to deliver clear-cut fact-checking verdicts. Overall, we found different agendas, editorial styles and journalistic scrutiny between the UK's main fact-checking sites. But how did the fact-checkers' agendas compare with flagship television news bulletins,

Table 6.5 The percentage of items and claims reported by UK fact-checking websites and television news bulletins (BBC *News at Ten* and Channel 4 at 7pm) (N in brackets)

Platform	No TV coverage	Story match with no corresponding match claim	Story match with corresponding claim match	Total
BBC Reality Check	56.8% (67)	22.9% (27)	20.3% (24)	100% (118)
C4 News FactCheck	60.0% (15)	12.0% (3)	28.0% (7)	100% (25)
Full Fact	92.5% (196)	4.2% (9)	3.3% (7)	100% (212)
Total	78.3% (278)	11.0% (39)	10.7% (38)	100% (355)

and to what degree did broadcasters apply the same level of scrutiny on claims examined?

Table 6.5 shows that the majority of stories covered by fact-checkers were not reported by television news bulletins. While this was understandable for Full Fact – which largely focused on social media disinformation – Reality Check and FactCheck pursued a domestic policy agenda and were part of the same news organisation as broadcasters.

But many of the same stories reported on BBC and Channel 4 did not include claims scrutinised by dedicated fact-checkers. For instance, in coverage of Prime Minister's Questions, a high profile weekly political event at Westminster, Reality Check questioned many of the claims exchanged between the two main party leaders. But the BBC *News at Ten* stuck to a largely 'he said, she said' approach to political reporting, featuring the perspectives of the prime minister and the leader of the opposition with limited scrutiny of their respective claims and counterclaims. While time and resources have often been used as an explanation for why broadcasters cannot subject claims to a great deal of scrutiny, the Reality Check item was published before the BBC *News at Ten* aired. In other words, there was an opportunity for BBC fact-checking online to inform BBC broadcast news output.

Overall, we found that just 20.3 per cent of items on BBC *News at Ten* and 28.0 per cent on Channel 4's nightly bulletin included a claim either from Reality Check, FactCheck or Full Fact in their coverage over a six-week period. To widen the television news analysis, we also examined ITV *News at Ten*, Channel 5 *News at 5* and Sky *News at Ten* in order to compare how the same claims on the fact-checking sites were reported by different television news bulletins (see Table 6.6). Every type of editorial interaction with a political statement was assessed, including whether it was a journalist or external source challenging or validating a claim. We discovered that fact-

checking items included more challenges or validations to claims (N = 269) than broadcast items (N = 223) despite only examining half the number of claims (N = 100) than television news coverage (N = 208). Put simply, television news challenged political claims less frequently and robustly than fact-checking sites.

Table 6.6 reveals how fact-checking sites scrutinised politicians far more than television news bulletins, with over half of claims on TV – 53.8 per cent – left unchallenged by broadcasters. It also shows, compared to television news, fact-checking items challenged more claims explicitly or implicitly, or validated them in some way. In short, fact-checking journalism more routinely held power to account than television news bulletins by applying more scrutiny of politicians' claims and challenging dubious claims.

A few indicative stories help illustrate the differences in how television news and fact-checking sites reported the same political events. For example, in the coverage of the Queen's Speech debate on 12 May 2021 – which is an annual parliamentary event that lays out the government's agenda for the upcoming year – television news bulletins largely focused on the process of the ceremony and parliamentary procedures, while fact-checkers forensically dissected the policy announcements. When an issue was reported on television news, political reporting largely reverted back to the tit-for-tat approach between the two main leaders with minimal journalistic questioning of claims. Channel 5 produced a series of vox pops about social care policies, but at no point were any political or public claims fact-checked. As another example, on 11 June 2021 BBC's Reality Check closely analysed claims by the then health secretary, Matt Hancock, about the government's handling of the pandemic. But on BBC *News at Ten* two claims made about care home discharges and a lockdown extension went unchallenged. Television coverage instead was more personal, asking whether Hancock was a liar or not rather

Table 6.6 Percentage of claims scrutinised across fact-checking sites and television news bulletins (N in brackets)

Extent of interaction with political claim	Fact-checking	TV	Total
Explicit challenge	35.7% (96)	27.8% (62)	32.1% (158)
No interaction with claim	4.5% (12)	53.8% (120)	26.8% (132)
Partial/Implicit challenge	37.2% (100)	13.5% (30)	26.4% (130)
Partial validation	13.4% (36)	1.3% (3)	7.9% (39)
Validation	9.3% (25)	3.6% (8)	6.7% (33)
Total	100% (269)	100% (223)	100% (492)

than dissecting the health secretary's specific policy claims. Some of the other bulletins also featured claims fact-checked on Reality Check, but yet again there was limited scrutiny of claims with many left unchallenged or unvalidated in some way.

The comparative content analysis further revealed that fact-checkers drew on a far wider range of sources to help assess the veracity of claims compared to television news (see Table 6.7). As previously acknowledged, a majority of claims on television news went unchallenged, with either no external source or journalists offering any scrutiny of them. When claims were inspected, it tended to be rival politicians responding to them (promoting a 'he said, she said' approach to reporting) and, to a lesser degree, journalists examining them. By contrast, fact-checking sites drew on a far broader range of information-rich sources, whether from institutional political sources, or scientific experts, including academics from universities and think tanks. Online news, in this respect, was able to draw on hyperlinks and on-screen graphics to help inform coverage, which was more difficult to achieve on television given its format and structure.

Taken together, our analysis shows that while editors considered fact-checking divisions to be central to their journalism, the claims they routinely

Table 6.7 The percentage of top ten sources used to scrutinise claims on television news bulletins and fact-checking platforms (N in brackets)

Source of interaction with claim	Fact-checking	TV	Total
No interaction	4.5% (12)	53.8% (120)	26.8% (132)
Journalist/Analysis (internal)	31.2% (84)	13.9% (31)	23.4% (115)
UK politician/political party/government	8.9% (24)	16.6% (37)	12.4% (61)
Ministerial government department	10.0% (27)	0.4% (1)	5.7% (28)
Non-ministerial government department / statutory agency / public body	7.8% (21)	3.1% (7)	5.7% (28)
Scientist/health/medical expert/SAGE	8.6% (23)	0.4% (1)	4.9% (24)
UK Parliament	5.2% (14)	/	2.8% (14)
Academic	4.5% (12)	0.9 % (2)	2.8% (14)
IGO/NGO	4.1% (11)	/	2.2% (11)
Think tank	3.0% (8)	/	1.6% (8)
Other	12.2% (33)	10.6% (24)	11.4% (57)
Total	100% (269)	100% (223)	100% (492)

checked were not widely included in television news output. When they were covered, the same claims were not treated to the same levels of interrogation and rigour as they were by fact-checking sites. Over half of the same claims assessed on television were left without any interrogation, often representing a tit-for-tat exchange, leaving it largely to politicians to argue between themselves without much journalistic mediation, let alone any challenge to their perspectives. Fact-checking coverage, by contrast, relied twice as much on their journalists as television news to directly scrutinise claims.

Fact-Checking in 2024 and During the UK's Election Campaign: A Case Study of BBC *News at Ten*

The chapter has largely drawn on analysis of fact-checking undertaken during the 2019 election campaign and against the backdrop of the COVID-19 health crisis. We therefore updated our analysis in 2024 to assess whether the role of fact-checking had become a more prominent part of broadcast news programming or if it remained a service delivered mostly online or across social media platforms. As previously explained, the BBC rebranded its fact-checking service, Reality Check, into Verify in 2023, creating a larger team that operated more centrally within the BBC's newsgathering team. The Reality Check team had largely worked outside of the BBC's main newsroom (Soo et al. 2023). In order to explore whether the launch of Verify enhanced fact-checking coverage on broadcast programming, we analysed all references to the new service over seven months (between 1 January and 3 July 2024) on the BBC's evening flagship bulletin, *News at Ten*. This involved systematically examining a routine period of almost five months (between January and June 2024) as well as during a six-week election campaign (between 30 May and 3 July) after a general election was announced. Overall, we examined *News at Ten* coverage in order to assess how and to what extent the BBC Verify team informed reporting on the evening flagship bulletin. Needless to say, we can only quantify explicit references to Verify. It could be that the fact-checking service informed BBC journalism behind the scenes, but we could not assess this unless Verify was namechecked.

On the BBC *News at Ten* between 1 January and 3 July 2024, Verify covered twenty-five fact-checking issues (see Table 6.8). Put another way, in approximately one in seven BBC *News at Ten* programmes, Verify was used to fact-check an issue. Of the twenty-five fact-checking issues covered, sixteen of them related to international conflicts, such as events happening in Ukraine or Palestine, while the remaining nine were about UK domestic politics. Apart from one item about the UK government's budget in March 2024, all of BBC

Table 6.8 The number of references to Verify fact-checking on BBC *News at Ten* between 1 January and 3 July 2024

Month	Number of Verify references by days of month	If Verify referenced, what was fact-checked?
January	2/31	2 international items: Palestine-Israel (2)
February	7/29	7 international items: conflicts in Palestine-Israel (3), Yemen (1), Ukraine-Russia (2) and Kazakhstan (1).
March	3/31	2 international items and one domestic item: Palestine-Israel (1), Ukraine-Russia (1) and UK politics (1)
April	2/30	2 international items: Palestine-Israel (1) and Ukraine-Russia (1)
May (22 May general election announced)	3/31	3 international issues: Palestine-Israel (2) and Saudi Arabia (1)
June	8/30 (in six bulletins)	8 domestic issues: legal migration (2), taxation (3), economy (2) and public opinion polls (1)
July (until 3rd)	0/3	
Total	25/185	16 international issues and 9 domestic issues

Verify's fact-checking on the BBC *News at Ten* appeared during the election campaign in June 2024.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the BBC's new fact-checking service in 2024 was used occasionally rather than routinely on its high-profile broadcast news bulletin. When it was used, Verify tended to cover international issues, such as examining the veracity of claims made by foreign militaries, including on social media, in relation to conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine and Yemen. By contrast, the claims of domestic politicians were not routinely fact-checked by Verify on the BBC *News at Ten*.

However, after a general election was called in May 2024, the number of domestic items fact-checked by Verify spiked in June, with policy claims in areas such as migration, taxation and economy subject to fact-checking analysis. The most prominent fact-check related to a Conservative claim – made more than ten times by Rishi Sunak, the then prime minister, in the first televised leaders' debate during the campaign – that a future Labour government would cost households £2,000 more in tax. Despite Conservative politicians claiming the figures were generated by the civil service, Treasury officials

stated they had not been calculated independently. Moreover, the civil service also pointed out that they had warned the government about making this misleading claim and the UK Statistics Authority had questioned the claim.

