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# Questioning Fact-Checking in the Fight Against Disinformation: An Audience Perspective

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**ABSTRACT**

Fact-checking has been identified as a significant journalistic tool in the fight against disinformation. Relevant studies have focused on its emergence as a movement within journalism aiming at renewing the profession, as well as its effectiveness in challenging disinformation, especially during elections. However, little has been said about how audiences themselves understand fact-checking and employ it in their daily consumption of news. In this article, we answer these questions by drawing upon two sets of data. The first consists of fourteen focus group discussions in the UK, which included 52 participants, and were conducted online between April and May 2021. The second consists of two qualitative surveys that explored news consumers' understandings of fact-checking and their evaluations of current fact-checking practices of UK media during the same period. We conclude that the use of fact-checking remains largely peripheral, and its influence is minimal in people's news consumption. However, there is an appetite for more fact-checking in television news, as a way of holding politicians into account and helping the public better understand politics. In this context, we argue, if fact-checking is to play an important role in political discourse, it should become a regular part of broadcast journalism.

## Introduction

Fact-checking, as the concerted effort to determine the accuracy and truthfulness of claims, mainly of political actors (Amazeen 2019), has become a significant journalistic weapon in the fight against disinformation. Distinct from internal journalistic scrutiny of facts and the verification of reporters' sources, fact-checking has been widely celebrated as a professional movement or a new style of political news that can revitalise journalism by holding public figures accountable for spreading misinformation and falsehoods (Graves 2016). Besides acting as a mechanism of accountability, it has also been seen as a tool for helping the public to navigate through disinformation circulating in high-choice media environments. It has been constructed in journalistic and academic discourse as a central development in restoring public trust in journalism and enhancing the quality of public debate.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Concerned with such questions, considerable audience research has focussed on the corrective effectiveness of fact-checking in experimental studies (Walter et al. 2020). However, little is known about how audiences engage with fact-checking in their daily consumption of news. Questions about how news audiences understand and evaluate fact-checking beyond the research context have been largely ignored. Such a bottom–up approach can not only supplement existing debates but also allow for a better understanding of fact-checking and its role in democratic politics, as well as identifying gaps between attempts by journalists to deal with disinformation and audience expectations. In that respect, the question of audience understandings and approaches to fact-checking can help better inform journalistic practices and enhance journalistic legitimacy.

It is these issues that we address in this study, by looking into public engagement with fact-checking and, in particular, exploring how news audiences understand, evaluate and use fact-checking. We draw upon two sets of data. The first consists of fourteen focus group discussions in the UK, which included 52 participants, and were conducted online between April and May 2021. The second consists of two qualitative surveys that explored news audiences' understandings of fact-checking and their evaluations of current fact-checking practices by UK media in the same period. The first survey drew on 1065 participants and captured multiple choice responses about fact-checking. A follow-up survey with largely open-ended questions was then carried out with 542 respondents, providing qualitative insights into people's understanding and engagement with fact checking.

## Fact-Checking as a Tool to Counter Disinformation

The circulation of disinformation in online and legacy media has caused fears that it might undermine democratic politics, not only due to the distraction of public agendas by misleading stories but also because of its contribution to political polarisation and ultimately the erosion of public trust in the media (IPSOS 2019). Against this backdrop, fact-checking initiatives aim to pro-actively identify and challenge political disinformation, and have, therefore, been celebrated as a professional reform movement (Amazeen 2019). By holding political figures accountable for what they say and committing to assessing claims rather than simply reporting them, the movement aims to revitalise the "truth-seeking" tradition in journalism (Graves 2016, 6). Fact-checkers themselves have seen their role as empowering citizens and their media literacy (Singer 2018).

The extent to which fact-checking empowers citizens and improves political discourse is, of course, not to be taken for granted. Relevant research has focused on the effectiveness of fact-checking and its corrective potential, largely in experimental settings. This has illustrated asymmetries in familiarity with, positive evaluation, and acceptance of fact-checking on the basis of political opinions and interests. Nyhan and Reifler (2015), for example, have found that people in the US who were interested in and knowledgeable about politics were also more interested in fact-checking, whereas those that identified as Republicans had a more negative view of the practice. These conclusions were amplified by similar findings that people often employ motivated reasoning, when confronted with corrective messages (Schaffner and Roche 2017), whereas "belief echoes" created through exposure to misinformation might mean that wrong beliefs could persevere even after correction (Thorson 2016). There seems to be a general consensus among

research findings that Republican supporters are more resistant to fact-checking, "more eager to accept pro-attitudinal corrections", and, therefore, "more likely to engage in biased processing" (Walter et al. 2020, 367). Ultimately, individual characteristics, such as pre-existing attitudes, political affiliations, worldviews and levels of scepticism play an important role in how resistant people are in changing their beliefs in the face of contradicting information (Lewandowsky et al. 2012).

