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Debating the research agenda around fake news.

BAXTER, G., MARCELLA, R.

2018

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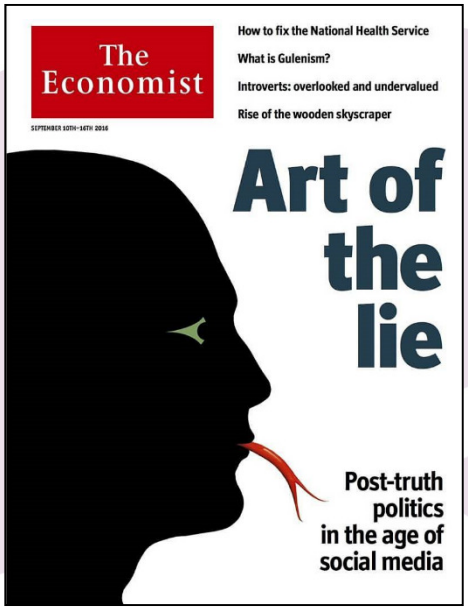
Information Search Engagement and ‘Fake News’

Debating the research agenda around ‘Fake News’



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‘Post-Truth’: Oxford Dictionaries International Word of the Year 2016

The Nation.
January 6/13, 1992 $1.75 U.S./$2.25 Canada
EDITORIAL
TURNING THE TEAMSTERS
THE MAN AND THE MOVEMENT
BUCHANAN—WE'D RATHER BE RIGHT
ANDREW KOPKIND
J.F.K. AND JFK Alexander Cockburn
RURAL POOR Dale Maharidge
GOVERNMENT OF LIES Steve Tesich
SAVE OUR SALMON Clay Nathorn
I.F. STONE PRIZEWINNER
THE BLACK AND THE 'RED' Peter Dalley
ART THAT DISLOCATES Arthur C. Danto

- **First attributed to Steve Tesich in 1992, describing US Government’s involvement in Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, and the First Gulf War**
- **Much of its use in 2016 related to the UK’s EU membership referendum (‘Brexit’) and the US presidential campaign**
- **‘Fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ now widely used terms (‘fake news’ was Collins Dictionary’s 2017 word of the year)**

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Research perspectives

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Media Studies - Borden, S. L., & Tew, C. (2007). The role of journalist and the performance of journalism: Ethical lessons from “fake” news (seriously). *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22(4), 300-314.

Communications - Marchi, R. (2012). With Facebook, blogs, and fake news, teens reject journalistic “objectivity”. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 36(3), 246-262.

Computer Science - Conroy, N. J., Rubin, V. L., & Chen, Y. (2015). Automatic deception detection: Methods for finding fake news. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 52(1), 1-4.

Health - Fernández-Luque, L., & Bau, T. (2015). Health and social media: perfect storm of information. *Healthcare informatics research*, 21(2), 67-73.

LIS approaches

Bluemle, S. R. (2018). Post-Facts: Information Literacy and Authority after the 2016 Election. portal: *Libraries and the Academy*, 18(2), 265-282.

Burkhardt, J. M. (2017). History of Fake News. *Library Technology Reports*, 53(8), 5-2.

Lamb, A. (2017). Fact or Fake? Curriculum Challenges for School Librarians. *Teacher Librarian*, 45(1), 56-63.