Analysis throughout the book has shown broadcasters have tended to be quite cautious in calling out a claim by one political party, particularly during an election campaign. They instead drew on competing party political perspectives to provide balanced coverage. As argued in Chapter 5, this editorial approach was consistent with how journalists adhered to the UK's legal requirement to report impartially. But there is some evidence to suggest that broadcasters adopted a more assertive approach to impartiality during the 2024 general election campaign. This approach, according to BBC journalist, Ros Atkins (2023), represents a forthright and fact-driven approach to debunking claims, which he often did in five-minute explainers that appeared on the BBC News channel and then on its evening bulletins.

A more explicit approach to BBC journalism questioning political claims was evident in how the £2,000 Labour tax allegation was dealt with on the *News at Ten*. For example, the BBC Political Editor, Chris Mason, described the Conservative claims live on air as 'misleading' and 'dubious' – a departure from the typically cautious language adopted by broadcasters during the 2019 general election (see Chapter 5). A BBC Verify reporter broke down the Conservative Party's alleged figures and identified where its political advisors had influenced the calculations. But beyond the fact-check about taxation, BBC Verify also examined the parties' economic plans and migration figures in similarly robust language, decisively providing judgements about their veracity.

Despite the spike in fact-checking stories on the BBC *News at Ten* ahead of the 2024 general election, it remains to be seen whether this represents a new approach to covering domestic political issues or a temporary response to covering dubious campaign claims. While the BBC ramped up its use of Verify on the BBC *News at Ten*, the fact-checking service still only appeared in six programmes out of a possible thirty-five days of coverage – approximately one in six episodes overall – during the official campaign period. A more regular slot for BBC Verify during the campaign might signal a more fully fledged shift towards embracing fact-checking on the public service broadcaster's flagship bulletin.

Towards More Fact-Checking in Broadcast News Reporting

This chapter focused on the extent to which news media have incorporated dedicated fact-checking into their reporting and, where they have, the nature

of their journalistic practices. It began by exploring the growth of studies examining fact-checking sites, and how different media and political systems have shaped their agenda and independence. Most attention has been paid to the US, and the rise of new partisan fact-checkers that reflect the increasingly polarised American political and media system over recent years. But beyond the US, the chapter considered how research on fact-checking needs to be de-westernised, and to more widely examine changes on a global level in the context of their political and media systems. The chapter drew on evidence that revealed how states with authoritarian political systems had used fact-checking for political purposes rather than to challenge misinformation. It was argued that it cannot be normatively assumed that fact-checkers represent an independent and impartial service, since they can be exploited in order for claims to gain political authority and legitimacy. Or, put differently, we acknowledged how political systems can influence media systems and, in turn, shape how fact-checking is carried out along with its wider effectiveness.

The chapter then turned to exploring the few systematic content studies that have examined how news media have incorporated fact-checking into their journalism. It found a diverse range of fact-checking journalism, with little uniformity in the editorial content and style. Broadly speaking, the chapter established that fact-checkers – free from partisan influence – tended to have higher standards than news media, such as producing more transparent ways of sourcing evidence and investigating claims (Humprecht 2020). Moreover, a journalistic logic was viewed as undermining the robust standards typically associated with dedicated fact-checking sites. But this research was largely from a US perspective, where a market-led approach to journalism with light-touch regulation has created a highly commercialised media system (Pickard 2020).

The chapter then focused on the UK, which has an overarching public service broadcasting system that is required to be impartial. It explored how dedicated fact-checking had been introduced into broadcast journalism over years and was often championed by editors as an important part of challenging claims and upholding impartiality. A case in point was the Head of BBC News namechecking Reality Check to defend the public service broadcaster from critics during the 2019 election campaign. We drew on systematic content analysis studies to compare fact-checking journalism on BBC and Channel 4 with an independent fact checker, Full Fact, during the 2019 election campaign. We found that broadcasters tied their fact-checking claims to the main parties' agendas and relied on a select few institutional sources, while Full Fact featured a broader range of topics and expert figures, with output more focused on challenging misinformation from social media (Soo et al. 2023).

In 2021, we examined these three sites again, but comparatively with television news in order to explore whether the same fact-checking informed broadcast output and if claims were treated differently across platforms. We found, above all, that claims assessed by dedicated fact-checking sites – including within the same news organisation – were not widely used by flagship broadcast programmes. When they were covered, we further discovered that fact-checking sites scrutinised claims more than television news bulletins, with over half – 53.8 per cent – of all claims on TV not subject to any journalistic comment or challenge. This is despite the fact that all broadcasters, including BBC and Channel 4, apply the same rigour of impartiality in their journalism across all output, as we discussed in the previous chapter. Of course, fact-checking at speed can be highly challenging for flagship bulletins. But there were times when online fact-checking stories were available to inform television news coverage but were not taken up by broadcasters. Our interviews with editors revealed a degree of separation between the main news and fact-checking teams, which may help explain the contrasting agendas and editorial approaches. While the impartiality rules allow fact-checking in coverage, journalists may be reluctant to regularly take political ‘sides’ by singling out a dubious political claim, and instead rely on balancing their coverage between opposing voices. In doing so, it is often left to dedicated fact-checking sites to apply more robust scrutiny of misleading statements across online or social media sites. We updated our analysis of how broadcasters used fact-checking in 2024, systematically examining the extent to which BBC Verify informed coverage on the BBC *News at Ten*. We found that it tended to be used for international conflicts rather than addressing domestic political claims. However, during the general election campaign in 2024, the flagship bulletin drew more heavily on Verify to question and explicitly call out some dubious claims – a departure from the more cautious approach of BBC reporting (see Chapter 5).

But despite the increase in fact-checking on the BBC *News at Ten* during the 2024 election campaign, our analysis revealed that over recent years fact-checking online or on social media within news organisations has not been widely used in broadcast programming. We also argued that broadcasters applied impartiality differently to online reporting, relying more on balanced coverage rather than challenging false or dubious claims from one side of the political debate. Impartiality, needless to say, can be complex to interpret, with journalists drawing on range of sources to understand an issue or event, and represent fair and balanced debates. It requires a journalistic judgement – reflecting the ‘due’ part of the UK’s broadcast impartiality guidelines – about assessing the veracity of competing claims. But without an evidence-based approach to assessing source claims – which was apparent on television news

– a ‘he said, she said’ approach to reporting can emerge, creating a tit-for-tat narrative where contrasting views are aired but without assessing the accuracy of their views. It can also lead to false equivalence between competing views on a topic, with misinformation a symptom of journalists not robustly holding claims to account (Nyhan and Reifler 2015a). This false equivalence is not sufficient to clarify misconceptions or challenge dubious claims. It can, therefore, feed public confusion and ultimately fuel misinformation.

The next chapter moves from analysing how the news media apply fact-checking in their stories to how the public understand and engage with fact-checking. We carry out an extensive review of how news audiences have responded to fact-checking initiatives around the world, considering the degree to which they have enhanced or undermined people’s knowledge and engagement. We then introduce new ways of understanding the role and value of fact-checking by drawing on our extensive studies with audiences in the UK, including a news diary study, two surveys and fourteen focus groups.

Audience Engagement with Fact-Checking

Fact-checking has been celebrated as a significant journalistic tool in the fight against disinformation. As discussed in Chapter 1, it has been viewed as a new style in political reporting that can revitalise journalism by holding politicians accountable for spreading falsehoods and disinformation (Graves 2016). The assumption is that this increased accountability can raise the standards of political discourse, as well as rehabilitate public trust in journalism and restore journalistic legitimacy. For this to happen, however, fact-checking needs to play a significant and consistent role in the ways the public engages with and consumes political news. It is this question of public engagement with fact-checking that we turn to in this chapter. What role does fact-checking play in the public's news consumption habits? How do people engage with it and how often do they use it? Ultimately, what is the actual impact of fact-checking on people's understanding of politics? These are the issues that we will address in this chapter.

These questions become particularly pertinent when considered in relation to the last two chapters. As we discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, dubious political statements have rarely been subjected to rigorous fact-checking in broadcast news, either because this would be seen as undermining 'due impartiality' or due to the constraints of television news formats. If fact-checking is a tool to fight disinformation in a battle where journalistic legitimacy is at stake, then it is crucial to consider how aware the public are of journalistic fact-checking efforts and whether they engage with them. As we illustrated in Chapter 2, news audiences largely consider disinformation and misinformation to be inherent in journalistic work, as they criticise journalism for often causing confusion by failing to explain political claims or to contextualise them. Fact-checking could provide this forensic approach to information that audiences

deem necessary. If, however, its role in mainstream news is marginalised, as we discussed earlier, its potential for reinvigorating people's trust in journalism would also be undermined.

The chapter starts with a review of existing literature on the audiences of fact-checking. This has largely focused on the effectiveness of fact-checking in correcting misinformed perceptions and has been mostly experimental in nature. The limited studies that questioned whether news audiences use fact-checking have illustrated this use as politically motivated or ideologically conditioned, given that fact-checking is embedded in broader partisan frameworks of news consumption. These findings mostly reflect the polarised nature of US politics, where most of these studies were conducted. Research beyond the US, however, has also illustrated limited use of fact-checking. This was confirmed by the findings of our audience studies, which, as described in the Introduction, included an online diary with 200 participants conducted during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a survey of 1,065 participants and a follow up qualitative survey of 542 people, and 14 focus groups consisting of 52 respondents, which were carried out in the spring of 2021. We found that audiences in our studies were not very familiar with UK fact-checkers and, by extension, very rarely used them. However, when we asked research participants to reflect on specific examples of fact-checking, they expressed an appetite for more inclusion of this type of journalism in news. We ultimately argue that fact-checking is a valuable form of journalism that can enhance journalistic legitimacy by filling in the gaps in journalistic reporting that were identified by audiences and discussed in Chapter 2. For this to happen, however, fact-checking needs to become incorporated in mainstream news content and, therefore, part of routine news consumption.

Correcting Misinformed Audiences

Similar to academic and journalistic assumptions about the audience of disinformation, as mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, research about fact-checking has also been underlined by assumptions about the passivity of news audiences. Framing audiences as victims of disinformation, extensive research – largely experimental in nature and based in the US – has attempted to explore how effective fact-checking can be in correcting misinformed perceptions. This research has illustrated remarkable imbalances in the ways people approach fact-checking and their openness to its corrective potential on the basis of individual characteristics, such as pre-existing attitudes, political affiliations, world views and levels of scepticism (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Nyhan and Reifler (2015b), for example, conducted a multi-wave panel survey during

the 2014 US election campaign to explore attitudes towards fact-checking and how they might change during the campaign. One of the main challenges for fact-checkers, the authors argued, was the fact that people who were interested in and knowledgeable about politics were also more receptive to the practice of fact-checking. At the same time, Republican voters tended to have a more negative view of fact-checking and appeared more resistant to its corrections. In other words, the impact of fact-checking in the US was influenced by people's partisan identity.