At the same time, however, there is evidence that some forms of fact-checking can be more effective than others, and that randomised exposure can help people be better informed about politics (Nyhan and Reifler 2015). Ultimately, the bulk of the research on corrective fact-checks concludes that it can have a positive influence, although this is conditional upon its format, and on how decisive the fact-checking judgements are (Walter et al. 2020). However, the threat of partisan motivated thinking is exaggerated, as this is mostly employed by citizens before elections, when fact-checking is needed the most (Walter et al. 2020).

As insightful and important as these studies are, there are two limitations pertaining to their focus. First, they are almost exclusively conducted in the US context, with its distinctly polarised political culture and media system. This is despite the fact that, as of February 2022, there were more than 350 fact-checking organisations in 53 countries around the world (Duke Reporters' Lab n.d.). These vary in terms of professionalism, style of reporting, and funding sources, reflecting differences in journalistic and political cultures. For example, in the US fact-checking is characterised by a clear distinction between professional and partisan fact-checkers, as well as close proximity to the academic and non-profit worlds (Graves 2016). In other countries, including the UK, fact-checking is embedded within the operation of legacy media (Graves and Cherubini 2016). These differences not only influence how fact-checkers work in different contexts but are also likely to affect the ways news audiences understand and trust fact-checking.

The second limitation of existing audience research with regard to fact-checking is its almost exclusively experimental nature, which poses questions about its external validity. Within the tightly controlled experimental context, research participants are exposed to corrective messages, according to researchers' design. Such forced exposure tells us little about whether the same people would choose to use the same or similar fact-checking sources in the "real" world (Walter et al. 2020). At the same time, fact-checking is approached in that research as an "asocial" activity, namely as "something that professional media can do to audiences" (Hannak et al. 2014, 187). The use of fact-checking, however, is a social activity, in so far as it is embedded in specific social contexts and can be employed by news audiences to challenge or validate information for specific motivations and in specific social situations. In other words, experimental research does not provide us with answers about how news audiences understand and employ fact-checking in their daily lives, or what their expectations from it are. It is interested in how people respond to corrections of misinformation but not how people might relate to and use fact-checking.

## Fact-Checking in Context

We address these blind spots of previous studies in this article by exploring news audiences' engagement with fact-checking as a tool for navigating misinformation. Despite

academic and public debates about the threats posed by misinformation, research has largely ignored the question of how news audiences perceive these threats (Tandoc et al. 2018) or how they try to cope with them (Chang 2021). In their analytical framework about how audiences navigate information in the age of fake news, Tandoc et al. (2018) distinguish between what they call "internal" and "external" acts of authentication. The former describes processes through which news consumers rely on their individual wisdom and insights about how to authenticate information, often evaluating the source and the characteristics of the message itself. External acts of authentication, according to the authors, constitute a second step in the process, only to be taken when news audiences are not satisfied with their evaluations in the first internal step. They include practices such as seeking verification from trusted sources in their interpersonal circle or institutional sources, such as trusted media, Google and fact-checking services.

These suggestions have been confirmed by a few empirical studies that have attempted to explore how people make sense of and engage with news in the "post-truth age". For example, Wagner and Boczkowski's (2019) interviewees in the US reported fact-checking as one of the tools they used to validate information, especially online news, in par with Google. In a German study, Schwarzenegger (2020) found that his interviewees were already so highly critical of the media that they did not find fact-checking necessary. Chang (2021) also discovered that only a minority of her survey respondents in Taiwan used fact-checking as a way of externally authenticating information, whereas the majority relied on personal evaluations. What these studies illustrate is that news audiences have constructed "personalised information systems" (Wagner and Boczkowski 2019, 881) as a way of dealing with what they perceive to be an environment fraught with disinformation. Within these personalised information systems, institutional fact-checking plays only a peripheral role. In order to fully understand the role that fact-checking can play in citizen empowerment, however, we need to contextualise how it is used within broader media repertoires.

These questions also need to be contextualised within the specific civic culture and broader media system in which news and information are understood and processed. In a study that tested research findings beyond the US context, Lyons et al. (2020) surveyed public attitudes towards fact-checking in six European countries, namely France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden. They concluded that, similarly to the US, research participants' political interest and knowledge predicted familiarity with fact-checking. At the same time, however, in Northern Europe, where there are more robust public media and higher institutional trust, there was greater acceptance and positive evaluation of fact-checking. Similarly, drawing upon a UK-based diary study during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, we concluded that the country's impartial media ecology and strong public service ethos of broadcast media created an environment where news audiences were largely receptive to journalistic fact-checking of political (mis)information (Cushion et al. 2021).