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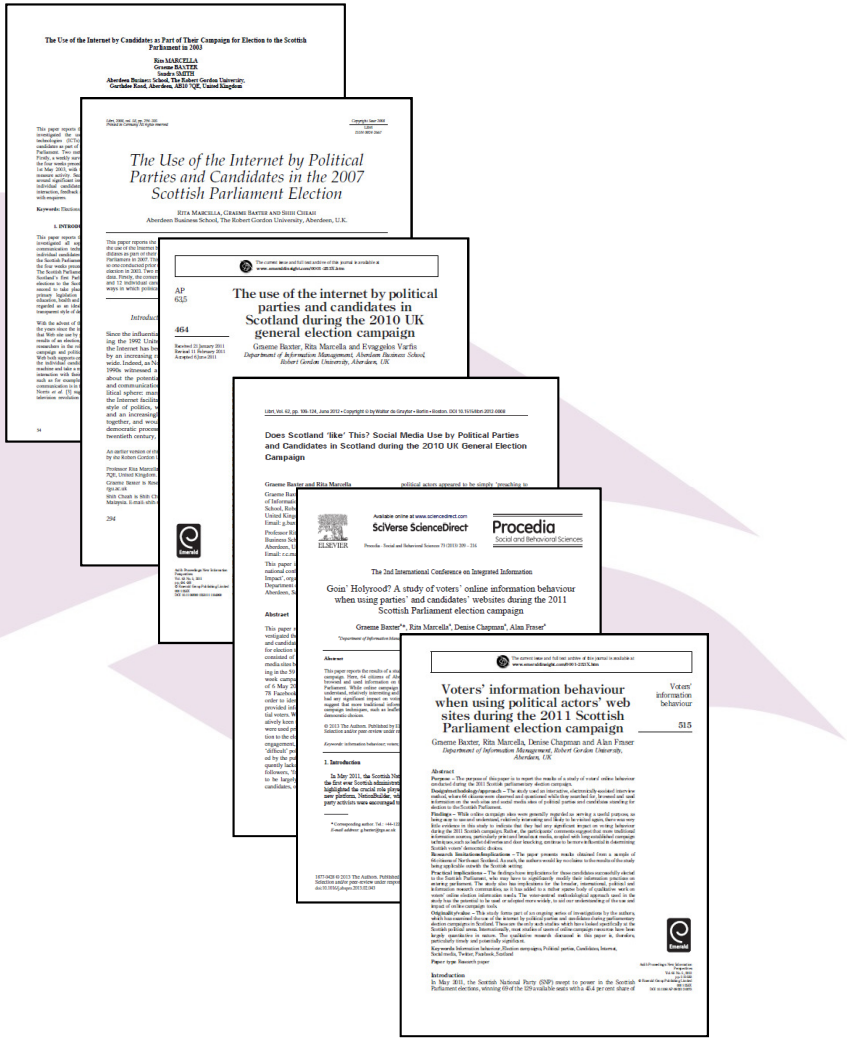
Rochlin, N. (2017). Fake news: belief in post-truth. *Library Hi Tech*, 35(3), 386-392.

Spratt, H. E., & Agosto, D. E. (2017). Fighting Fake News: Because We All Deserve the Truth: Programming Ideas for Teaching Teens Media Literacy. *Young Adult Library Services*, 15(4), 17.

Katz, W.A. (1969) *Basic Information Sources, Vol.1, Introduction to Reference Work* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Our studies conducted to date

- Citizenship information provision and needs 1990s
- Parliamentary information online
- MPs' information needs
- European Parliament Library user study
- Election campaigns online in Scotland, 2003 to date
- Voters' information behaviour online
- MSPs on Twitter, in 'peacetime', early 2014
- Scottish independence referendum, Sep 2014
- Fake news and alternative facts, General Election 2017



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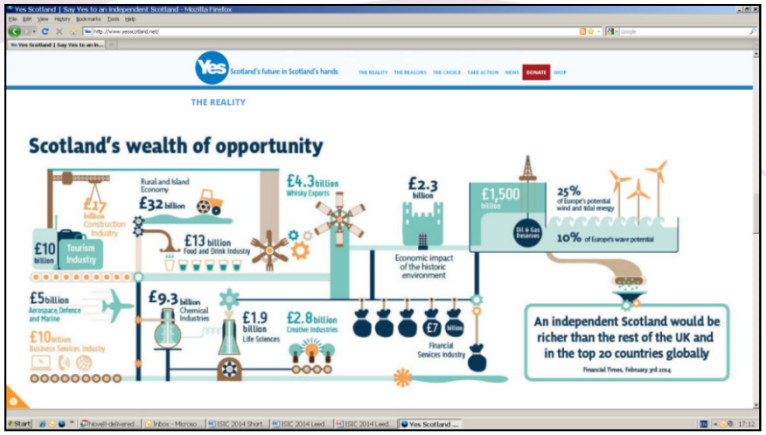
Scottish Independence Referendum 2014
Voters' Online Information Behaviour Study

- **Respondents sceptical about information presented as 'the facts' or 'the truth'**
- **Acknowledgement of likely bias in information presented**
- **Need expressed for more information on *sources* of data/statistics presented**
- **Just 20 (37%) of the 54 respondents described the information as 'very' or 'quite' reliable.**
- **Although some uncertainty about their personal capacity to evaluate information**



