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Misinformation: A Qualitative Exploration

PREPARED FOR: OFCOM
PREPARED BY: YONDER

Misinformation: A qualitative exploration

Executive summary

- This study focuses on the opinions of those who define themselves as 'questioners' or 'rejectors' of mainstream media sources and are open to, or curious about, non-mainstream alternative sources. It explores how they interact with news and information, their perceptions of 'truth' and 'misinformation', and their opinions about some hypothetical interventions designed to combat types of misinformation.

- Participants described a fast-moving and cluttered news and information landscape which they found both highly engaging, and fatiguing. Alongside the volume and speed of information delivery, they felt there was an increasing tendency from all types of news providers to sensationalise or exaggerate in order to gain attention, which added to the intensity of the experience.

- The research also identified fading levels of trust in the news media, driven by reporting that is perceived not so much as 'false' than selective, and by a belief that previously reliable indicators of 'truth' such as video, stats, 'expert opinion', or even professional journalism, have been undermined or eroded. Participants felt that this erosion of trust had been accelerated during the news-heavy pandemic.

- Against a backdrop of uncertainty, participants had come to adopt highly (and knowingly) subjective navigation strategies, such as shortcutting to sources or stories that reflect their own world view, or reading the headlines and comments sections of articles but skipping the main copy, seeking to anchor their take-out of the story in the opinions of others. The research uncovered a range of consumption and sharing behaviours that helped participants construct their identities and build relationships, but in a way that could reduce the attention and importance they placed on accuracy.

- Particular content formats were observed to play a nuanced role in the unwitting spread of misinformation. Memes were often shared without thinking about their veracity or potential impact on other people. Recognising them only sometimes as provocative, participants felt that the comedic nature of memes allowed them to communicate their viewpoints without having to get into 'serious' debates. Similarly, participants told us that they don't always watch the whole of a video before sending it on to others, instead intuitively deciding if it is something that validates their beliefs.

- Perhaps counter-intuitively, the more active followers of alternative sources and stories were not found to share this content indiscriminately or in high volume; rather they appeared cautious and selective. Hoping for opinion-reinforcement, but also fearing rejection by others who may see them as being on the 'fringe', they typically preferred to share and communicate with like-minded people, (and often ended up building their own echo chambers).

- Participants had divergent ideas of what constitutes 'misinformation'. Questioners characterised it as alternative, false information that is presented as 'fact', which is then believed by certain sections of society, whereas Rejectors felt that it applies equally to the selective or biased reporting they saw in mainstream news as it does to outlandish conspiracy theories coming from alternative sources. Some, indeed, believed that accusations of 'misinformation' could be

targeted at people like them, and that the term had become weaponised for censorship of valid alternative perspectives.

- Participants therefore took different positions regarding the extent to which, and for whom, misinformation is a problem, and how best to address it. Crucially, however, both Questioners and Rejectors tended to believe it is a danger to others in society but not themselves, as they saw themselves as too savvy to fall for it.

- When shown a range of intervention ideas for discussion, there was little consensus - not just between the Questioner and Rejector groups, but more broadly across all participants, providing a reminder of how counter-misinformation engagement and intervention strategies will need to reflect the very complex reality around attitudes towards misinformation.

.YONDER

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Introductory Definitions

News, information and content

For this project, we reviewed participants' consumption of news and information, covering online, social, TV and printed channels. We aimed for a specific focus on news and current affairs content rather than entertainment, sports, celebrity, or general knowledge.

Misinformation

For the purpose of this research, this was defined as:

a) Information that is widely acknowledged to be false or misleading (for example, the link between 5G and Covid-19)
b) Information that is mostly seen as false or misleading, but which is more contested (for example, the idea that facemasks have no effect on the spread of Covid-19)
c) Factual/mainstream news content which omits some counter-narratives or wider context
d) Perceived subjectivity/bias in mainstream media (or broadcast media which is regulated for accuracy and impartiality)

When this report uses the term 'misinformation' generically, we are focusing on the first two definitions only.

False information

We use this term in place of 'misinformation' in places throughout our report:

a) When referring to clearly false information
b) When paraphrasing or quoting research participants' own language

1. Introduction

Research objectives

This study, commissioned by Ofcom, focuses on the opinions of those who define themselves as 'questioners' or 'rejectors' of mainstream media sources and are open to, or curious about, non-mainstream alternative sources. It explores how they interact with news and information, their perceptions of 'truth' and 'misinformation', and their opinions about some hypothetical interventions designed to combat types of misinformation.

The project provides qualitative, in-depth exploration of these issues, rather than quantifiable assessment.