Fact-checking in the UK is largely conducted by public service broadcasters, namely BBC and Channel 4. The latter's FactCheck was the first service of political fact-checking in Europe, starting as a blog during the 2005 general elections and becoming a permanent feature in Channel 4 in 2010 (Graves and Cherubini 2016, 6). BBC Reality Check started timidly in 2015 but was reinvigorated during the "Brexit" referendum campaign

of 2016 (Graves and Cherubini 2016, 9) and currently operates with a dedicated editorial team (Samuels 2017). The third main fact-checker in the UK is the independent Full Fact, which was launched in 2010 as an independent charity (Graves and Cherubini 2016, 11). Fact-checking has been adopted by other media organisations, especially during important political events or in crisis periods, such as election campaigns or the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is only these three fact-checking initiatives that are committed to principles of impartiality, in the case of broadcasters because of the public service obligations, and in the case of Full Fact, due to its independent status. The research questions we, therefore, set out to explore are the following:

RQ1: How aware are news audiences in the UK of fact-checkers?

RQ2: How do news audiences in the UK engage with fact-checkers?

## Method

In order to answer these questions, we draw upon two audience studies, namely a focus group study and a series of two surveys, both of which were conducted with UK respondents. Participants in both projects were recruited through Prolific, an online research company, and were compensated for their participation. Our fourteen focus groups included 52 participants in total and were conducted between 22 April and 26 May 2021. Due to COVID-19-related restrictions, the discussions took place on Zoom. Their duration varied from 55–90 min. We used purposeful sampling, in an attempt to ensure participant variation in terms of their age, gender, political affiliation and news habits, on the basis of the assumption that these factors influence people's engagement with the media (Ofcom 2020). While focus groups as a method do not allow for generalisations, they do provide important qualitative insights into how meanings about the world are constructed in conversation and social interaction (Kitzinger 1995). Our sample selection did not strive for representativeness of the UK population but to reflect a diverse range of perspectives from different social groups and with contrasting political perspectives —for focus group composition, see Table 1.

The discussions covered a range of themes, such as the evaluation of broadcasters' attempts to tackle disinformation, questions of trust and news habits. With regard to fact-checking, approximately half-way through the discussions, participants were asked to watch three short news clips from BBC, ITV and Sky News, all reporting on the same topic, namely a relatively vague claim by Prime Minister Boris Johnson during his 2019 election campaign that a new Conservative government would hire 50,000 nurses. Out of the three clips, it was only the Sky News one that fact-checked and challenged this claim. The clips were selected in order to act as triggers for conversations about different approaches to fact-checking journalism rather than experimentally assessing participants' reactions. Participants were invited to evaluate them in relation to their informational content and asked whether they were aware of fact-checking in general, as well as fact-checking organisations. It is the discussions triggered by these questions that are included in the analysis below.

The second set of studies are two surveys conducted over April and May 2021. The first survey included a sample of 1,065 respondents and the second 542 respondents from the same sample (see Tables 2 and 3 respectively for respondents' demographics). We

**Table 1.** Focus group composition.

| Participant characteristics | Number of participants | % (n = 52) |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
|   Male | 17 | 33% |
|   Female | 34 | 65% |
|   Other | 1 | 2% |
| Age | | |
|   18–24 | 17 | 33% |
|   25–34 | 11 | 21% |
|   35–44 | 12 | 23% |
|   45–54 | 5 | 10% |
|   55 and above | 7 | 13% |
| Political affiliation | | |
|   Conservatives | 13 | 25% |
|   Labour | 22 | 42% |
|   Liberal democrats | 7 | 13% |
|   Greens | 4 | 8% |
|   None | 4 | 8% |
|   Other | 2 | 4% |
| Education | | |
|   Secondary school/GCSE | 3 | 6% |
|   College/A levels | 20 | 38% |
|   Undergraduate degree | 15 | 29% |
|   Graduate degree | 12 | 23% |
|   Doctorate | 1 | 2% |
|   Other qualification | 1 | 2% |
| Main news source | | |
|   Online news | 22 | 42% |
|   Social media | 13 | 25% |
|   Television news | 11 | 21% |
|   Newspapers | 3 | 6% |
|   Radio | 3 | 6% |

constructed the sample to reflect a range of demographic characteristics, political affiliation, main source of news and we measured for levels of trust in news media in general, different media platforms (television, newspapers, radio, online media, social media) and the consumption of different broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, Sky News). The two different steps of the survey reflected a difference in the focus of the survey questions. Whereas the first survey was exclusively quantitative, exploring broader questions of news media consumption and use, the second survey was of a more qualitative nature, addressing participants' understandings of disinformation and fact-checking. Everybody who completed the first survey and indicated they would be willing to participate in further survey research (n = 759) were invited to complete the second survey, which included 542 respondents.

