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**Misinformation and Trusted Voices During the Pandemic and
Beyond**

**Evidence submitted to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-committee on Online Harms and
Disinformation**

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About this Evidence

The following evidence is presented by a team of academics from Leeds Trinity University and the University of Leeds who have collaborated on two recent studies funded through Research England. 'New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain' [NUSPB - University of Leeds] investigated the broad use of screen devices during and after the pandemic, and has built upon data drawn from 'British Families in Lockdown' [BFIL – Leeds Trinity University], which continues to collect data on British family experiences and has done so since the start of the first lockdown in March 2020.

Evidence presented here is drawn from several methodologies used across both studies which include a nationally representative survey [2022], an online questionnaire on lockdown experiences and attitudes [2021] and 110 qualitative interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022. During these interviews, we often focussed the line of questioning on where the participants got their information from, how they formed opinions and who they trusted during the coronavirus pandemic. In the following report, we will respond to each of the committee's six questions in turn.

1. Which organisations are the most trusted sources of information in the UK?

- a) When asked how they formed their opinions about the pandemic and specifically their feelings about vaccinations, participants told us that they based their views in large part upon **Government** announcements and public health messages from the **NHS** [National Health Service]. This information was predominantly sourced from mainstream media such as newspapers, TV or radio.
- b) Sometimes '**discussions**' on **TV, Radio and Podcasts** helped the participants to form what they considered to be a more balanced picture.
- c) Alongside the NHS, a number of participants cited the **World Health Organisation** [WHO] as a credible source.
- d) Many of the participants trusted the **BBC** [British Broadcasting Corporation], however some felt it was not free from political bias and that it was aligned with, and controlled by the Government.
- e) Often participants expressed distrust of the **Government**, who were subsequently described in derogatory terms. Interviewees used terms such as 'inept' and 'untrustworthy'. This was often connected to the perceived hypocritical behaviours by ministers and the Prime Minister [such as breaking lockdown rules], or the perception that the Government were slow to act and uncertain of what decisions to make.

- f) However, this is not the whole picture and despite some criticism, the message seemed to be from many participants that they were generally accepting of Government sources of information. They felt that in particular, that official medical advice provided by the **CMO** [Chief Medical Officer] related to the pandemic was accurate, in their best interests and in the interests of the nation as a whole.
- g) Those who expressed a strong mistrust of government, placed their trust in other sources, including interpersonal communications and the advice of their **friends and family**. They chose to prioritise their trust in the 'real' stories and personal experiences of people they knew. This was seen as tangible and genuine, despite these stories and experiences sometimes being at odds with the government's position.

2. Where do you seek authoritative information to make up your mind about matters of national debate [such as vaccines and climate change]?

- a) In addition to the previous points made, the majority of the participants cited the **internet** as their biggest source of information due to the ease of access. Information is readily available on the internet, particularly through social media. However, since the accuracy of information on social media was questioned, participants found themselves having to make value based judgements on the validity of the sources. To reiterate, social media was not seen as authoritative.
- b) Participants with international connections [such as migrant families, people with relatives overseas, or expats] often followed international reporting from **European, Asian and African sources**, alongside UK reporting when deciding on pandemic related issues. Generally, sentiments expressed were that overseas Governments were responding to the pandemic better than the UK. As such, some deferred to foreign authorities.
- c) In connection to this, the use of modern communication technologies meant that migrated peoples in the UK were able to become immersed in the news and discussions of their countries and cultures of origin through their smartphones and computers.
- d) We have found that online **social platforms** attract and act as a melting pot for various categories of conflicting information, from multiple sources including Government, public health bodies, international media, subversive groups, and fake news propagators - all placed alongside the opinions of friends and family.
- e) Despite there being benefits to social media platforms, some participants avoided it since it had become a source of poor mental health.

3. Are you able to "do your own research" on matters of national debate?

- a) All participants seemed to feel that they had conducted some level of research on Covid-19. This included watching and reading **TV, newspapers and online resources** such as official websites, national and international news and academic publications.
- b) A number of participants had conducted their own scholarly research. This included looking at medical or professional reports and reliable websites such as those of the **WHO** or the **NHS**. A minority of participants looked at academic **peer reviewed journals and professional blogs**. We heard that some people would undertake further research if they encountered information from a source that they were suspicious of or did not trust [commonly on social media].
- c) Participant often spoke to **friends and family** about pandemic related concerns. At times, these discussions were part of informal social conversations, whereas other times, familiar contacts were specifically consulted for their advice. For example, some participants had

spouses, friends and other family members who were medically trained. Advice from these sources were heavily trusted.

4. What role should the National Academies have in being a source of authoritative, trustworthy information?

- a) Participants felt it was not always easy to separate the reliable from the unreliable. The National Academies could help to provide those distinctions; however, none of the participants seemed to be aware of the role or presence of the National Academies in the UK.
- b) The participants demonstrated in the interviews that they are well educated and capable of making reasoned and balanced judgements when provided with information. Many of the participants felt they were not presented with enough information by government. The National Academies public engagement agendas could be utilised to increase visibility and access of information to the public.
- c) It is worth considering that since participants are seemingly not aware of the role and presence of the National Academies, then there may be reluctance to trust and/or take on board information from them.

5. Are National Academies prominent enough voices in engaging with the variety of debates on the internet?

- a) Participants did not refer to the National Academies at all during the interviews which indicates a lack of prominence.
- b) Currently only a small number of participants engaged with scholarly work through the reading of peer reviewed journal articles [it is uncertain if these articles originated in the UK].

6. Is the provision of authoritative information responsive enough to meet the challenge of misinformation that is spread on social media?

- a) Generally, the participants said that they did look for accurate sources of information outside of social media on issues that they considered important.
- b) Many participants felt that the amount of information on the internet during the pandemic was overwhelming and lead to confusion. However, as the pandemic progressed participants did feel able to find authoritative and trustworthy information if they chose to look for it.
- c) Participants were aware that misinformation exists and they were alert to it.

Summary

The **National Academies** were not mentioned by participants during the interviews, which indicates a lack of prominence; although for those people who did engage with peer reviewed journal articles [either from the UK or abroad], these were considered by them to be dependable and trustworthy. This suggest that should the National Academies become more known, they would likely be trusted.

Our findings demonstrate that the public appeared to feel that they had sufficient access to information if they chose to undertake their own research. Information was mostly obtained via official **Government** advice, **media** outlets and the informal advice of **friends and family**.

Participants were aware of the risks of misinformation and fake news, particularly on the internet, and commonly on social media platforms. As such, whilst our two studies identified that many people increased their use of social media throughout the pandemic, the participants largely did not consider social media to be a reliable source of information.

Our participants did not draw upon just one source in their decision-making about pandemic related issues. Instead, they would consider multiple sources in weighing up the available information.

The perceived usefulness, trustworthiness and credibility of different sources varied between individuals, and was dependent upon personal outlooks, wider views and direct/in-direct experiences relating to the pandemic.

Technological advances and increased screen use since the outbreak of the pandemic, led to a heavier use of online material when searching for credible information. For some, this included the accessing of information from international sources, a trend seen particularly amongst minority ethnic groups.