Furthermore, research has discovered that the public often apply motivated reasoning when confronted with corrective messaging (Schaffner and Roche 2017), particularly among Conservative/Republican voters (Walter et al. 2019, 364). This type of reasoning is also aggravated by emotions such as anger (Weeks 2015). At the same time, 'belief echoes' (Thorson 2016) or the 'continued influence effect' mean that retractions are not always effective, even when people believe, understand and remember the retraction (Lewandowsky et al. 2012, 114). This, Thorson (2016) has argued, can be explained on the basis that misinformation has a strong affective impact on people, becoming immediately integrated into their evaluations of politics and political candidates. It is this immediate affective response that generates belief echoes rather than deliberative, cognitive processes.

Lewandowsky et al. (2017) have, therefore, concluded that for fact-checking to be effective it must not directly challenge people's world views, and must explain why misinformation was disseminated in the first place. Research has also illustrated that fact-checking can be effective, when repeating retractions, providing an alternative explanation, as well as explicit warnings before reporting a false claim, and using simple language (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Belief echoes, according to Thorson (2016, 476), can be minimised not only by correcting misinformation but additionally providing a narrative about how misinformation emerged in the first place. Furthermore, fact-checking is more favourably viewed when people are randomly exposed to it, irrespective of their individual characteristics and pre-existing attitudes, and this randomised exposure helps the public become better informed (Nyhan and Reifler 2015b). In their study on US Twitter (now X) users, Margolin et al. (2018) found that people were more likely to accept corrections from users they followed or were followed by rather than strangers. Moving beyond partisan politics, Carnahan and Bergan (2022) found that, when it came to correcting false beliefs about immigration, fact-checking could have a positive impact on US citizens, even those with high levels of confidence in inaccurate beliefs. Similarly, concerns about COVID-19 were found to increase support and interest in fact-checking across political lines (Rich et al. 2020). In their meta-review of the literature,

Walter et al. (2019) discovered that the threat of partisan motivated reasoning was exaggerated, as this was largely linked to election periods rather than routine reporting. Ultimately, the bulk of research related to corrective fact-checks concluded that it could have a positive influence, although this is conditional upon its format, and on the decisiveness of fact-checking judgements (Walter et al. 2019).

The findings of these studies, taken together, have provided significant insights into the cognitive processes through which people understand misinformation and its correctives, as well as conveying specific recommendations for the successful debunking of misinformation. Although they do offer answers about the effectiveness of fact-checking in influencing people's beliefs, they tell us little about the role that fact-checking plays in people's daily consumption of news. If fact-checking is to play a role in challenging misinformation and enhancing journalistic legitimacy, it needs to be embedded in people's routine media consumption habits and their engagement with politics.

Who Uses Fact-Checking?

Experimental studies testing the effectiveness of fact-checking in challenging misinformed beliefs have proliferated over recent years. But little attention has been paid to the ways fact-checking as a journalistic practice has become part of audiences' news consumption repertoires. This gap is startling, given that if fact-checking is to fight disinformation and restore journalistic legitimacy, it needs to be widely adopted by the general public. If audiences fail to engage with fact-checking, its mission to reinvigorate journalism is likely to remain limited.

People's engagement with fact-checking has also been understood through a narrow lens. Most studies that have explored the question of who uses fact-checking have tended to be US-based. They have largely confirmed the polarising nature of the country's political environment and, by extension, news media use. Some research has illustrated that the use of fact-checking in the US has limited public reach, with one survey revealing that roughly half of the population were not very familiar with fact-checkers while about a third of the public claimed to be 'very unfamiliar' with them (Nyhan and Reifler 2015b, 8). In their study of individual web traffic data, along with a representative survey of Americans, Guess et al. (2018, 11) found that engagement with fact-checking was more common among people that did not consume fake news. Moreover, they found that people almost never read fact-checks about specific fake news articles they had consumed themselves. In other words, fact-checking was generally failing to directly counter disinformation people had encountered.

Furthermore, research into the characteristics of fact-checking use has suggested it has been ideologically conditioned, if not politically motivated (Shin and Thorson 2017; Amazeen et al. 2019; Walker and Gottfried 2019). For example, while about half of the US population have evaluated fact-checkers as fair and impartial – more than mainstream news organisations – about 70 per cent of Republicans have suggested fact-checkers favour one side of the political spectrum (Walker and Gottfried 2019). Exploring how fact-checking was employed by different groups discussing the 2016 US election on Reddit, Parekh et al. (2020) confirmed that corrective fact-checks were more extensively and effectively used in the non-partisan subreddit politics sites than partisan-driven subreddits for Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton. Ultimately, what these studies have highlighted is that, despite fact-checkers largely positioning themselves as objective watchdogs, the way they have been understood and used by the public is ‘absorbed into wider ideological discourses and patterns of news consumption’ (Robertson et al. 2020, 217). This research suggests the effectiveness as well as the broader mission of fact-checking is undermined, if it only influences those already interpreting fact-checking as a valuable process and who generally hold high levels of political knowledge.

At the same time, fact-checking might be viewed according to patterns of mistrust similar to the journalistic profession overall. In an attempt to explore how US social media users evaluated and engaged with fact-checking in natural settings, Brandtzaeg and Følstad (2017) analysed social media users’ comments about fact-checking, focusing mostly on perception of trustworthiness and usefulness. Although positive comments were mostly related to the perceived usefulness of fact-checkers, about 60–70 per cent of the comments expressed negative sentiment about Snopes and FactCheck.org. This was largely related to a perceived left-wing bias, but also appeared motivated by an underlying mistrust towards the social and political system. The conclusions of the study point out that not only is fact-checking not successful in reinvigorating trust in journalism but seems to be interpreted within the same kind of generalised lack of trust toward news media.

Taken together, these research findings represent how fact-checking is used in American’s highly polarised political environment. But what can they tell us about the use of fact-checking beyond the US and across different media systems? In a Hong Kong-based study on a very polarising issue, namely the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (AEBM), Chia et al. (2022) discovered through a survey that it was men with extensive news consumption and political involvement in the issue that used fact-checking the most. Furthermore, fact-checking was also found to have reinforced beliefs in misinformation about opposition groups. Lyons et al. (2020) explored public attitudes towards

fact-checking in six European countries, including France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden. They concluded that, similarly to attitudes in the US, research participants' political interest and knowledge predicted familiarity with fact-checking. However, in Northern Europe, where people were exposed to public service media and tended to have a high level of institutional trust, there was greater acceptance and positive evaluation of fact-checking. In other words, it is not only political polarisation but also media systems that play an important role in how the public evaluates and engages with fact-checking (Cushion et al. 2022b).

Further studies have illustrated the limited engagement much of the public have with fact-checking. In a non-representative survey with young social media users in the Philippines, Lavilles et al. (2023) found that although 62 per cent of their respondents were aware of fact-checking websites, just under half – 46 per cent – reported to have used them. They were also ambivalent in terms of trusting these sites, with their judgements varying depending on the platform. Ultimately, the authors found that fact-checkers were not central to processes of verification of information, as social media users found that other ways, such as looking for information on search engines, better responded to their news consumption needs. Schwarzenegger's (2020, 370) German interviewees claimed to be so critical and sceptical of the news media that they found fact-checking unnecessary, given that they already did not believe much of the information they received. Chang (2021) also found that only a minority of survey respondents in a Taiwan-based study used fact-checking as a means of authenticating information, whereas the majority relied on personal evaluations.

Ultimately, while most of the research has focused on the effectiveness of corrective information, the most critical question that studies in the US and around the world have posed is how this corrective information can reach the public. Or, put more simply, how fact-checking can become more popular and widespread among the general public. We now turn to advancing this research agenda in terms of understanding people's knowledge and understanding of fact-checking, as well as how they believe it can be used to enhance their knowledge and engagement with politics.

Familiarity with and Use of Fact-Checking

In order to explore public engagement with fact-checking in quantitative and qualitative detail, we now draw on our own UK-based audience studies, including an online diary during the height of the pandemic in 2020, a quantitative survey of 1,065 people, a follow-up qualitative survey of 542 people, and

14 focus groups with 52 participants all undertaken in the spring of 2021. Our aim was to consider how fact-checking informed people’s news consumption habits during a major health crisis and in more routine periods of time.

Overall, we found that while the practice of fact-checking was broadly familiar to research participants, the vast majority did not use the UK’s fact-checking services. In fact, as Table 7.1 reveals, in our diary study only 13 per cent stated that they had used the BBC’s Reality Check services once or twice, while for Channel 4’s FactCheck and Full Fact just 6 per cent and 7 per cent respectively had used it. This fell to 7 per cent when considering who regularly used BBC Reality Check, compared to just 3 per cent for Channel 4’s FactCheck and Full Fact.

Our larger survey of 1,065 participants in May 2021, which explored perceptions of disinformation and fact-checking in detail, found that almost a third – 31 per cent – of respondents were aware of the BBC Reality Check site, compared to 9 per cent for Channel 4’s FactCheck, 11 per cent for Full Fact, and 5 per cent for Sky News Campaign Check (see Table 7.2).

As expected, this lack of awareness was reflected in the limited use of the UK’s main fact-checking websites. Although about 18 per cent of the survey respondents claimed to have used BBC Reality Check once or twice,

Table 7.1 The percentage of diary participants who use fact-checking sites (N in brackets)

Use of fact-checking	BBC Reality Check	Channel 4 FactCheck	Full Fact
Not at all	80% (139)	91% (158)	90% (156)
Once or twice	13% (23)	6% (11)	7% (12)
Regularly	7% (12)	3% (5)	3% (6)
Total	100% (174)	100% (174)	100% (174)

Table 7.2 The percentage of survey respondents who were aware of UK fact-checking services (N in brackets)

Fact-checking	Reality Check	Channel 4 FactCheck	Full Fact	Sky News Campaign Check
Aware of	31% (334)	9% (100)	11% (120)	5% (49)
Not aware of	69% (731)	91% (965)	89% (945)	95% (1016)
Total	100% (1,065)	100% (1,065)	100% (1,065)	100% (1,065)

Table 7.3 The percentage of survey respondents who used UK fact-checking sites (N in brackets)

Frequency	Reality Check	C4 FactCheck	Full Fact
Not at all	78% (830)	93% (991)	91% (966)
Once or twice	18% (193)	6% (60)	6% (61)
Regularly	4% (42)	1% (14)	4% (38)
Total	100% (1,065)	100 % (1,065)	100% (1,065)

Table 7.3 shows that more than 90 per cent of them had never used FactCheck or Full Fact.