The survey questionnaires explored broader issues about respondents' news consumption patterns and political engagement (survey 1), as well as their evaluation about how effectively journalists in the UK counter disinformation (survey 2). The questions addressing our research interests in this article and discussed below were the following: "Which of the following fact-checking services have you heard of?", "Have you used the following fact-checking websites to make sense of the news and how often?" (Survey 1); and "Some people argue that fact-checking undermines trust in broadcast news because facts are difficult to establish. Would you generally agree or disagree with this perspective?" and "Should broadcasters fact-check politicians more or less in television news bulletins?" (Survey 2).

**Table 2.** Survey 1 respondent demographics.

| Respondent demographics | Number of respondents | % (*n* = 1,065) |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 387 | 36% |
| Female | 671 | 63% |
| FTM trans | 1 | 0% |
| Non-binary | 4 | 0% |
| Prefer not to say | 2 | 0% |
| Age | | |
| 18–24 | 252 | 24% |
| 25–34 | 345 | 32% |
| 35–44 | 227 | 21% |
| 45–54 | 118 | 11% |
| 55–64 | 90 | 8% |
| 65 and over | 33 | 3% |
| Political affiliation | | |
| Conservative | 218 | 20% |
| Labour | 402 | 38% |
| Liberal Democrat | 118 | 11% |
| None | 112 | 11% |
| Other | 19 | 2% |
| Don't know | 65 | 6% |
| Plaid Cymru | 1 | 0% |
| Reform UK (formerly Brexit Party) | 5 | 0% |
| Scottish National Party (SNP) | 28 | 3% |
| The Green Party | 93 | 9% |
| United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) | 4 | 0% |
| Education | | |
| Secondary School/GCSE | 84 | 8% |
| College/A levels | 320 | 30% |
| Undergraduate degree | 324 | 30% |
| Postgraduate degree | 266 | 25% |
| Doctorate | 34 | 3% |
| Other qualification | 38 | 3% |
| No formal qualifications | 6 | 1% |
| Prefer not to say | 3 | 0% |
| Main news source | | |
| Newspapers | 39 | 4% |
| Online media | 567 | 54% |
| Radio | 33 | 3% |
| Social media | 240 | 23% |
| Television | 177 | 17% |

The analysis of the qualitative questions of the surveys, as well as the focus group material was conducted on NVivo, following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). The material was initially coded on the basis of the focus groups topic guide and survey questions, but after several re-readings, new nodes were constructed to allow for more nuanced understandings of the different themes emerging from the discussions and surveys. These allowed us to pay closer attention to participants' own understandings rather than theoretical categories or our pre-existing assumptions (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The discussion that follows is not meant as an exhaustive analysis of the wider themes in the two research projects, the focus groups and the survey. Instead, it is to be approached as a largely qualitative exploration of how news audiences in the UK understand and use fact-checking. In that respect, the paper's contribution is to open up new lines of investigation that pertain to news audiences' practices, expectations and evaluations of fact-checking, rather than test existing hypotheses or provide definitive answers.

**Table 3.** Survey 2 respondent demographics.

| Respondent demographics | Number of respondents | % (n = 542) |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 207 | 38% |
| Female | 330 | 61% |
| FTM | 1 | 0% |
| Non-binary | 3 | 1% |
| Prefer not to say | 1 | 0% |
| Age | | |
| 18–24 | 121 | 22% |
| 25–34 | 155 | 29% |
| 35–44 | 118 | 22% |
| 45–54 | 65 | 12% |
| 55–64 | 58 | 11% |
| 65 and over | 25 | 5% |
| Political affiliation | | |
| Conservative | 156 | 29% |
| Labour | 183 | 34% |
| Liberal democrat | 61 | 11% |
| None | 38 | 7% |
| Other | 9 | 2% |
| Don't know | 18 | 3% |
| Plaid Cymru | 1 | 0% |
| Reform UK (formerly Brexit Party) | 2 | 0% |
| Scottish National Party (SNP) | 12 | 2% |
| The Green Party | 58 | 11% |
| United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) | 4 | 1% |
| Education | | |
| Secondary school/GCSE | 50 | 9% |
| College/A levels | 158 | 29% |
| Undergraduate degree | 162 | 30% |
| Postgraduate degree | 132 | 24% |
| Doctorate | 22 | 4% |
| Other qualification | 16 | 3% |
| No formal qualifications | 2 | 0% |
| Main news source | | |
| Newspapers | 26 | 5% |
| Online media | 272 | 50% |
| Radio | 16 | 3% |
| Social media | 102 | 19% |
| Television | 124 | 23% |

## Results and Discussion

### *Familiarity and Use of Fact-Checking*

When we asked respondents in our first survey what fact-checking services they had heard of, the majority indicated they were not aware of them (see Table 4), with the exception of about a third of the respondents that had heard of BBC Reality Check.