Sample

We recruited two specific groups of participants for this project, defined chiefly by their news and information consumption preferences, and their attitudes towards the mainstream media:

1) 12 *'Mainstream Questioners':* these participants self-identified as frequent consumers of a mix of mainstream media, but who also questioned if the information provided by mainstream media is always truthful.
2) 12 *'Mainstream Rejectors':* these participants self-identified as low/non-consumers of mainstream media, and all strongly questioned or lacked trust in the truthfulness of information provided by mainstream media.

Further criteria across both sample types included the following:

- A mix of male and female participants
- All actively consumed and spoke about information with friends and family
- Mix of demographics, ages, gender, and locations where possible
- Half of participants actively shared information online

Methodology

The research was conducted entirely online and took a phased approach.

Firstly, all 24 participants kept a 5-day 'information diary' designed to capture their daily information consumption habits, as and when they happened, and explore their in-the-moment perceptions and motivations surrounding these. We did not mention the concept of misinformation at this point.

This was followed by 30-minute depth interviews with all 24 participants, designed to dive deeper into the consumption journeys for relevant pieces of content (e.g. pieces of misinformation, alternative sources, etc.), and to explore in more detail the emotional triggers and motivators behind their individual consumption and sharing habits.

Finally, we conducted group discussions with 12 of the most engaged participants. These were designed to further understand our Mainstream Rejector and Mainstream Questioner audiences, using the group environment to draw out the nuances of their behaviours, perceptions and motivations. During this stage we introduced the idea of misinformation for the first time and shared a number of potential intervention ideas for participants to reflect upon.

2. The News & Information Landscape

News consumers can feel overwhelmed by both the quantity and speed of information that they encounter

Most of our participants tended to gain news and information from a number of sources, but there was a tension in their relationship with a news and information landscape which they felt is becoming increasingly crowded with social media, apps and pinging news alerts. On the one hand they expected and demanded speedy updates and breaking news, but on the other they felt fatigued with the constant flow of information. Across our sample people felt that this environment requires a lot from them in terms of staying up to date, because the story is in-the-moment and subject to change once the next piece of information emerges.

> *"It can be difficult to keep up, things change so quickly. For example, there was a story about nurses reacting to the (COVID-19) vaccine that really worried me recently, then it turned out that they have these underlying conditions, but it was very easy to miss the follow-up information"*
> *(Mainstream Questioner, 21)*

A perceived increase in sensationalism has further pushed news into the entertainment space

Another element of the news cycle participants described as difficult to deal with was the news providers' '*race for breaking news*'. They felt that, in order to capture readers, headlines have become ever more dramatic, shocking and exaggerated. This could have different effects on their attitudes, anywhere from annoyance to frustration to reluctant acceptance. But at the same time, they reported that they were more likely than previously to look at attention-grabbing language, memes, or strong opinions, as these were easily digestible. This is especially true when they were checking the news in moments of 'leisure' such as coffee, lunch break or before or after work.

> *"I'm pretty much constantly scanning my Twitter feed or BBC news or whatever, whenever I have a spare moment. I'm guilty of probably just focusing on those headlines that really capture your attention"*
> *(Mainstream Questioner, 28)*

Nowadays, all information sources are believed to be subjective

In an environment so strongly influenced by news designed to capture attention quickly, participants felt that information and opinion are inextricably linked. The mainstream press, in particular, was perceived to be strongly divided along party political lines, meaning that even those who fundamentally still trusted the mainstream media for their daily information often perceived a level of bias in everything they consumed, the most obvious and regular reminders of this being the big news stories of the day such as Brexit or the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, others felt that news aggregator sites like Yahoo selectively chose a particular mix of news and information for their users.

Attitudes towards the BBC

Historically, the BBC was often described as a beacon of neutrality, objectivity and thorough journalism. And for this very reason, our participants felt more strongly about any perceived biases.

These perceived biases or subjectivity played out in different ways:

- …the BBC has a left-wing bias (and is therefore too critical of the current Conservative government and other right-wing politicians);

- …the BBC is a mouthpiece or is too uncritical of the current government (for example, that it does not hold the government sufficiently to account for its handling of the pandemic);

- …or, the BBC deliberately ignores stories and viewpoints (for example, alternative perspectives on the efficacy of lockdowns and face-masks during the pandemic)

The pandemic has intensified the impact of these contextual factors

During the past year, the daily news around the global pandemic has felt especially overwhelming, negative and disconcerting for our participants. They attributed this, in part, to mainstream media reporting that reinforced their negative beliefs and frustrations around the media. Rapidly changing interpretations and projections of data have led to participants feeling that news sources contradict themselves from one day, week or month to the next. Both our Questioner and Rejector groups were increasingly questioning organisations' motivation to provide accurate information rather than just breaking or sensationalised news. They had also come to perceive increased bias in reporting that focuses on government messages.