The findings from the fourteen focus groups carried out in 2021 broadly reinforced the conclusions of our online diary and survey studies with regard to audience awareness and use of fact-checking. We found that research participants claimed to have heard of fact-checking and seemed aware of what the practice entailed. However, they could not name specific UK fact-checking sites. In fact, only six out of fifty-two participants knew that the BBC had its own fact-checking service and could not remember its specific name. Full Fact was mentioned by four participants and a couple said that they had used Snopes, the US-based commercial online fact-checker. Just one participant, exceptional in her heavy consumption of TV news and social media, seemed to be aware of the three main fact-checkers in the UK (Reality Check, FactCheck and Full Fact).

The few focus group participants that had used fact-checking told us they did so as a means of clarifying the validity of political claims, especially before elections. For example, one participant in the diary study, who claimed to regularly use fact-checking, explained he had:

first heard of these websites during the Brexit referendum build-up. I found them really useful when discussing the issue with friends who had a different view than I did in order to remove some of the hyperbolic and tabloid-esque ‘facts’ that they would use to argue their case. I then also used the websites more frequently during the December general election campaign.

Similarly, the few participants in the focus groups that used fact-checkers described how they followed the Twitter (now X) account of BBC Reality Check regularly only during ‘election time’ and ‘political conference season’ or checked information about COVID-19 vaccines on Full Fact before getting vaccinated. These comments seemed to link fact-checking to periods of social

and political anxiety, when fears about misinformation or actual disinformation were rife. They thus confirm the temporal nature of disinformation, as discussed in Chapter 2. This reinforces research findings that suggest misinformation is likely to be perceived as more severe during critical periods in time, which then affects how people cope with information, including whether they turn to fact-checkers (Chang 2021).

For other focus group participants, especially those that had heard about fact-checking, but had never used it themselves, this journalistic practice was mostly associated with conspiracy theories and ‘fringe beliefs’, such as 5G masts spreading COVID-19. Some participants also referenced warnings of unreliable information that social media platforms, such as Twitter (now X) and Instagram, started to include in some of their posts and videos as, for example, in relation to Donald Trump’s false claims that he had won the November 2020 USA elections. Given the confidence that participants felt in detecting this type of fake news, as discussed in Chapter 2, many found that fact-checking was not useful to them. This confidence not only stemmed from the trust they had in their selected news sources, but also by what they described as ‘doing their own research’ or ‘fact-checking’, as explained in Chapter 2.

Fact-Checking as Valuable Journalism

Most of our research participants – across the online diaries, surveys and focus groups – appeared highly confident when dealing with news and perceived misinformation. But once we discussed fact-checking with them, they were overwhelmingly positive about its journalistic role and wider purpose.

Given the limited exposure to and knowledge of fact-checking among participants, we shared examples of fact-checking with them and asked them to further reflect on these. Respondents in the diary study, for example, were asked to reflect on a BBC Reality Check video debunking COVID-19 myths, as well as the web page of BBC Reality Check. They were also shown BBC Reality Check stories challenging government claims about reaching specific health targets, juxtaposed with BBC television news reporting that would uncritically reproduce these claims.

Similarly, we showed focus group participants – half-way through the discussions – three short news clips from BBC, ITV and Sky News, all reporting on the same contentious claim. This was made during the 2019 election campaign by the then prime minister, Boris Johnson, who promised that 50,000 nurses would be hired under a new Conservative government. According to fact-checkers, the claim was not accurate, as the figure included successfully encouraging about 19,000 existing nurses to remain at the NHS.

However, out of the three news clips, it was only the Sky News one that challenged the claim, under the label of fact-checking. The first two clips shown to the focus groups (ITV and BBC News) uncritically reported this claim. Each clip was followed by a short discussion that illustrated that participants appreciated the information received and deemed the report accurate. It was only after watching the third Sky News clip, which included a dedicated fact-checking segment entitled ‘Sky News campaign check’, that they became aware of how the first two reports, by not questioning the claim, had failed to help them understand it and, in doing so, misled them about the alleged recruitment of 50,000 new nurses.

The support for fact-checking among participants – once the practice was discussed and illustrated – was overwhelming. This was also evident in the survey results. The vast majority of respondents in our survey of 542 people in 2021 – 82 per cent – wanted journalists to fact-check politicians. This strong support for fact-checking was apparent across ideological and party political lines, with slightly more support from those on the political left (84 per cent) than right (78 per cent) as well as for Labour (82 per cent) compared to Conservative (78 per cent) voters. This contrasts with some other countries, across Europe (Lyons et al. 2020) and especially the US (Nyhan and Reifler 2015b), where research has suggested that those on the political right tend to trust fact-checkers far less than those holding left-wing perspectives.

In a similar vein, the degree to which respondents were engaged with mainstream media or politics did not influence whether they wanted journalists to fact-check more or less (see Table 7.5). There was only marginally greater support for fact-checking among respondents more engaged than disengaged with mainstream media (7 per cent) or more politically engaged than disengaged (8 per cent).

The apparent lack of polarisation and ideological asymmetry with regards to how receptive research participants were to fact-checking can be justified when one contextualises these findings within the UK media system.

Table 7.4 The percentage of participants supporting the use of fact-checking according to their ideological and party political perspectives (N in brackets)

	All	Left	Right	Lab	Con
Don't know	12% (66)	11% (36)	12% (19)	10% (18)	12% (19)
Fact-check less	6% (32)	4% (13)	10% (16)	3% (16)	10% (16)
Fact-check more	(82%) (444)	84% (266)	78% (127)	87% (159)	78% (121)
Total	100% (542)	100% (315)	100% (162)	100% (193)	100% (156)

Table 7.5 The percentage of participants supporting the use of fact-checking according to their level of engagement with mainstream media and politics (N in brackets)

	All	MSM engaged	MSM disengaged	Pol. engaged	Not pol. engaged
Don't know	12% (66)	11% (30)	14% (16)	7% (17)	15% (25)
Fact-check less	6% (32)	6% (16)	9% (10)	7% (16)	5% (9)
Fact-check more	82% (444)	84% (233)	77% (86)	85% (194)	80% (137)
Total	100% (542)	100% (279)	100% (112)	100% (227)	100% (171)

As opposed to many highly polarised national media and political systems – most strikingly the US – the UK, as we discussed earlier, has an influential public service media infrastructure which requires broadcasters to be impartial. This underlying public service ethos in broadcast media has, for many decades, cultivated a relatively high level of trust in television journalism, which was established in Chapter 3. This broad faith in journalism translates into public confidence, including the kind of journalistic scrutiny involved in fact-checking processes (Cushion et al. 2022b). By contrast, in highly polarised national media and political systems, the public can be suspicious of journalists and sceptical about whether they can impartially fact-check politicians.

The qualitative responses from our participants across the news diaries, surveys and focus groups often expressed confidence that fact-checking can enrich both public engagement with the news and political understanding. Viewed in this light, we argue that participants experienced fact-checking as a form of ‘valuable journalism’ (Costera Meijer 2022, 230), namely as journalism that news audiences find worthwhile and useful in ways that might diverge from professional ideals. This was explained across three main dimensions. The first was the value of fact-checking for understanding the context of news stories and political claims. The second dimension constructed fact-checking as a tool for political accountability. The third dimension related to journalistic legitimacy, with fact-checking considered critical for news media to carry out their ‘watchdog role’. Although these three dimensions of fact-checking often overlapped in participants’ understandings of it, we have analytically separated them in order to illustrate the different ways it was interpreted as valuable journalism.

The value of fact-checking as contextual information was articulated in terms of providing news audiences with the resources necessary to understand current affairs, formulate judgements and take decisions that affected them. For participants in the online diary study, their receptiveness to fact-check-

ing was framed by anxieties over the global pandemic and the need to verify information necessary for dealing with daily decisions that had to do with public health. They saw fact-checking as a necessary tool for challenging any misinformation stemming from social media, as well as confusion caused by relevant political news. It was considered to be vital for people in order for them to have an ‘accurate view of the situation’, as one female participant put it, ‘both so that people can understand the severity but also not believe everything that they see and suffer mentally due to worrying’. A few participants also mentioned that challenging racist misconceptions or ‘hate between races/nations’ was another way fact-checking could have been useful during the pandemic, presumably referring to the stigmatisation of China being seen as responsible for causing and spreading the virus and the xenophobic attacks that ensued during the first months of the pandemic (Karalis Noel 2020).

Importantly, it was not only online misinformation that needed to be fact-checked and challenged, according to participants, but also claims made by politicians, as they were the most important source of information framing the way the public understood the virus. This call to fact-check claims made by politicians was justified on two grounds. On the one hand, informants were asking for more clarity in the messages that they would get on daily updates, in order to ‘clear up misconceptions’, especially as there had ‘been conflicting information such as ideas on immunity and reinfection’. There were a few issues that participants found confusing with regard to political messaging in the first few months of the pandemic, as illustrated in our diary study, and discussed in Chapter 2. These included lockdown measures, the number of deaths reported daily, the use of face masks and PPE (Kyriakidou et al. 2020). This lack of specificity in political messaging, as one participant wrote, meant that ‘people are in limbo, and it gives people the wrong impression’.

In a similar vein, many participants in the focus groups, when discussing the Sky News fact-check of the pledge of the 50,000 NHS nurses introduced earlier in the chapter, drew attention to the usefulness of fact-checking in helping them understand the context surrounding political decisions and claims and formulate informed opinions. The Sky News clip was highly praised for ‘breaking down’ the information, which helped participants comprehend the political claim, rather than just repeating the dubious pledges of politicians. Despite actively verifying news that is important to them, our participants still had expectations that broadcasters would provide them with news that featured not just plain information but sufficient context to make sense of it. As a young woman who claimed not to watch television news often put it, ‘that’s why you watch the news – you want information.

But you don't just want little bits of information, you want all the information.' Similarly, another woman who was a heavy consumer of television news, argued that:

That's the kind of thing that should be regular. We should be expecting that level of breakdown of information, we should be expecting that level of detail, rather than just snippets, headline grabbing information.

This expectation was even higher during general elections, several participants argued, as well as other critical moments where 'making a judgement' was expected by the public, such as during the EU referendum campaign or the global pandemic. This reaffirmed the time-bound nature of public fears about and understandings of disinformation, discussed earlier. After all, it is in times of crisis that so-called 'fake news' and misinformation proliferate. According to participants, it was during these moments in time that the public expects more from journalists, helping them to understand the context within which they are asked to make decisions.