As expected, when asked whether they had used any of the main fact-checking websites, respondents' answers reflected their lack of awareness (see Table 5). Almost a fifth of respondents —18%—claimed to have used BBC Reality Check a couple of times, whereas more than nine in ten had never used Channel 4's FactCheck or Full Fact.

**Table 4.** Awareness of fact-checking services (n = 1,065).

| Fact-checking | Reality check | C4 Fact check | Full fact | Sky News Campaign check |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aware of | 31% (334) | 9% (100) | 11% (120) | 5% (49) |
| Not aware of | 69% (730) | 91% (965) | 89% (945) | 95% (1016) |

**Table 5.** Use of fact-checking services ($n = 1,065$).

| Frequency | Reality check | C4 Fact check | 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) |

These answers confirmed previous findings from the focus groups. When research participants were asked during the discussions whether they were aware of fact-checking and specific fact-checking services, they claimed to have heard of it and seemed aware of what it entails but could not name specific websites or services. Six participants (out of 52) were aware that BBC had its own fact-checking service, but only a couple named it as Reality Check. Four participants mentioned Full Fact and a couple said that they used the US-based Snopes. Only one participant, a woman that claimed to both use social media for her news but also be a heavy television news consumer, seemed to be aware of all three big fact-checkers in the UK. Twitter and Instagram would often be mentioned in relation to fact-checking and the warnings that the social media platforms would include in some posts labelled as unreliable information, such as Trump's claims that he had actually won the election.

The participants that had used fact-checking did so within specific critical periods in the news cycle or in order to check specific claims. For example, one of the older participants, who did not support any of the main parties, avoided television and consumed mostly online news, said that he would follow the Twitter account of BBC Reality Check regularly only during "*election time*" and "*political conference season*". Similarly, a woman aged between 35 and 44 that consumed online news and avoided television, claimed to have checked information about the vaccines on Full Fact before getting vaccinated. As Chang (2021) argues, perceptions of the severity of misinformation are likely to determine whether people will employ active coping strategies, such as resorting to fact-checkers.

Overall, however, both focus group discussions and surveys illustrated that the use of fact-checking among participants was at best minimal and limited to specific moments in time, but not part of their daily routine consumption of news.

The fact that research participants did not seem to be aware of and use established fact-checking services did not mean that they did not find fact-checking necessary. What they reported instead is that fact-checking was something they would do in their own variable ways, when consuming news that they either did not trust or wanted to know more about. These practices, ranging from attempts to fact-checking, resorting to trusted sources, and cross-referencing across multiple media, reflect what Tandoc et al. (2018) have labelled "audience acts of authentication". They included both active practices of authentication and more passive forms of critically approaching news consumption.

When it came to actively attempting to verify the news, focus group participants mentioned three interrelated practices. The first can be described as a personalised form of fact-checking, or as participants called it their own "*independent research*". This entailed the use of online sources, including Google searches, as well as checking directly the sources employed on a news story. Different media played the role of fact-checker for

different people. For some, information on social media, and in particular Twitter, was not to be trusted; in other cases, Twitter was used to provide background information for news stories that could not be thoroughly covered in the duration of the evening news. Second, participants claimed to turn to more "*reputable sources*", when questioning the veracity of news. Legacy news, and especially BBC News and its website, were mentioned in that regard. A participant described this process in the following:

> If I see something is happening, or people are talking about things, I will look at their profiles to see who they are, to see if they appear to be reputable and then I tend to go straight to the BBC website to see if there's information about it on there. That's kind of the process I go through quite a lot—I seem to spend a lot of my time doing that rather than actually working. I go "oh, what's this?" and suddenly I've gone down a rabbit hole!
>
> (Female, 35–44, Liberal Democrats, heavy TV news consumer)

Finally, another practice of verifying information was cross-referencing it across a number of different media. For some, a story would seem valid and truthful, if reported by different news media. For others, this was a useful practice for getting different points of view, given what they perceived to be inherent political bias of media organisations. What was at stake here was not facts but the ways the facts were being discussed, what participants described as getting exposed to different *viewpoints* so that they can form their own *opinion*. As one of the younger participants argued:

> I don't think anyone should just read one newsfeed. You need to be able to compare yourself and to have yourself some ideas. Even if you are reading or watching any newsfeed from a source that you trust, you can't make it completely unbiased and so you need to have your own opinion.
>
> (Female, 18–24, Labour, avoider of TV news)

Such individual practices of fact-checking should not be overstated. First, they are self-reported within a research context, and often what people do is different from what they say they do (Prior 2009). At the same time, participants seemed to resort to fact-checking only in relation to topics that were critical to their interests rather than as a regular habit. As a younger focus group member, who claimed to get his news from social media, described:

> 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.