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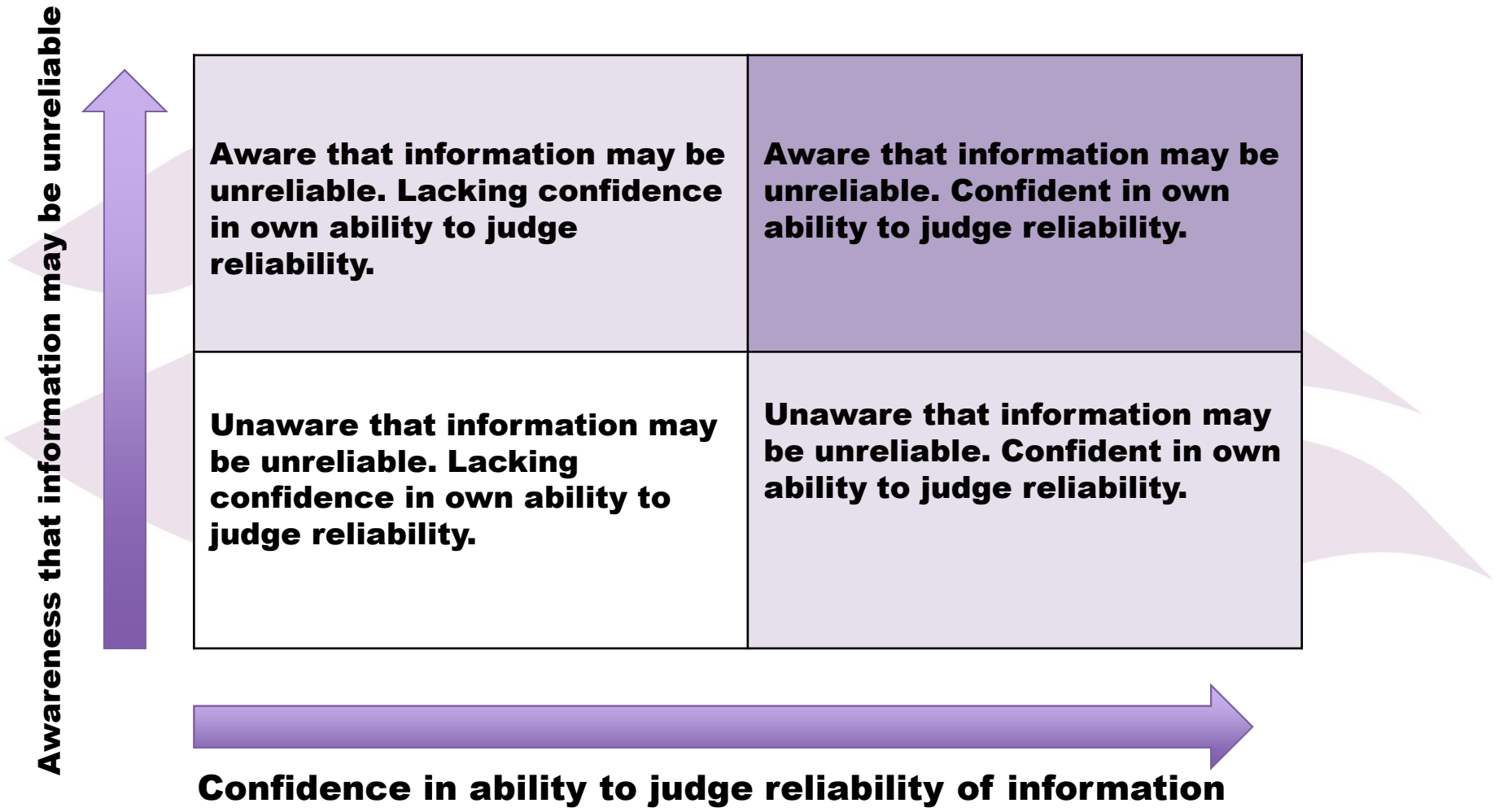
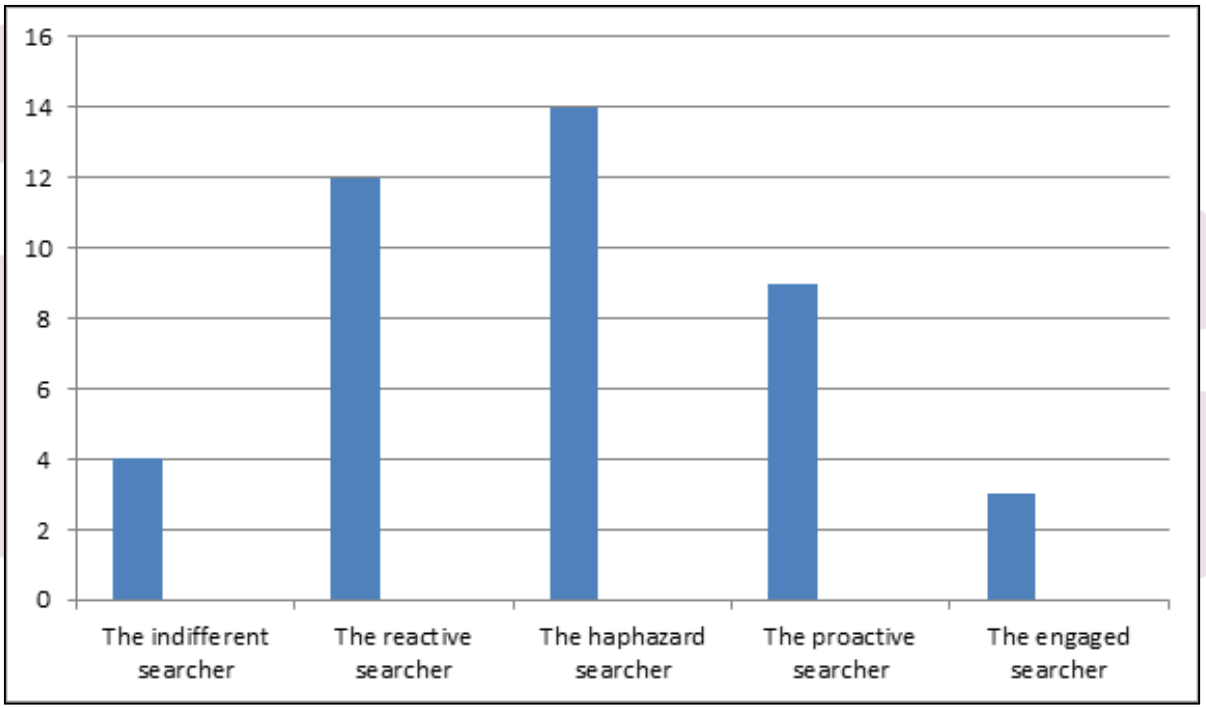
Participants' Self-Perceptions of Their Ability to Recognise and Evaluate Questionable Political 'Facts'