These responses, highlighting the usefulness of fact-checking in providing further contextual information, need to be considered within the discussion about public understandings of disinformation and misinformation addressed in Chapter 2. To recap, disinformation was understood by our participants beyond fake news reproduced on social media or explicit lies told by politicians. In their view, it included possible misinformation and confusion created by the media when, for instance, journalists did not provide adequate context about news stories. According to participants, then, fact-checking not only served to verify information but to also provide the public with the tools necessary to understand politics.

This sense of empowerment that participants experienced was based on the opportunity for understanding and learning that fact-checking provided them with, in this case by unpacking a political claim. It is this opportunity that many participants seem to think is missing from mainstream news – as discussed in Chapter 2 – which makes fact-checking valuable and worthwhile. As Costera Meijer (2022, 238) has observed when analysing news audiences, this 'joy of suddenly understanding a complex situation or topic' or having an eye-opening experience, as our research participants seemed to have, is central in the type of 'valuable journalism' that centres on audience experiences rather than normative understandings of the profession. A focus group participant that seemed to have a keen interest in news explained the unpacking of information by fact-checkers as something that dovetails with the evolving demands of news audiences, who:

are more interested in data these days, and analysis. And we're not happy with just one line that includes really big numbers, we're demanding more of, 'what does that actually mean?', 'what does that actually mean in real terms?', 'what does that mean for my locality?' We're asking those questions and I think news agencies are having to go into it rather than 'that's their one-line statement that covers health, believe it or don't believe it, up to you'. There is that demand out there, from us, wanting to see more granular information about these bold statements. I think the perfect example is that bus with the big number on it, some people were bought by that and lots of others, and when it comes down to it, where has that gone? Oh well 'that was never the promise', kind of thing, so people are pushing more for that underlying data.

Underlining the need for contextual information among participants was the lack of trust in politicians, or at best a belief that it was not always in the best interests of politicians to fully communicate and explain their claims to the public. As discussed in Chapter 2, spin and the manipulation of information were viewed by our participants as inherent in politics and the way politicians communicate with the public. Fact-checking, in this context, was constructed as valuable because it could act as a tool for political accountability. For example, in the online diaries, fact-checking was considered highly useful because it could hold politicians accountable for their mishandling of the pandemic. Government failures were mentioned extensively in the diaries, such as the UK's missed opportunity to join an EU scheme to buy PPE in bulk, and the respective shortages in the NHS. In that context, fact-checking was seen as a way for holding political leaders accountable for their failures, as described by a young man, when he reflected on the usefulness of the BBC's Reality Check service and whether it should feature more on BBC news. He believed it was:

Very important. A lot of these politicians and big figures need to be held accountable to what they say and by doing these reality check reports the public can form their own opinions on these important figures. England is a great example; we had seen what the coronavirus is doing to Italy and had time to prepare for it, yet we were one of the latest to close our airports and take COVID-19 seriously and now we are at over 20,000 deaths!! So I believe more should be included especially on UK Politicians.

The fact-checking of politicians was broadly seen as necessary by our participants on two grounds. In the short term, it helped the public make informed decisions. For example, during the global pandemic this would

mean, according to participants, that the public had a better understanding of the situation, did not panic or follow ‘scaremongering’ information on social media, and complied with lockdown rules or other public health measures. A young participant and Labour voter in the focus groups described the value of fact-checking at election time:

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 tell us in more detail than what Boris ... because Boris isn’t going to go into depth – he wants people to hear what he wants them to hear, to get elected. That’s just the way it is with politicians, I think. 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.

In the longer term, such political accountability, according to our participants, could lead to more confidence in politicians and enhance trust in the political process. In this respect, fact-checking was seen as being able to establish a culture of political accountability beyond checking the trustworthiness of specific political claims. This idea of accountability reporting, which promotes democratic discourse and accountable government, has underlined fact-checking initiatives around the world, irrespective of their organisational and practical differences (Graves and Cherubini 2016; Graves 2018). Professional perceptions, viewed in this light, dovetail with audience expectations.

Including more fact-checking in routine news reporting, according to many of our participants, could further empower citizens and improve their engagement with politics. As one of the oldest participants in the focus groups, who had not voted in the previous election, put it, fact-checking political claims could ‘begin to dissolve public indifference to politicians’ lies’. It could also create greater confidence in political news, as people would feel confident that only claims that were truthful would be covered in the news. If not, they would be challenged by journalists, as one participant in her diary entry pointed out when reflecting on the significance of fact-checking claims by politicians:

By weeding out the truth from the fiction, people can trust better in what is reported. I think it would be very useful to use this with UK politicians as so many distrust them. It could lead to greater compliance with lockdown rules for example. Overall, including pieces like this in news bulletins could lead to greater confidence in them and greater accountability for all.

At the same time, among participants there was the assumption that this threat of fact-checking and potential reputational damage would deter politicians from lying and would further improve political discourse (Nyhan and Reifler 2015a; Lim 2018a), although it might also open the space for politicians to avoid employing verifiable claims altogether (Mattozi et al. 2023). It is this belief in the corrective potential of fact-checking on political discourse that participants often drew attention to in focus group discussions:

But I do think, doing something like that, it would definitely put politicians on the spot and make them think about what they're actually saying, because it would discredit them if that flashed up, that they'd try to avoid it and so maybe they would lean more towards the truth.

Overlapping with such expressions of mistrust towards politicians were expectations about the role of journalism as the watchdog of political power. Research participants in their majority argued that fact-checking should be integral to routine reporting, as verifying and challenging the claims of politicians was expected from journalists. This was particularly illustrated in the focus group discussions, and the juxtaposition of the different clips reporting on the same claim, with only one of them fact-checking it and explaining the context of the pledge of hiring 50,000 nurses. According to one participant, the ITV news clip, which merely reported the claim without explaining nor challenging it, 'was technically accurate but morally not accurate at all'. According to another one, the first two clips felt like 'a retweet without reading the content. It's just, 'here's the headline – minus the content.' Taken together, these responses show how mainstream news can circulate misinformation by amplifying untruthful claims without questioning or challenging them, as we have discussed throughout this book. The news stories that did not unpack the political pledge of hiring 50,000 nurses failed to make audiences understand the complicated nature of the claim, thus leading to misinformation and public confusion.

This was also acknowledged in our survey, when respondents were asked to reflect on whether it should be expected by the media or other politicians to challenge political claims. While the responses were varied and nuanced, the majority of respondents believed the role of journalists was to scrutinise and, when necessary, question information. As one respondent put it, 'If someone tells a lie, you would not just tell everyone that same lie, yet labelling it as true, before scrutinising first.' If journalists fail to do that, our participants broadly agreed that they failed in their journalistic roles and risked becoming facilitators of political misinformation. For example, one respondent stated:

The role of journalism is to gather, analyse, scrutinise, create and present information for the public. Scrutiny of information presented by politicians is fundamental to that role. If journalists do not or cannot do that effectively then they cease to be journalists and become a mouthpiece for others.

Underlining the responses, both in the surveys and focus groups, was a distinction between just reporting and interpreting claims for the public. If journalists merely did the former, they were seen to be in collusion with politicians. Given that misinformation was seen as inherent in politics, as we discussed in Chapter 2, journalism was by extension seen as being complicit with politicians in promoting it. In the words of one survey respondent, 'If they are just reporting the claims, we might as well just listen to a recording of the politicians' claims.' On the contrary, our research participants believed that journalistic interpretation should routinely involve unpacking, challenging and fact-checking claims. In a lengthy answer, one survey respondent explained this expectation:

The media are the ultimate mediators of news. It is simply misguided to think that all they could be reduced to is 'report what happens'. If the BBC were to report all that happens in the world, that would be one long broadcast. Rather, the media already has to choose what is news-worthy, what to show, etc. Given this interpretative role and responsibility they already have, they should provide unbiased but decisive fact-checking.

There are two salient points to highlight here in respect of how participants constructed the watchdog role of journalists. First, objectivity and interpretation were not mutually exclusive in the way research participants perceived fact-checking and journalism overall. Explanation of political claims and interpretation of the context within which they were made were both welcome and considered part of the job of fact-checking. Viewed in that light, fact-checking does not reflect nor encourage a simplistic understanding of the world, as its critics seem to assume (Uscinski and Butler 2013, 163). On the contrary, our participants believed it could help news audiences better understand politics, as discussed above and described here by a focus group participant, who explained that she does not necessarily expect fact-checkers to call politicians liars. Instead, she thought they can help the public better understand how political claims can be misleading:

instead of saying this is right or wrong, or a lie or not, I think it would make more sense to just have more context on why this person says this

and what is the objective behind it, especially when it comes to politics. Yes, Covid there are the facts and the truth, but there is also some decision made out of ... I don't know, it could be economic reasons, or something else, or maybe because there is a campaign coming or whatever. So it's not just about saying this person lied because of this, but more explaining why this person said that, and just additional information, including some fact-checking, but not just the facts, also the reason why this person said that.

The second point to underline in relation to how our participants understood fact-checking was that it presupposed a certain degree of trust in the media and their potential to be a watchdog of political power. In some of the discussions it was pointed out that, when adopting fact-checking, journalists should be cautious in keeping a journalistic balance, ensuring they challenge different political parties to the same degree. However, despite their assumptions that media can be complicit with politics in reproducing misinformation, our participants seemed to still recognise that journalism operates separately from political power, which is the precondition for the press's watchdog role (Palmer et al. 2020). This assumed trust should once more be contextualised within the UK's media system and the overall political culture, which lacks the polarisation observed in other national contexts and media systems (Cushion et al. 2022b).

Fact-Checking and Journalistic Legitimacy

This chapter has demonstrated that the public's understanding of the role and value of fact-checking is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, research has mostly focused on how effective fact-checking can be in correcting misinformed beliefs. Despite their diversity and the challenges in the corrective potential of fact-checking they illustrate, these research projects point to specific ways and contexts within which fact-checking can play an important role in challenging misinformation and helping audiences become better informed. However, we argued that this research tells us little about how fact-checking is employed by audiences in their routine news consumption and about the broader role it can play in reinvigorating journalistic legitimacy. The few studies that have addressed this question have pointed out that the use of fact-checking is rather limited and, at least in polarising political environments such as the US, determined by political orientation and often explained by partisan motivations. And yet, in our study the ideological motivations of respondents did not deter their support for fact-checking. While many participants could

not regularly use or name dedicated UK fact-checking sites, an overwhelming majority agreed that this approach to journalism should more routinely inform news reporting. We argued that the public's appetite for fact-checking was conditioned by the UK's overarching public service broadcasting ecology that attempted to be impartial in coverage of politics and public affairs. Nevertheless, the fact that the vast majority of our participants were unfamiliar with fact-checking, and therefore would not use it, also meant that the practice served only a small and engaged minority, and so its role in informing public debates was limited (Birks 2019b).