> *"Look at the advice on masks, it's actually changed over the pandemic, but each time there are supposed experts that we're supposed to take as gospel."*
> *(Mainstream Rejector, 31)*

3. Perceptions of truth in the evolving news environment

A number of push and pull factors had made our participants more likely to come across and consume content from alternative sources

There is no 'absolute truth' for Questioner and Rejector news consumers

The dynamics described above have led, for our participants at least, to a generally accepted sense of uncertainty regarding news and information, and a feeling that 'accurate' or 'neutral' reporting has become an impossibility (or at least an impossibility to discern). For them, the problem was characterised in two slightly different ways.

Firstly, a sense of uncertainty could be driven not so much by information that is 'false', but rather by information that it is selective and doesn't present all parts of the story.

> *"It would be helpful if there was more balance of opinion in the mainstream, more people on mainstream media saying things regarding the real effects of lockdown that no-one's really reporting"*
> *(Mainstream Rejector, 42)*

Secondly, there was a perception that many of the previously trusted and established 'indicators of truth' have been eroded or even actively manipulated, in order to deliver false or biased content that poses as legitimate information. Sometimes this was seen to come from people spreading outright falsehoods but was also at times seen to come from larger mainstream sources trying to add credibility to a particular viewpoint.

Examples of these indicators are elements that can broadly be grouped under the heading of 'evidence', such as data, statistics, video footage or real people's experiences. Participants tended to classify these things as absolute fact, things that cannot be falsified – or so they once thought. But, often based on their personal experiences of consuming news, they have come to believe that this 'evidence' can be found, created or manipulated to fit a particular narrative, for example reporting deaths rather than recovered Covid-19 patients to support the government's lockdown policy.

A second type of indicator now challenged by participants is the professional or 'expert' status of reporters or other information-givers such as scientists or investigative journalists. We observed that there was little trust in the neutrality of these sources. Both Questioners and Rejectors felt that experts had often been chosen by media outlets, or by the government, to align with their own values and opinions.
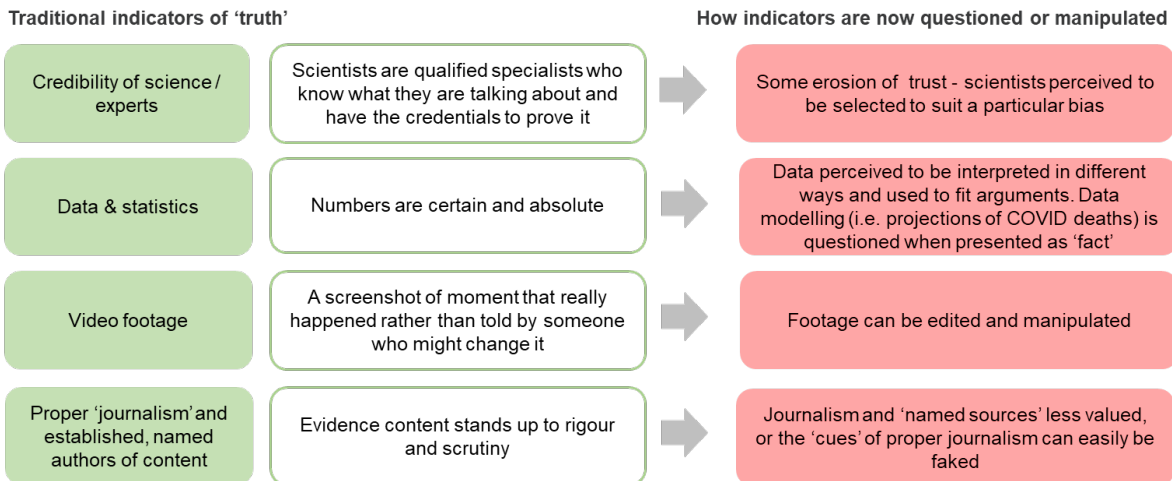
Traditional indicators of 'truth'

How indicators are now questioned or manipulated

Credibility of science / experts	Scientists are qualified specialists who know what they are talking about and have the credentials to prove it	→	Some erosion of trust - scientists perceived to be selected to suit a particular bias
Data & statistics	Numbers are certain and absolute	→	Data perceived to be interpreted in different ways and used to fit arguments. Data modelling (i.e. projections of COVID deaths) is questioned when presented as 'fact'
Video footage	A screenshot of moment that really happened rather than told by someone who might change it	→	Footage can be edited and manipulated
Proper 'journalism' and established, named authors of content	Evidence content stands up to rigour and scrutiny	→	Journalism and 'named sources' less valued, or the 'cues' of proper journalism can easily be faked

Fig 1: Challenges to traditional indicators of 'truth'

The Axe Incident

One participant told us a story about how confused and disconcerted he felt when his belief in 'evidence' was turned on its head.