What these reported practices, however, reveal is that news consumption in an environment that news audiences perceive to be undermined by disinformation is a multi-layered process. The actual news texts people consume, either on legacy or social media, constitute just a starting point, to be discussed with friends and trusted sources, double-checked with other media, and ultimately approached with generalised scepticism. As Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) have argued, these "personalised information systems" do not necessarily signal the end of ritualised news consumption but novel forms of news consumption, where part of traditional journalistic practices are performed by audiences themselves. What remains unclear in this process is the role played by

institutionalised fact-checkers. Given the lack of awareness and minimal use of fact-checking services discussed in the previous section, and the nomadic nature of news audiences that feel confident, even if not always willing, to do their own fact-checking, how can institutionalised fact-checking revive journalism (Graves 2016) and empower citizens (Singer 2018)?

## *"Lying Politicians" and the Watchdog Role of News*

As previously outlined, during the focus group discussions participants were invited to reflect on three different news clips on the same pledge from the Conservative party manifesto during the 2019 election period. The manifesto pledged that, under proposed measures, there would be 50,000 more nurses at the end of the next parliament, should the Conservatives return to power. This became a contentious issue at the time, as the 50,000 figure included measures to recruit around 32,000 new nurses and persuade some 18,000 nurses to not leave the NHS for that period. The first two news clips shown to the focus groups (ITV and BBC news) reported this promise without challenging the misleading claim. Discussions after each clip illustrated that participants seemed to accept the pledge, as phrased in the news clips. When shown the segment from the Sky News Campaign Check, which explicitly challenged and unpacked the claim, participants unanimously described the claim as misleading and expressed dissatisfaction with the previous two news clips. Although the pledge itself was viewed as being accurately reported, participants felt that, by not challenging it, broadcasters were culpable of propagating misinformation. One participant compared these news clips as "a retweet without reading the content. It's just, 'here's the headline'—minus the content" (male, 25–34, Greens voter, light TV news consumer). Another one argued that the ITV clip "was technically accurate but morally not accurate at all" (female, 35–44, Labour voter, heavy TV news consumer). On the other hand, the Sky News clip was highly praised for helping participants understand the political claim rather than merely broadcasting information. As one participant put it, this fact-checking clip "wasn't necessarily dumbed down but I felt like they were on our side" (female, 18–24, Liberal Democrats voter, light TV news consumer).

The discussions that followed explored and evaluated such fact-checking reporting and whether participants felt it should be included more in broadcast news. All groups supported greater inclusion of fact-checking practices, as they would help them formulate informed opinions and take decisions on significant topics, such as making sense of political pledges during election campaigns. Despite conducting their own individual fact-checking, as discussed in the previous section, participants argued that there is always the expectation that television news will report information that is both factual and helpful for the public to understand political issues. As a participant who claimed to consume a lot of television news, but not Sky News, explained:

> 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 …
>
> (Female, 35–44, Liberal Democrats voter, heavy TV news consumer).

This request for more political fact-checking by television news was echoed in our second survey ($n = 542$), when respondents were asked whether broadcasters should fact-check

politicians more or less in television news bulletins. The vast majority (82%) of all respondents supported the claim that broadcasters should check politicians more (see Table 6). There was a difference in this expressed support between Labour and Conservative voters, with the former being more favourable towards increased fact-checking. This difference, however, was relatively small (9%) in comparison to polarising tendencies found in other countries (Lyons et al. 2020) and, in particular the US (Nyhan and Reifler 2015).

Similarly, the degree of respondents' engagement with mainstream media and political engagement did not seem to distinctively differentiate them with regards to their support towards increased fact-checking of politicians (see Table 7).

This lack of polarising opinions and ideological asymmetry in receptiveness towards fact-checking, which has been documented in US-based studies, can be explained by the information environment of the UK's media system. Given the strong public service ethos in broadcasting and the general trust in broadcast journalism (Ofcom 2021), UK audiences seem to be equally receptive of journalistic fact-checking across the political spectrum (Cushion et al. 2021).