Overall, our research shows that fact-checking can foster engagement with news and, in so doing, enhance the public legitimacy of journalism. When asked to reflect on specific examples of fact-checking, a majority of participants revealed how they viewed it as a form of 'valuable journalism' (Costera Meijer 2022, 230). Based on these findings, we argue that the value of fact-checking can be identified in three interrelated dimensions. It can provide contextual information that helps the public better understand politics, act as a tool of political accountability and confirm the role of journalism as the watchdog of political power. In this context, we would agree that fact-checking can reinforce public trust in news (Graves 2016) and empower citizens (Singer 2018).

It seems, however, that in order for this to happen, fact-checking first needs to tackle the problem of its reputation among audiences – or lack thereof. Ultimately, it needs to become a more routine and integral part of flagship broadcast news reporting, as we have already discussed in Chapter 6, given that it is this reporting in its various platforms that reaches the biggest audiences (see also Riley 2019). This will ensure the reach and influence of fact-checking will be extended, making it a day-to-day news practice as opposed to during election campaigns or pandemics. There is a further gap to be bridged in the relationship between the public and fact-checking. Graves et al. (2016) found that it is primarily professional motivations and the promotion of journalistic values that drives fact-checkers, rather than the aspiration to respond to audience needs. From this perspective, fact-checkers appear to professionally position themselves in relation to journalists and politicians as opposed to the wider public. By neglecting, however, their audiences and how they can cater to their needs, fact-checkers ultimately largely fail to engage audiences with their work. Moreover, this can also mean that fact-checkers risk reproducing the gap between professional motivations and audience understandings discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. While disinformation and misinformation have been broadly understood by journalists as external threats to news work, what our research has revealed is that misinformation is already seen by research

participants as inherent in the work of journalists. This means that turning fact-checking into a routine journalistic convention would not only correct external disinformation but would also improve how the public thinks about journalism.

We develop our analysis of how to more effectively engage the public with fact-checking journalism in the final chapter. It brings together the salient findings of the book and argues that the news media need to rethink how they counter disinformation if they want to enhance their journalistic authority.

Countering Misinformation in Political Reporting

This book has made the case for why it is important for news media to more effectively counter political disinformation and enhance public understanding. We have examined how broadcast media have attempted to confront false and misleading political information over recent years, as well as how audiences engaged with and reacted to such journalistic efforts. The book drew on several large-scale content analysis studies that forensically scrutinised the extent to which journalists challenged political claims and the nature of their corrections, as well as interviews with senior editors and journalists from the UK's major broadcasters and their specialist fact-checking sites. We also explored audience evaluations and engagement with news media through a variety of methods, including a six-week news diary study, fourteen focus groups and two large scale surveys. This extensive analysis, along with a review of the latest academic literature on disinformation and fact-checking, generated a wide range of evidence-based conclusions about how effectively the news media can counter disinformation. This included identifying gaps in public knowledge about politics, and assessing how journalists could more effectively challenge false or misleading information, and provide greater context and explanation for audiences. Across different case studies, our research identified areas where the news media robustly countered disinformation and interpreted issues cogently for audiences. But we also found instances where the news media could have tackled false and misleading information more convincingly. In doing so, our research identified reporting that could have unwittingly reproduced disinformation and spread misinformation among audiences.

This final chapter brings together the salient findings of the book across five themes. First, we rethink debates about the origins of misinformation. Rather than focusing so heavily on blatant acts of disinformation, we argue that more

nuanced research is needed to identify where and why misinformation can emanate from mainstream media, and lead to public misunderstanding of politics and public affairs. Second, we focus on how the interpretation of impartiality has led to reporting that often balances competing political perspectives without always interrogating the veracity of them. In doing so, we make the case for broadcasters to move from passively applying impartiality to adopting a more assertive approach that rigorously challenges false and misleading claims. Third, we consider the value of fact-checking journalism and how it can be used to counter disinformation. Our research found that while fact-checking has often been heralded by senior editors and journalists, in practice it often lies at the periphery of newsrooms when – given its democratic value and appeal to news audiences – it should be a normalised convention used in routine reporting. Fourth, we consider the role and influence of media and political systems in countering misinformation and raising public knowledge. We highlight how differences in media systems frame public engagement with journalism and its attempts to tackle disinformation. We illustrate this by analysing fact-checking initiatives developed by public service broadcasters in the UK and how the public have responded to them. Finally, the book is concluded by considering how the legitimacy of journalism can be enhanced by tackling disinformation in ways that have been considered valuable in our various studies of news audiences. As argued throughout the book, we believe that news media need to more consistently and effectively hold politicians to account, as well as rethink their practices, especially in fact-checking, in order to respond to the fast-changing media and political environment.

Rethinking Debates about Misinformation and Mainstream Media

Over recent years, debates about the origins of misinformation and disinformation have intensified not just in academic scholarship, but across media and public policy agendas. Above all, there have been escalating fears that so-called ‘fake news’ is warping the minds of the public and undermining democratic politics. The protagonists inciting public harm have largely been social media platforms, conspiracy theory websites and malign foreign government interference. A burgeoning academic literature has steadily grown, intricately tracking the trajectory of false information, and how it spreads lies online. The mainstream news media often prominently report on such studies, producing sensationalist headlines about the malign effects of disinformation. For example, when a 2023 poll asked the British public whether ‘The COVID-19 pandemic was part of a global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated whether they want to or not’, a headline in *The Guardian* newspaper read: ‘Quarter in UK

believe Covid was a hoax, poll on conspiracy theories finds'. Yet the findings of the highly leading question were based on a five-point scale survey that actually found that 41 per cent of the public thought it was definitely false, 18 per cent probably false and that 9 per cent didn't know. In other words, the majority of the public did not subscribe to the idea that the pandemic was a hoax. Even the 32 per cent who thought it was probably or definitely true may well have thought a global effort to force vaccination was required in order for governments to logistically manage the pandemic. This is at odds with the portrayal that many people believed COVID-19 was a hoax or, more broadly, that conspiracy theories now plague public opinion in the UK and beyond.

Our point here is not to diminish or underestimate the effects disinformation can have on the public. There has been – as the UN labelled it – an 'infodemic' of false and misleading information about the coronavirus pandemic over recent years. At the same time, however, we have argued that the often singular focus on online disinformation and the prominence it has received in academic scholarship and media coverage can, at times, exaggerate its impact and undermine the complexity of debates about the origins of public misunderstandings on a range of issues. As argued throughout the book, the evidence shows that it is not merely so-called 'fake news' being peddled on social media or conspiracy websites that represents the only threat of disinformation and misinformation to the wider public. A small but growing body of scholarship has begun to ask whether mainstream media perpetuate rather than prevent the spread of misinformation. For example, research has found news audiences routinely encounter false or misleading information directly from politicians, or from partisan news channels like Fox News and MSNBC. Similarly, the tabloid press and their sensational reporting have often spread exaggerated and misleading information in the UK and beyond.

The way we advanced debates about the role of mainstream media was by demonstrating that even impartial news providers, including the BBC – one of the most well-known global public service broadcasters – can inadvertently spread misinformation and limit public understanding of politics. This was highlighted in our audience research. Across the online diaries, focus groups and surveys, research participants described disinformation in much broader ways than academics and journalists. Although they could easily identify and dismiss examples of conspiracy theories, fake news and blatant instances of disinformation, our research participants criticised the news media for often creating confusion by not providing adequate context for them to better understand political claims and developments. Some of these critiques explicitly focused on media bias and what participants saw as the one-sidedness of reporting. Others were more nuanced and reflective of an awareness of media framing, as

well as the structural and complex conditions under which journalists operate, which did not give them the space or time to provide sufficient contextual information. For example, research participants expressed frustration about the way COVID-19 was communicated, which created confusion in terms of the lockdown measures, the number of deaths in the UK, and UK government policies. We argued that many of our audience participants approached news media with a form of pragmatic scepticism (Kyriakidou et al. 2023). This meant that people continued to heavily rely on the mainstream media for information, but they were aware that some degree of disinformation may have informed the news they consumed.

Our research during the first few months of the pandemic allowed us to identify instances of audience misunderstanding which could potentially be linked to the lack of contextual and clear information provided by television news reporting. When we examined television news coverage, which was the key information source for much of the public – including our research participants – during the early period of the pandemic, our systematic content analysis revealed that the agenda was overwhelmingly focused on domestic issues, with very few comparisons between the UK and other nations. At the same time, we found that the reporting of political decisions was largely from an English perspective and did not sufficiently explain any policy differences across the four nations – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – of the UK. These gaps in news reporting – not clearly identifying which government was responsible for political decisions across the UK during the pandemic (Cushion and Carbis 2024) – were reflected in the gaps in knowledge among our research participants in the diary study. They lacked an understanding of how the UK was dealing with the pandemic in relation to other countries, such as not being aware of the UK's comparatively high death rate due to COVID-19. Many research respondents did not realise there were contrasting political decisions taken by the devolved nations, displaying a misunderstanding of how different lockdown measures were implemented across the four nations of the UK at a key point in the pandemic. This was not necessarily indicative of a direct link between television coverage at the time and our participants' responses. But our analysis illustrates an informational environment that did not regularly supply audiences with any clarity about the different lockdown measures across the UK or how different countries were dealing with the health crisis and implementing distinctive policies.

Our research, in broader terms, points towards a need to rethink debates about the origins and causes of misinformation and disinformation beyond social media and websites peddling conspiracy theories. Taken together, our book has shown that mainstream media, including impartial public service

broadcasters, can inadvertently spread news about politics and public affairs in ways that undermine rather than enhance people's knowledge and understanding of the world. There needs to be greater acknowledgement of how 'fake news' can often stem – not necessarily deliberately or conspiratorially – from often highly reputable news media organisations. More nuanced research is needed to identify where and why misinformation can emanate from mainstream media, and lead to public misunderstandings of politics and public affairs. In short, a new agenda for studies examining the origins and causes of misinformation from mainstream media is needed.