He noted a video of a man being beaten seemingly by Black Lives Matters protestors in the United States that went viral in May 2020. It was only later that he found out that the video had been edited, and that the victim had in fact been the initial aggressor.

> *"I saw this video of a white man being beaten by the protesters and thought 'wow they're really out of control and taking it too far with BLM'. But then I saw the next day that half of the video was cut off and the guy actually came at them with an axe!*
>
> *I always thought video was one of the only things to really show you the truth because it is real life footage, but this really made me re-think."*
> *(Mainstream Questioner, 27)*

DALLAS LOOTING
MAN VICIOUSLY BEATEN FOR DEFENDING BUSINESS
BREAKING NEWS
WARNING: GRAPHIC VIDEO

Jason_Powell
@JasonPowellRBLX

The rioters just killed a man defending his business in Dallas. It's time for martial law and Insurrection Act of 1807.

3:58 AM · May 31, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

6 Retweets   24 Likes

Yonder subsequently learnt that this story had caused quite a stir in the wider media, with some outlets reporting the man had died, others showing evidence of the man's Facebook account still posting regarding the incident, and others again questioning the validity of this account.

It should be noted that a smaller part of the sample was oblivious to the idea of the erosion or manipulation of truth indicators, and still often took this type of information at face value. For example, they tended to believe without questioning any information that appeared to be scientific or based on data or statistics, and it did not cross these individuals' minds that reporting of this nature could potentially not be truthful.

Participants consciously embraced this world of subjectivity, aligning with sources that validated their own identity

Questioners and Rejectors in our research had started accepting this apparent lack of objectivity and developed coping mechanisms and workarounds. Not believing neutral fact exists anymore, they instead told us they tend to identify with sources that align with their own personal opinions – using it as a shortcut to get as close to the truth as possible.

> *"Statistics and facts can be massaged to fit your point of view. So, you have to look at the source, do you trust the source, do they have opinions similar to your own, as it will always be subjective."*
> *(Mainstream Questioner, 34)*

They appeared mostly to be aware of their own 'confirmation bias', but this was interpreted as a necessary evil to navigate the flood of information. In practice, we observed this leading to instinctive and habitual information consumption behaviours:

- Content from habitual or pre-screened sources rarely being fact-checked;
- The majority of information seemingly being ignored in favour of information that has personal relevance;
- Reading the headlines and comments sections of news articles but skipping the main copy – seeking to anchor their takeout of the story in the opinions of others.

This shows in effect that what participants considered as a trustworthy source could vary from established news organisations to other people's posts and comments.

A variety of biases at play

Participants tended to be aware of their own 'confirmation bias', i.e. a tendency to identify with sources that align with their own personal opinions. However, they were often less aware of a range of other biases that could be driving how they reacted to news and information:

Simplicity bias

- Attaching to certainty; black and white thinking; easily digestible arguments, figures and visuals are often found easier to believe
- *For example, appetite for easy soundbites around the Brexit debate, both for and against*

Social reinforcement

- Selectively looking for other people who agree with them
- *For example, selectively reading comments sections rather than full articles; sharing content only with some people who already agree with them*

Illusory superiority

- Overestimating own critical thinking abilities
- *For example, some people self-identify as being too 'savvy' to fall for any form of false information*

Participants' disengagement with the mainstream, and engagement with alternative sources, had come about both proactively and passively

Some in the sample still fundamentally trusted the mainstream media. They perceived a level of bias but either triangulated a range of sources to mitigate this, or just 'accepted' a certain level of subjectivity as long as this fitted with their own personal confirmation bias.

Others had become disengaged with the mainstream media. These participants often felt that their own personal viewpoints are not reflected back at them, or that some truths are deliberately hidden or biased towards a certain agenda. They told us that they are looking for 'truths' that have not been picked up by the mainstream media, and therefore tended to more actively turn to alternative sources that better reflect their viewpoints and shine a light on truths that have been ignored by the mainstream media. Alternative content often also plays into their questioning mindsets by providing new and different perspectives, which encouraged them to re-validate their suspicion that some information may be hidden by the mainstream.

A smaller proportion had also become disengaged with news and information per se. These participants told us that they are just not sure what or who they can trust. Some of them seemed simply overwhelmed with the amount and nature of news on a daily basis and had often switched off from serious consideration of news and information, seeing it more as entertainment and not looking into it too deeply. They claimed to subsequently engage with alternative sources accidentally or passively when something *'a bit different'* shows up on their screens and captures their attention.