Emerging Typology of Information Searchers



Election 2017 - methodology

- **Online survey (538 responses)**

- **Electronically-assisted interviews with 23 citizens in Aberdeenshire, North-East Scotland**

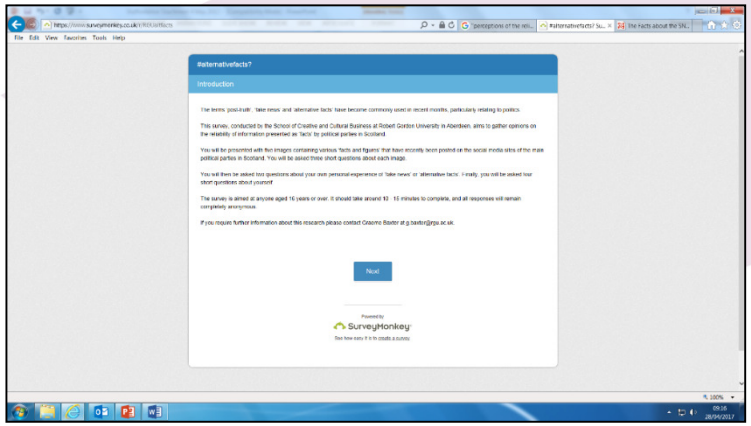


Image: Urban Realm

Image: Aberdeenshire Council

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Survey Respondents' *Known* Demographics

- **Gender (*n* = 369):-**

Female	64.2%
Male	35.2%

- **Age Group (*n* = 408):-**

16-24	8.1%
25-34	20.8%
35-44	24.5%
45-59	30.6%
60 or over	15.9%

- **Location (*n* = 406):-**

In Scotland	64.5%
Outside Scotland	35.5%

- **Political allegiance (*n* = 230):-**

Labour	26.1%
Scottish National Party	22.6%
Greens	22.2%
Liberal Democrats	17.0%
Conservatives	12.2%

Interviewees' Demographics (*n* = 23)

- **Gender:-**

Female	15
Male	8

- **Age Group:-**

35-44	4
45-59	7
60 or over	12

- **Status:-**

In paid employment	11
Seeking work	1
Retired	10
Running a home	1

- **Highest level of Education**

School	2
FE college	4
University	17

- **Voted at:-**

Council elections 2012	20
European elections 2014	19
Scottish independ. ref. 2014	19
UK General election 2015	21
Scottish Parliament election 2016	21
'Brexit' referendum 2016	20

Just 8 of the 23 described themselves as 'politically active'

Image 1 (Scottish National Party)