The reasons given by survey respondents, when they were asked to justify their answers about whether broadcasters should fact-check politicians more, were varied but can be grouped in three broad inter-related themes, namely the lack of trust in politicians, the watchdog role of the media, and the restoring of trust in media organisations.

The assumption that politicians are by default either lying or manipulating the truth was by far the most common reason respondents gave for justifying their support for more fact-checking of politicians. Typical among these responses was that "*politicians are expert liars and very good at bending the truth*" (female, 45–54, Labour voter, light TV news consumer). This argument was linked by some respondents to politicians' tendency to avoid or refuse to answer difficult questions, when interviewed. Some answers also expressed this sentiment in relation to COVID-19 and the handling of the pandemic by the Government or politicians in general. According to one participant:

> During the coronavirus pandemic, some politicians made claims on broadcasting channels which contradicted what other politicians said on other broadcasting channels, this led to misinforming the public and media outlets should fact-check more to avoid the public doing the wrong thing.

**Table 6.** Support for fact-checking according to political ideology and party allegiance.

|  | 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) |
| Grand total | 542 | 100% (315) | 100% (162) | 100% (183) | 100% (156) |

**Table 7.** Support for fact-checking according to engagement with MSM and political engagement.

|  | 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) |
| Grand total | 542 | 279 | 112 | 227 | 171 |

(Female, 25–34, Conservative voter, light TV news consumer)

These findings echo reports about the decline of trust in politicians at the time of the research (Quilter-Pinner et al. 2021), especially after the first months of the global pandemic and revelations about political scandals related to government mishandlings of the public health crisis (Davies et al. 2021).

Failing to challenge political lies and misinformation, some respondents argued, would practically turn broadcast journalism into amplifiers of misinformation or "*as means of propagation, which is to be complicit*" (male, 55–64, Green party voter, heavy news user). These arguments were underlined by the assumption that the public tends to trust broadcast media. If they merely reproduce misleading political claims and spin without challenging them, the public will thus be misinformed. As one of the responses summarised, "*Television news is immediate and wide-ranging, once something is 'out there', it is almost impossible to counter*" (female, 55–64, Labour voter, heavy TV news consumer). At the same time, more consistent fact-checking of politicians was seen as a way of deterring politicians from purposefully making misleading claims, and, by extension, improving politics in general.

Related to the theme of political misinformation was the belief expressed by participants in the role of broadcast media as the watchdog of political power. Given that politicians tend to "lie" and propagate misleading information, it was seen as the responsibility of broadcast media to challenge and reveal these lies. As one respondent summarised, "*politicians spin and journalists challenge*" (female, 45–54, Conservative voter, heavy TV news consumer). In this attribution of a watchdog function to political fact-checking, audience expectations seem to meet with fact-checkers' self-perceptions (Singer 2018).

These audience expectations were further compounded by participants' views about broadcasters' public service responsibilities. One respondent summarised these responsibilities in the argument that "*broadcasters are meant to be a proxy for the public to pose the questions. If a politician refuses to answer a question or obfuscates, that politician is disrespecting the public*" (male, over 65, Conservative voter, heavy TV news consumer). Fact-checking was described as a necessary step in helping the public make informed decisions about important political issues. It was also seen as a way of helping the public understand politics and political claims better. In a rather long and thoughtful answer, one young respondent eloquently articulated this position:

> I think fact-checking is a really important tool for political education. It can show that politicians can truly influence the world by what they say. It gives weight and scrutiny to their words. I think this could help for citizens to cut the bullshit, as it were, and be more empowered to discern what politicians are claiming, what information they are banking on, etc. I think it could also potentially disrupt the extreme ideologies some cling to and provide a breeze of refreshing "here's what is actually going on" to politics where many citizens now believe no one speaks the truth anymore.

(Female, 18–24, Labour voter, heavy TV news consumer)

There was a broadly shared belief among our respondents that fact-checking can reinvigorate both politics and journalism, and by extension, enhance public trust in both. This point was made by some in their justifications for more political fact-checking in

broadcast news. Fact-checking, according to these answers, could restore audience trust in broadcast journalism as it would illustrate the effort taken by journalists to hold politicians to account. According to participants, it would also reaffirm the broadcasters' commitment to reporting the "truth", and thus convince the public that what they watch is not political spin. Such a development, some respondents argued, could further empower citizens and improve their engagement with politics, as it would "*begin to dissolve public indifference to politicians' lies*" (male, 55–64, non-voter, light TV news consumer).