4. Profiling news and information consumers who question or reject mainstream media

Drivers and motivations for 'questioning' and 'rejecting' the mainstream media varied. We found that our initial 'Questioner' and 'Rejector' groups could be further segmented into five distinct profiles.

We have mapped these profiles based on a) their relative engagement level with news and information, and b) their preferences for either 'traditional' mainstream information sources or more alternative sources:
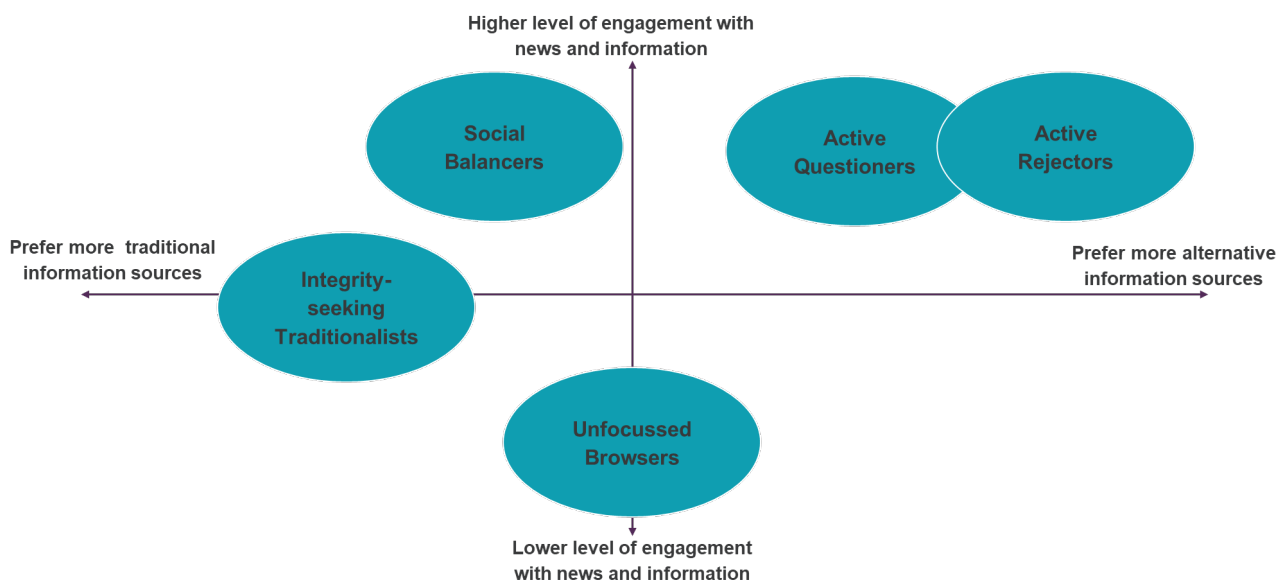

Fig 2: The five news consumption profiles in our sample

People in each profile have their own discrete consumption habits, motivators and interaction or sharing behaviours.

Active Questioners and Active Rejectors: 'think for yourself' is the key mindset

> *"It felt really good seeing other people with similar opinions on the community, it made me feel less alone."*
> *(Mainstream Questioner, 28)*

Attitudinally these two profiles share a lot of similarities – they see themselves among a minority of critical thinkers who see 'what's really going on'. They believe that the mainstream media deliberately does not tell the whole truth and that it is their responsibility to find what is being hidden from them. They appreciate alternative sources for their attempts to provide a breadth of perspectives. Importantly, they are often careful to distance themselves from what they refer to as outright 'conspiracy theories' (e.g. 5G links to Covid-19) and will develop their own logic as to where they draw the line between what they consider realistic or unrealistic.

For Active Questioners and Active Rejectors, news can be a negative and emotionally charged experience. They are aware that others may seem them as being on the 'fringe' and they can easily become defensive about their opinions.

> *"There's so many people out there who just blindly accept what the mainstream media tells them. It becomes quite frustrating when you talk to them really, what's the point if they're not going to even look into the facts themselves, so I tend to avoid it"*
> *(Mainstream Rejector, 51)*

This also makes them highly cautious and selective about their sharing behaviours and they typically prefer to share and communicate with those who they know are like-minded. We observed that this is not only for opinion-reinforcement, but also for a fear of rejection by others, as speaking to like-minded people can alleviate the feelings of isolation that they experience. As a result, they often end up building their own echo chambers.

When it comes to media consumption behaviours, the two profiles differ slightly. Active Questioners may still keep a critical eye on the mainstream or use it to gain a 'balanced' overall viewpoint. Active Rejectors are more likely to have turned away from the mainstream media completely, and more likely to consume alternative sources more regularly.