From Passively to Assertively Interpreting Impartiality

Our analysis throughout the book has largely focused on news produced by public service broadcasters with legal obligations to report with 'due impartiality'. Reporting impartially is a long-standing convention designed, in theory, to prevent political partisanship from shaping editorial judgements. The journalistic aim is to deliver news without bias by drawing on a range of perspectives to construct well-balanced debates when reporting a story or issue. But, as explored in several chapters, research – including our own systematic content analyses – has often found that impartiality can be passively applied in news reporting, with political balance often narrowly constructed by opposing political parties and subject to little or no journalistic scrutiny about their respective positions (Cushion and Lewis 2017; Hughes et al. 2023; Morani et al. 2024). In doing so, misinformation can spread because journalists passively relay competing perspectives rather than assertively challenge any false or misleading claims.

If the lack of contextual information in journalistic reporting was identified by audiences in our studies as reproducing misinformation, another prominent critique was the perceived complicity of news media with politicians' lies and manipulation of information. Politicians were often seen by our research participants in the diary study, focus groups and surveys as major actors in perpetrating disinformation. Many felt politicians achieved this through explicit lies and political propaganda, as well as more implicit forms of manipulating information, such as political spin. News media were often mentioned by our respondents in conjunction with politicians when we asked them to interpret the meaning of 'political disinformation'. Our research participants often felt journalists failed to challenge politicians and hold them accountable, or that they would amplify politicians' untruthful claims by broadcasting them uncritically. This failure to counter disinformation was attributed not only to media bias, but also journalistic routines and the inherent limitations of reporting within the culture of 24/7 news.

Our analysis of online and especially television reporting generally and during the 2019 UK election campaign demonstrated that journalists often appeared reluctant to challenge the claims of political elites. It was often left to opposing politicians to argue between themselves irrespective of the claims both sides were making. By contrast, when we examined how the same claims were covered by the broadcasters' fact-checkers, including the BBC's own dedicated service Reality Check (now subsumed into BBC Verify), they were rigorously checked, and either validated or corrected. We argued in Chapter 6 that a passive approach to impartiality was largely due to the adoption of a 'he said, she said' approach to political reporting and interpreting impartiality as balanced journalism (Cushion and Lewis 2017; Hughes et al. 2023; Morani et al. 2024; Wahl Jorgensen et al. 2017). This is most evident in two-party political systems when journalists cover the competing views of the main parties, but they do not always uncover whether their respective claims were accurate or convincing. In many cases, public service broadcasters adopt this approach with the well-intentioned aim of reflecting representative democracy rather than constructing it. But we would make the case that this approach to reporting politics has become increasingly flawed because it rests on the assumption that the claims and counterclaims of political elites are broadly accurate and allow audiences to reach informed judgements about their competing positions. Over recent years professional politicians and parties have made wild and egregious claims that can either confuse or mislead public opinion. Employing the 'he said, she said' model of reporting validates such claims as legitimate opinions and arguments. In this post-truth world of politics, we believe it is essential that the news media hold parties accountable and challenge any deceptive or false claims. Put simply, when broadcasters apply impartiality passively it can perpetuate rather than prevent the flow of political misinformation.

In our view, broadcasters need to shift from adopting a passive approach to impartiality towards what has become known as 'assertive impartiality' (Atkins 2023). The term has been coined in the context of how a BBC journalist, Ross Atkins, has approached analysing news stories on the public service broadcaster's dedicated television news channel over recent years. He has produced 'explainers', lasting approximately between two and ten minutes, which take up a particular story – such as funding the health service, the origins of COVID-19 or the tax affairs of a UK government minister – by comprehensively going through all the facts or issues behind it, and reaching a final informed and decisive judgement about them. This direct form of journalism represents a break from a passive form of impartiality because it puts greater emphasis on fact-checking and journalistic judgement. Indeed, in developing

an assertive approach to impartiality, Atkins's explainers have relied heavily on the BBC's Reality Check team (now BBC Verify) to fact-check the events and issues being covered. When explaining why he adopted this approach, Atkins (2023) argued that 'even in these helter-skelter moments, there are still chances to stand back, to distil what's happened and provide the fact-checking, context, analysis and explanation to really understand an event'. In doing so, the BBC's explainers had the confidence to regularly call out lies and half-truths from politicians, and deliver clear-cut conclusions driven by the facts. For example, one explainer directly challenged the UK government's account of how they had not broken lockdown rules during the pandemic. In a tweet, Atkins posted: 'The government says "there was not a party" at No 10 last December and that no COVID rules were broken. A week into the story, this is a new 5-min video on the gap between the government's assurances and available evidence.' Likewise, another explainer explicitly called out Donald Trump for 'attacking American democracy' given his past behaviour. Atkins has openly acknowledged the assertive approach to reaching impartial judgements: 'If a participant in a story says something factually inaccurate, we would be quite comfortable saying so. Not to make a political point but to help our audience judge a story in as accurate a way as possible' (cited in Sherwin 2021).

But while many of the BBC's explainers have gone viral on social media and have been accessible online, they have not become a fixed part of broadcast programming, such as the evening news bulletins. On occasions they have featured on prime-time television, but this type of assertive impartiality has not become the norm for how politics is reported. Instead, explainers have largely been reserved for the BBC's online media, across their social media platforms, or on its dedicated news channel. For an assertive approach to impartiality to become widely applied across the BBC and other news organisations, it will need to turn into the norm rather than the exception in broadcast journalism. By normalising the use of fact-checking into routine reporting – as we further argue below – our research suggests that political disinformation would be more effectively countered, and the public better informed about politics and public affairs.

Normalising Routine Fact-Checking

Fact-checking has now become an established practice around the world, with dedicated online and social media platforms set up to investigate contentious issues and deliver judgements about the veracity of stories including claims made by politicians. While it has long been a professional convention in journalism, limited time and resources can undermine how thoroughly

fact-checking can be routinely carried out. As a consequence, the news media have begun to draw on professional fact-checkers, particularly during election campaigns, such as when the leaders of the major political parties debate each other live on television news. Some news media outlets have invested in the development of their own dedicated fact-checking teams, incorporating it into their newsrooms. But, to date, there has been limited academic attention paid to how far it informs mainstream journalism and the nature of fact-checking conventions employed by broadcast news (Soo et al. 2023). Research has illustrated that fact-checkers, when free from partisan influence, have tended to embrace higher editorial standards than traditional news media, such as more transparently sourcing evidence and investigating claims (Humprecht 2020). In this book we have analysed whether fact-checking journalism can enhance journalism standards and help counter political misinformation.

Our research found that senior editors and journalists at the UK's major broadcasters all broadly supported the value of fact-checking. As Chapter 6 explored, the BBC claimed to have ramped up its fact-checking during the 2019 election campaign to debunk political spin. But our analysis found that while fact-checks were regularly posted on the BBC's news website and appeared on their social media platforms, they did not become an integrated part of broadcast programming. We then examined how dedicated fact-checking online sites – on the BBC, Channel 4 as well as the independent site, Full Fact – dealt with the same claims covered in UK television news bulletins throughout 2021. Above all, we discovered that fact-checks conducted online – including within the same news organisation – were not widely used by flagship broadcast programmes. When we analysed political claims included both on television news and fact-checking sites, we found that fact-checkers subjected them to rigorous interrogation and, when necessary, often directly challenged them. On television news, by contrast, over half of the claims did not receive any journalistic scrutiny. This reveals the relatively passive approach to impartial reporting in conventional broadcast news compared to the more assertive impartial approach of challenging claims on fact-checking online sites. Despite the fact that the BBC and Channel 4 had in-house fact-checking divisions, there appeared to be an editorial reluctance to draw on them in prime-time programming (Soo et al. 2023). Our interviews with editors further revealed that there was a lack of integration between the main newsroom and the fact-checking team. Since we carried out the interviews, the BBC has moved its fact-checking team into a larger division of specialist reporters, called Verify, in order to develop a new brand of journalism, which can counter disinformation. We examined whether the BBC's flagship bulletin, *News at Ten*, referenced Verify's fact-checking between 1 January and 3 July 2024,

including during the general election campaign. We discovered that the new disinformation team fact-checked many international conflict news stories, but just one domestic politics story ahead of the election campaign. However, once the campaign began there were some prominent fact-checks that did feature the Verify team robustly challenging the claims of political parties. This shows that fact-checking was ramped up in BBC broadcast programming during the 2024 election campaign, but beforehand – in a routine period of time – Verify (like Reality Check) largely operated across online sites and social media accounts.

The limited integration of fact-checking in routine news was reflected in our findings from the audience research. Across the focus groups, online diaries and surveys, our research participants revealed they were not that knowledgeable about any UK fact-checking sites, including BBC's Reality Check, Channel 4's FactCheck and the independent site, Full Fact. This is particularly important in light of the fact that research participants, as we discussed in Chapter 3, assumed that disinformation was inherent in newswork. Their lack of knowledge of fact-checking sites demonstrated that, even when journalists actively tried to challenge disinformation, audiences were not aware of these efforts. However, when we provided our research participants with specific examples of fact-checking and asked them to reflect on those, they were highly receptive to this practice. They found it useful in ways that went beyond simply verifying information. According to our participants, fact-checking provided them with contextual information for understanding political claims and held politicians accountable for their actions. Reflecting on our participants' responses, we argued that fact-checking embodies what Costera Meijer (2022, 230) has described as 'valuable journalism' because audiences identified the practice as worthwhile and useful for their understanding of politics. Given that our studies revealed that fact-checking was highly appreciated by audiences and considered central to journalism, we believe there is a strong case for moving it from the margins to the centre of newsrooms and ensuring it is not only an online and social media service, but a prominent part of widely watched broadcast programmes.

The value of fact-checking for audience understanding was well illustrated in our analysis of how news media reported the claims of the UK government during the opening months of the coronavirus pandemic. We found that a senior government minister's claim that the UK government had carried out 100,000 tests per day by April 2020 was almost instantly rereported without any scrutiny on the BBC's 'Breaking News' Twitter (now X) account. A government minister then retweeted it, using the BBC's journalistic reputation to add credibility to the government's management of the pandemic.

Less than thirty minutes later, however, the BBC's Reality Check Twitter (now X) account cast doubt on the claim because the figure included testing kits sent out to homes but not returned or analysed. In other words, the fact-checking site used its resources to dig deeper into the claim and provide an evidence-based judgement on the performance of a specific government policy. We believe that this approach to fact-checking news should become a normalised pursuit in routine reporting, informing all output – social media, online and broadcast – rather than being at the fringes of journalism and ramped up during election time, or when covering blatant instances of disinformation. Roger Mosey, former Head of BBC Television News, similarly argued that broadcasters have not made enough of fact-checking and marginalised it in their journalism. He observed that the BBC's 'reality checks tend to sit on their own little bit of the broadcaster's website, or towards the end of the Today programme, whereas they should be right up there at the top of News at Ten' (Gibb and Mosey 2020).