Once more, audience expectations, as illustrated in the survey responses, seem to confirm the vision of fact-checking as reinvigorating trust in journalism and its "truth-seeking" mission (Graves 2016) and, by extension, improving political dialogue and the public sphere. These responses, however, are expressive of what participants would have liked to see *more of* in their daily consumption of news media, in other words, they are expressive of a sense of *lack* in people's experience with broadcast media. This sense is partially justified by the lack of awareness of existing fact-checking initiatives, discussed above. It is also indicative, however, of the role that people would expect broadcast media to play, namely of more actively challenging political claims in a way that allows the public to understand them and detect misinformation. At the moment, though, fact-checking seems to be in the periphery of the news media participants consumed.

At the same time, fact-checking cannot be seen as the panacea for restoring public trust in journalism. The minority of respondents that were either uncertain or wanted less political fact-checking (see Table 6), justified their answers by expressing a lack of trust in media organisations. They thought that given the lack of objectivity in broadcasters, their fact-checking of politicians would be another extension of partisan reporting. As one respondent put it, "*Broadcasters tend to fact check politicians they do not agree with but not so much with those they have similar beliefs*" (male, above 65, Conservative voter, heavy TV news consumer). This, according to another one, would lead to "*more biased fact checking against one party than the other one*" (female, 25–34, Green Party voter, moderate TV news consumer), given that broadcasters miss the impartiality they would need in order to hold politicians to account. Similar arguments about the bias of broadcasters were also made in the focus group discussions, when a few research participants pointed out that broadcast news is a form of business that often abides to the political agenda of media owners or directors. In this sense, all "*channels they're on someone's payroll and they've got to suit a certain agenda*" (male, 55–64, Labour voter, light TV news consumer).

Given that such responses were in the minority, their significance in the context of the empirical findings is not to be overstated. They are, however, illustrative of the generalised scepticism with which people approach the media, and which justifies their individualised fact-checking practices discussed above. They can also be approached as an indication of how fact-checking can reach the most sceptical segments of the public, namely by being balanced and impartial. Although populist leaders are more inclined to lie, and therefore, more susceptible to fact-checking (Lyons et al. 2020), it is important for broadcasters to pay equal attention to different parties, especially when it comes to political claims during election campaigns (Birks 2019).

## Conclusions

In this study, we set out to explore the extent to which news audiences in the UK are aware of fact-checking services, as well as how they use and evaluate them. The combination of focus group discussions and online surveys illustrated a rather limited role for fact-checking in the current multi-choice media environment. First, our empirical material shows that the vast majority of the people participating in our research were not aware of the fact-checkers that are currently active in the UK. The small minority that has heard of them has only used them occasionally, as a coping strategy (Chang 2021) for issues that they deemed to be of great personal or political importance. At the same time, however, the empirical findings illustrated fact-checking as necessary in the daily consumption of news. Research participants reported that they employ a number of practices or "acts of authentication" (Tandoc et al. 2018), in order to verify information for issues they are interested in. They also asked, in their vast majority, for more political fact-checking by broadcast news, as a way of holding politicians accountable. This became particularly pronounced, when focus group participants compared the coverage of the same political pledge between two regular and one fact-checking news story. The value of fact-checking in helping the public better understand politics and make informed decisions was highlighted in participants' comments.

What can be concluded on the basis of these empirical findings is that for fact-checking to play the revolutionary role imparted to it by practitioners and academics alike, it needs greater visibility. Our research shows that fact-checking can indeed reinforce trust in journalism (Graves 2016) and empower citizens (Singer 2018), but this can only happen, when citizens are aware of it and engage with it more regularly. At the moment, fact-checking seems to be of service only for a small and engaged minority, and its role in informing public debates is, therefore, limited (Birks 2019). Such visibility can be given to fact-checking through the mainstream media and, in particular, broadcast news. Including fact-checking segments in broadcast news can help audiences better understand political claims and can, therefore, improve the quality of political discourse.

These findings need, of course, to be contextualised within the UK media system. The strict impartiality and public service standards required by broadcasters mean that they remain the most trusted news brands in the country (Newman et al. 2021). This trust in the impartiality and independence of broadcasters dovetails with a belief in their watchdog role (Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2020). The characteristics of the UK media environment and the broader political culture can, therefore, justify the greater and non-partisan receptiveness of audiences towards increased political fact-checking in broadcast news, when compared to other polarised political contexts, such as the US (Cushion et al. 2021). This point leads to a further conclusion to be drawn from our study, namely the need for more diverse research with regard to fact-checking, both in terms of research questions and the national contexts and political cultures within which fact-checking is embedded. Moving beyond the intensely polarised political context of the US and experimental settings can expand the type of relevant questions to be asked and insights to be provided. Fact-checking can indeed play an important role in democratic politics but for this to happen we need to understand how people in different political and national contexts understand and engage with it.

## Disclosure Statement

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