Active Questioners often still have varied information sources – but they view them through a lens of mainstream mistrust

Fig 3: Example information universe for Active Questioners

Active Rejectors may consult fewer sources overall as they have 'weeded out' over time the ones that they more fully trust

Fig 4: Example information universe for Active Rejectors

Social Balancers: information enables social discourse and reflects identity

> *"If something really resonates with me or I feel it's really important I might re-post it on Twitter – then when you see my feed people will understand I am a liberal & progressive thinking person."*
> *(Mainstream Questioner, 39)*

Within this profile we found mostly younger people – Millennials or GenZ who are confident navigating the opinionated online and social media environment and generally love staying up-to-date and learning new things. They accept that nothing can be 100% trusted and habitually get a broad range of content and sources to triangulate their information. This often also means that they think they are quite savvy and knowledgeable and that they are not susceptible to falling into the trap of false information.

Information is a big part of their social lives and they can be the go-to person for others in their immediate circles for keeping up-to-date. Information and content therefore have an important role in how they construct their own identities as 'thought leaders' in their peer groups and educated news consumers. However, this also gives them a certain level of influence over their friends' and families' information worlds, which can have implications if their information happens to be wrong.

Social Balancers enjoy debating different viewpoints, satire and humorous content, and sharing is often an expression of their emotional engagement with content. While they share mostly with like-minded people to create conversation topics and light-hearted relief, they can also reach larger audiences, as many are avid social media users via WhatsApp groups, and Twitter or Facebook feeds.

Fig 5: Example information universe for Social Balancers

Unfocussed Browsers: information is diverting entertainment

> *"I share stuff that I find funny, I don't really think about where it comes from."*
> *(Mainstream Rejector, 44)*

People in this profile have typically disengaged from news and information per se. They feel mostly satisfied that mainstream media is truthful, and don't engage with it so deeply as to really notice any discrepancies, biases, or manipulation of information. They spend relatively little time reflecting on whether content is 'true' or not, be it from mainstream or alternative sources.

Their main motivators for information consumption are distraction from daily tasks and stresses by feeling entertained, or connecting with others. They typically prefer content that easily captures their attention, is visual and emotionally engaging, or even controversial. They can also passively engage with alternative sources (such as news sites and Facebook posts) when these disrupt their attention.

Unfocussed Browsers told us that they want to spark easy laughs and connections with friends and family and mostly share memes from social media or WhatsApp. Conversely, they are less likely to share more serious content and opinions, typically due to their lack of general engagement with news and information relative to other profiles.
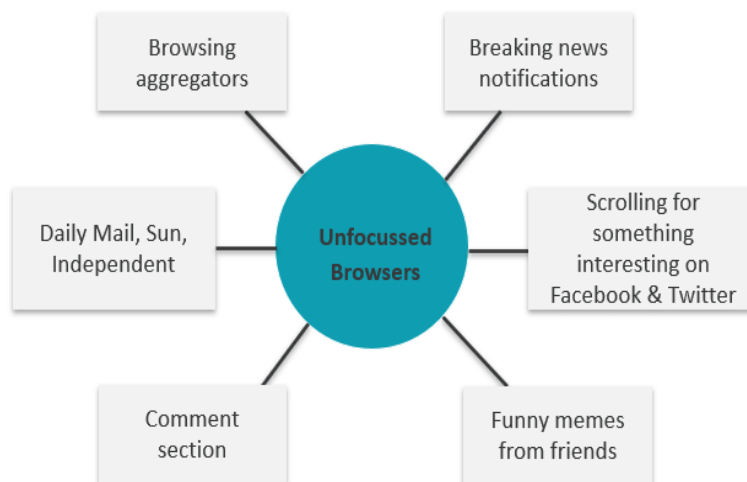

Fig 6: Example information universe for Unfocussed Browsers

Integrity-seeking Traditionalists: information provides social glue

> *"It's just about the money now – whoever talks about the story first and in the most dramatic way wins. It's not about accuracy at all."*
> *(Mainstream Questioner, 53)*

This profile was the least represented in our sample, and they were mostly older and often less comfortable with the digital media environment overall.

Their relationship with news and information tends to be more traditional, having grown up in a time where large news organisations were largely trusted as purveyors of credible information. They want to believe in the integrity of news sources and straightforward facts. Mostly trusting of organisations such as the BBC, they are also more likely to read print newspapers in addition to some newer online sources. Social media is not something they would generally trust for what they consider important or serious topics.