Needless to say, not all fact-checking journalism has the same high standards of accuracy and impartiality. Furthermore, in media and political systems where political polarisation affects public perceptions and engagement with fact-checking – notably in the US – it could be that news audiences have become sceptical of this journalistic convention compared to countries where news media have historically been widely trusted. In the case of the UK and other nations with well-resourced public service broadcasters and impartiality requirements, our audience research has showed overwhelming support for the greater use of fact-checking as a tool for journalists to hold politicians accountable and for the public to better understand politics. This, we have argued, is where public legitimacy in journalism can be enhanced to help counter political disinformation. These ideas, however, need to be contextualised and considered in relation to the media and political systems within which news media and fact-checkers operate.

Media and Political Systems Matter in Countering Misinformation

Throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century, scholars begun to theorise and empirically investigate the way national media systems reflected the broader political and social identity of a country (Siebert et al. 1956). As scholarship grew and became more sophisticated, large cross-national studies began to interpret how media and political systems shaped journalism and, more broadly, the comparative ways people acquired knowledge about politics and public affairs. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) landmark 18-nation study

across Western European countries and North America, for example, coined three media systems – Liberal, Democratic Corporatist and Polarised Pluralist – that began to develop specific indicators that differentiated national journalistic structures and cultures. While their taxonomy attracted criticism for grouping nations crudely together, it raised important debates about interpreting the comparative value of media systems. For example, the UK was grouped with the US in a Liberal model and yet the former has an overarching public service media system compared to the latter's largely hyper market-driven media system. This has helped fuel a highly partisan political broadcast media system compared to the more impartial system in the UK. As a consequence, critics have argued that media systems construct radically different information environments that affect how people understand what is happening in the world (Bruggemann et al. 2014; Curran 2011). In short, how media and political systems have historically been funded and organised shapes public knowledge. Debates about understanding media systems have grown over recent years and become more sophisticated in the twenty-first century, interpreting the commonalities and characteristics within and beyond nations in the Western world (Hallin and Mancini 2012).

Our book has contributed to and advanced debates about media and political systems by highlighting the important role they play in how disinformation is countered by both journalists and news audiences. As discussed in the previous section, we identified that news audiences in the UK were largely receptive to journalists directly confronting disinformation by challenging false or misleading claims, and more regularly fact-checking political statements and promises. By contrast, a growing body of scholarship has found Americans have been largely resistant to journalists' fact-checking largely due to partisan-motivated reasoning (Walter et al. 2019). A meta-analysis of thirty academic studies based on a total sample of 20,963 people concluded that 'Democrats/liberals are equally receptive to information that supports or contradicts their ideology, Republicans/conservatives are more eager to accept pro-attitudinal corrections and less likely to adopt ideologically inconsistent information' (Walter et al. 2019, 367). The study also established that partisan reasoning increased during election campaigns – a time when fact-checking has tended to be used more widely by news media. In doing so, an academic conventional wisdom has grown that suggests that news audiences do not want journalists to engage with corrective fact-checking. This is because, as Walter et al. (2019, 369) acknowledged, 'while the number of fact-checkers around the world has more than tripled in the past few years ... and currently fact-checking organizations can be found in 53 countries around the globe, the empirical literature focuses disproportionately on the United States'. Contrary to the prevailing

logic, our book demonstrated that news audiences in the UK were receptive to journalists directly challenging disinformation, including through the use of fact-checking.

Taken together, the evidence throughout different chapters has shown that a country's media and political system helps frame the ways audiences respond to journalistic attempts to counter disinformation. In the UK, we found that many participants in our studies were receptive to fact-checking and appeared to trust broadcast journalists when they fact-checked political claims, irrespective of their partisan allegiances. They also displayed high trust in television news, which was the most trusted source of information during the pandemic. This was despite the fact that they would also criticise journalists for unwittingly or purposefully reproducing disinformation. Taken together, we have argued throughout the book that the UK's impartial media ecology and overarching public service infrastructure has helped cultivate an environment which makes many people receptive to journalists countering disinformation. In broader terms, our research suggests that in order to understand how news audiences respond to journalistic challenges of disinformation it is important to interpret the media and political systems that shape the wider information environment.

Cross-national research has shown that it is public service broadcasters – rather than market-driven news media – that have developed the most robust and well-resourced initiatives to combat misinformation (Horowitz et al. 2022). In the UK, for example, Channel 4 set up a fact-checking blog during the 2005 general election campaign. A decade later the BBC launched Reality Check, a fact-checking service, before the 2015 general election campaign. Reality Check has now morphed into BBC Verify, a broader news service, as discussed earlier. As explored throughout the book, both public service broadcasters have continued to invest in these dedicated disinformation teams, drawing on their resources to investigate contentious claims. In the UK, public service media have developed more initiatives to tackle misinformation than many market-driven media outlets. In doing so, they have the potential to cultivate healthier relationships with their audience compared to many commercial media outlets, while facilitating effective ways of countering false and misleading information that can help the public better understand politics and public affairs. For this to happen, however, the initiatives to tackle disinformation – as argued throughout the book – will need to become a more prominent part of news reporting, in order for audiences to become familiar with and make use of these services, such as fact-checking.

Enhancing the Legitimacy of Journalism

This book began by considering the place of journalism in the disinformation age and the perceived weakening of its legitimacy at a time of worldwide declining trust in news media. We suggested that journalistic legitimacy needs to be considered as a negotiation between professional practices and audience expectations. Our methodological approach, which included interviews with senior editors, journalists and fact-checkers, extensive content analyses, and a range of audience studies, enabled us to examine the connections between the production, content and reception of news countering disinformation. By specifically assessing how effectively broadcast journalists in the UK challenged false and misleading information and how these attempts were evaluated by the public, we identified gaps in the relationship between journalistic practices and audience expectations. Our interviews with some of the most senior editors, journalists and fact-checkers in the UK suggested that they were worried about maintaining their journalistic legitimacy in the digital age because they had lost some of their gatekeeping power to social media networks. However, our audience research suggested that the mainstream media still have an important gatekeeping role even if it has been weakened over recent years. Broadcasters, in particular, act as a gravitational force for news audiences on the issues that matter to them, or for critical moments, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic or elections.

But we believe broadcasters would enhance their legitimacy by rethinking their approach to tackling false and misleading political statements. As our audience research revealed, the news media and disinformation were not viewed as opposing forces. Many respondents believed that news media might reproduce disinformation and misinformation due to factors such as media bias or because of the structural constraints journalists operate under. However, we have argued that news audiences approached news media with a kind of pragmatic scepticism yet still largely trusted broadcast journalism. For this reason, we have made the case that providing more context and explanation for audiences, as well as holding politicians more accountable for their dubious claims, represented effective ways of news media sustaining and even rebuilding their relationship with audiences. For example, the normalisation of fact-checking into routine news reporting could play a significant role in demonstrating how journalists aim to tackle disinformation.

But enhancing the legitimacy of journalism will not be an easy task. Over recent years, political parties and politicians have attempted to challenge the impartiality of fact-checkers, notably from the political right, and to attack fact-checkers for the ‘facts’ they claim to check. The right-wing UK journalist,

Fraser Nelson, for example, has argued that fact-checking has had a chilling effect on public debates by restricting argumentation. He wrote that when

you engage in frank discussions about certain topics – climate change, jihadi finance, immigration, transgenderism – then you can expect the equivalent of a lawsuit. A breed of investigators or self-appointed fact-checkers will swoop, posing as judges of the truth – even if they often get it wrong. What was intended as a test of objectivity, a remedy to ‘fake news’, has ended up becoming a new form of bias. (Nelson 2023)

Similarly, Robby Gibb (Gibb and Mosey 2020), a former Conservative spin-doctor, claimed that ‘all too often what we see is not true fact-checking, but scrutiny deployed against one side of the political argument rather than the other’. Delegitimising the value of fact-checkers was evident in the 2019 UK general election campaign, as discussed in Chapter 1. During a live televised debate of the party leaders, the Conservatives rebranded one of their Twitter (now X) platforms, the @CCHQPress account, and renamed it ‘factcheckUK’. Twitter (now X) responded by calling out the party’s misinformation tactics, stating that ‘We have global rules in place that prohibit behaviour that can mislead people, including those with verified accounts. Any further attempts to mislead people by editing verified profile information ... will result in decisive corrective action.’ But this party political stunt represents a wider battle to control and legitimise the so-called ‘facts’ of a debate. The Conservatives repeated this strategy during the 2024 UK election campaign. During a live televised debate, the party rebranded its official press account on X as ‘Tax Check UK’ in order to appear as the authoritative source on disputed facts about Labour’s taxation policy. The battle over controlling ‘facts’ was perhaps most famously deployed in 2017 by the Republican party in the US when Kellyanne Conway, Counsellor to President Trump, claimed to be presenting ‘alternative facts’ when a journalist challenged her about a provable falsehood. While political parties may not entirely sway public opinion when challenging journalists about the ‘facts’ behind an issue, they can muddy the political waters and cast doubt in people’s minds about the independence of fact-checkers and the news media more generally.

Such ideological attacks against journalism or cases of politicians attempting to manipulate information do not represent new threats to democracies. But while there is a long history of the news media being undermined and exploited by the political class of the day, the growth and reach of new online and social media networks have created new ways of extending their influence. Mainstream media and journalism today are subject to intense public criticism

because of these technological developments. But new online and social media platforms can also be effectively used to tackle instances of disinformation and better inform audiences.

We believe the time has come for journalists to rise to the challenge of countering false and misleading information by rethinking their approach to reporting disinformation and prominently using their fact-checking services in ways that cut through to the public. Our research has shown that news audiences have a sceptical but pragmatic relationship with the news media. They understand that establishing the ‘facts’ behind an issue will often be complex and potentially contentious. After all, not every political claim can be easily called out. But for fact-checking to work effectively it needs to go beyond blatant instances of disinformation, tackle dubious claims that can lead to misinformation and ensure audiences access these initiatives to raise public understanding. Our analysis has shown that journalists can take a more forensic approach to political reporting, weighing up the evidence, explaining the context of a debate and delivering a judgement that accurately informs audiences about an issue or specific claim being made. When a judgement discredits one side of the political argument, inevitably it will open up accusations of bias. But our research has shown that most people, irrespective of their ideological beliefs, expect journalists to challenge politicians more consistently and robustly when they attempt to manipulate information. Taken together, the evidence amassed throughout this book has demonstrated that the legitimacy of journalism would be enhanced if the news media adopted a bolder and more assertive approach to challenging false and misleading political claims.

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