They dislike the way that, in their view, media organisations take part in sensationalist reporting that shifts the public mood. They are also uncomfortable with what they see as the divisiveness of discourse on social media and generally want to stay out of any debates. They are highly sensitive to these developments in the news and information environment and feel they could be damaging for society.

Integrity-seeking Traditionalists' relative inexperience makes them less likely to share content from digital sources. Instead, they may share more verbally in personal conversation with people they trust. However, this means that they may not be as well versed in recognising false information and content when it adopts the hallmarks of legitimacy.

Fig 7: Example information universe for Integrity-seeking Traditionalists

5. How alternative content is consumed

Misinformation can be consumed unnoticed - intuitively rather than consciously

Memes are highly shareable and engaging, and can be a potent misinformation source

For our sample, memes were mostly perceived as humorous, light-hearted and instant, and were often shared without thinking about the consequences. They were recognised sometimes as provocative, but mostly used to be playful or create light-hearted relief and fun – so most of our participants didn't give much thought to their veracity or their impact on other people.

For example, looking at the Anti-vaccine memes below, a Social Balancer told us he had no problem with the vaccine but enjoys the debate around the topic, so he posted a related meme (Fig. 8) to his work WhatsApp group to create light-hearted conversation.

Fig 8: Content posted on the online research community

Fig 9: Content posted on the online research community

Some memes can also validate and promote non-mainstream views and are often shared between like-minded individuals to further bond around their common viewpoints. For example, a meme (Fig. 9) was received by a vaccine sceptic Active Rejector - who recognised that it was *'exaggerated for comedy'* - but also saw in it an element of his own world view. He then shared the meme with a couple of other like-minded friends, as he felt it to be humorously provocative, although he would not share this with wider circles. Some Active Questioners and Active Rejectors also told us that the comedic effect around memes helps them to communicate their viewpoint with others, without having to get into serious debates.

Video is often still more 'trusted' than other content types, so well-disguised manipulation can more easily filter through

Video footage could still be assumed to be closer to the 'truth' by our sample than other types of content – especially if it aligns with existing opinions and viewpoints. In many cases, participants told us that they don't watch the whole of a video before sending it on to others, but relatively quickly and intuitively decide if it is something that validates or goes against their beliefs. Then, they share or don't share accordingly. This means that despite some awareness of its potentially problematic nature, video content does not get fully 'vetted', which could in turn facilitate the spread of misinformation.

Alternative news sources, even those carrying highly speculative content, are still valued as non-mainstream 'truth seekers'

Active Questioners and Active Rejectors do not take at face value everything that is communicated by alternative news sites and commentators, and they recognise that some of the content is speculative or less believable. However, they do value these sites for being 'searchers of truth' and as such, the content they feel is less believable does not discourage them from embracing the content that they *do* perceive to be accurate. They appreciate the attempt by these sites to uncover hidden truths and accept that this can be hit and miss. These profiles also often still perceive a kernel of underlying truth in more speculative content if it plays into their underlying world view (for example, if a story is based around critique of Government communication around Covid-19.)

6. Perceptions of misinformation and the role for intervention

Misinformation is seen as a problem – but interpretations differ across news consumer profiles, which in turn affects the potential efficacy of intervention ideas

Most participants felt strongly about the existence and spread of 'false information' - but what is considered 'misinformation', and who it affects, was driven by their own world view

Those who still used and trusted the mainstream media felt that 'misinformation' relates to any alternative, false information that is presented as 'fact', which is then believed by certain sections of society. However, they tended to perceive misinformation as being a problem that is 'for others' but not 'for them' – and that the mainstream news and information content that they consume is typically not prone to misinformation. They also felt that they were savvy enough to identify misinformation when they do come across it.

Mainstream Questioners and Rejectors had a different perspective from the above. When asked about 'false information' they initially tended to think about more 'extreme' conspiracy theories (e.g. QAnon, 5G-Covid) that they felt were outright unrealistic. However, in the long run they were as likely to interpret the term 'misinformation' in relation to the *mainstream* media as to alternative commentaries. For most of them, misinformation meant mainstream 'scaremongering', twisting of facts or taking a party line.

For some here, misinformation was seen in itself as a symbol of liberal or mainstream bias, and they felt from personal experience that accusations of 'misinformation' could be targeted at people like them, and that the term had been weaponised for censorship of valid alternative perspectives.

> *"It's used to shut people up."*
> *(Mainstream Rejector, 40)*

There was little or no consensus on a range of hypothetical intervention ideas that we shared with participants

Awareness of existing real-world interventions, beyond Twitter flags and bans, was low across the sample. However, the range of perspectives amongst our participants regarding the definition and risk areas of misinformation, that we have described earlier, meant that there was no consensus on any 'solutions'.

Broadly speaking, those who still used and trusted the mainstream media were intuitively open to the idea of intervention to address misinformation. They did, however, often feel that it is 'others' and not themselves who would benefit from support in this area.

Active Rejectors and Questioners, on the other hand, were more likely to find the idea of any form of intervention problematic. Driven by their belief in the overarching power of the mainstream media to steer public discussion, they perceived intervention as an attempt at 'censorship by the back door'. There were concerns about who has the power to decide what is 'true' vs. 'false', and a suspicion that intervention is actually part of the mainstream agenda. They feared an effort by the mainstream media to further strengthen its own bias and power by limiting the range of alternative perspectives and unfairly penalising those who speak out.

It was symptomatic of this stance, when discussing the hypothetical ideas, that most participants concurred with the spontaneous suggestion from one of them that any interventions relating to news and information sources should be aimed as much at mainstream organisations as at alternative sources, social media, or individual commentators.

Overview of intervention ideas tested within the research

Prioritised by their potential to affect positive societal change, as perceived by our sample:

Higher potential

Getting social media companies to publish annual reports about how they deal with false information

Resources to help people make more confident decisions about what they read or share

Telling people when the information they read or are about to share is false

Asking people to add their own comments to information they're about to share

Preventing people from sharing links to certain websites known for spreading false information

Banning people when they share a lot of false information

Perceived as more problematic

Fig 10: Overview of intervention ideas with nuances in potential

Breakdown of responses to each of the intervention ideas tested

Annual social media company reporting

Participants felt that if it became a high-profile initiative, this could generate high-level momentum or structural change

The idea was perceived to deliver more transparency and accountability, although:

- This strategy still does not answer exactly 'how' false information would be tackled, or how 'true' and 'false' is being defined (and by whom)

- There were some concerns that this might become a dry, box-ticking exercise

"It would be great to have something that holds the social media companies to account – it would mean that we can see exactly what companies are doing to try and sort this and not just rely on them doing it in the background. I would want to know what happens when they fail to comply though, how would it be enforced?"

(Mainstream Questioner, 28)

Resources to help people make more confident decisions about what they read or share

There was broad appeal for the idea of empowering people to make their own informed decisions across profiles:

- Avoids direct accusations of censorship or '*ulterior agendas'* and plays into the critical mindset of Active Questioners and Active Rejectors, by encouraging people to 'think for themselves'

- Would require careful positioning to avoid appearing patronising

"It's a good idea but would really depend who the resources come from. Otherwise it's just again someone telling you what to read rather than you making your own decisions. It couldn't come from someone like the BBC but if it was someone like Ofcom then I like the idea in theory"

(Mainstream Questioner, 44)

Telling people when the information they read, or are about to share, is false

'Not verified' rather than 'false' may be a more subtle and broadly accepted approach:

- There was agreement in principle from those who trust the mainstream media – although they believed intervention was necessary for others but not for themselves

- The idea was problematic for Active Questioners and Active Rejectors who were concerned that this strategy might be used to flag any information that is perceived to be alternative to mainstream views.

"I imagine a 'pop up' with a warning. If I saw this and it was something I'm interested in but it said it was unverified then I would want to look into that further and understand why"

(Mainstream Questioner, 24)

Asking people to add their own comments to information before sharing

Our sample welcomed the idea of 'pause and consider' before sharing:

- The act of requiring people to add comments to information was felt to potentially encourage this sort of reflection

- But there were concerns it may be easy to circumnavigate, or become a chore

"If you needed to stop and add a comment to everything you post then you'd probably be more selective, but I can't really see how this would work in reality"

(Mainstream Rejector, 42)

Preventing people from sharing links to websites known for false information

'Forced intervention' was problematic for those who questioned or rejected mainstream media:

- The idea appealed to some of those who were more trusting of the mainstream – although again, for others and not for themselves

- Active Questioner / Rejectors were concerned that this intervention may serve to censor valid alternative sources of information

"This is verging on a police state a little bit, it could only be done by a known independent organisation. But really I think this could be used to shut down voices"

(Mainstream Rejector, 51)

Banning people when they share a lot of false information

Many, across profiles, were concerned about the censorship of free speech:

- There was some agreement from those who were more trusting of the mainstream media and perceived the idea as similar to banning people who post harmful content on social media.
- But again, they felt an intervention like this applied to others and not to themselves
- Many were concerned about the definition of true vs. false, and whether this might serve to stymie valid alternative perspectives.

"It needs to be really clear that they are genuinely false. If you are sharing false figures then that makes sense, things that can be verified. But there's a fine line because who is in charge, who is deciding what's true and false?"

(Mainstream Rejector, 27)