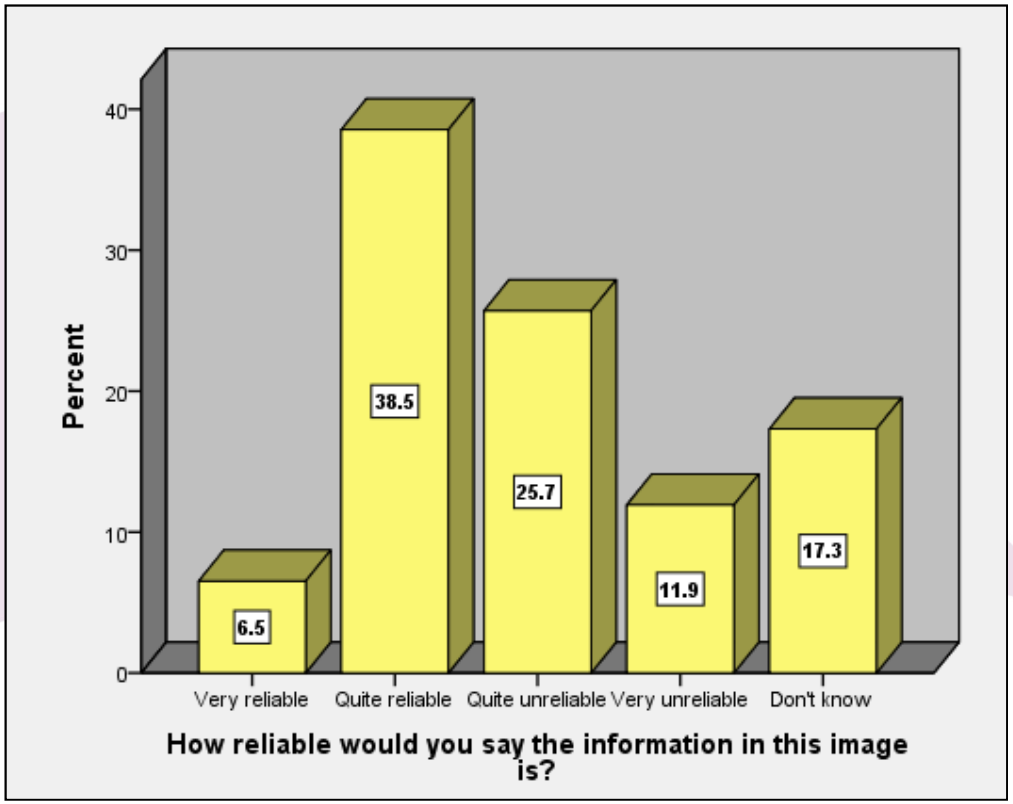

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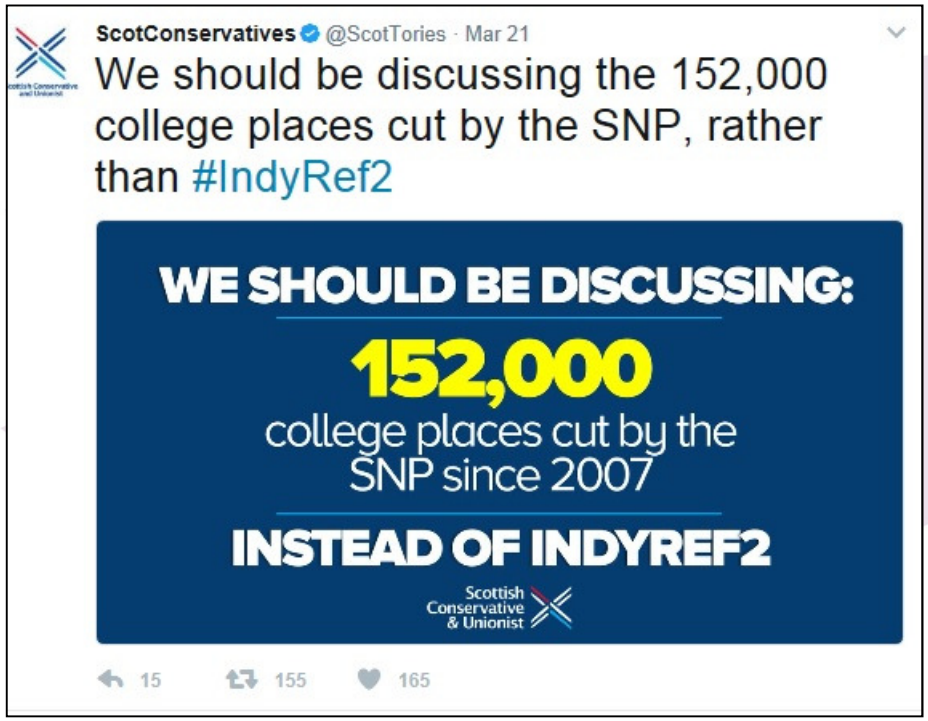
Image 2 (Scottish Conservatives)



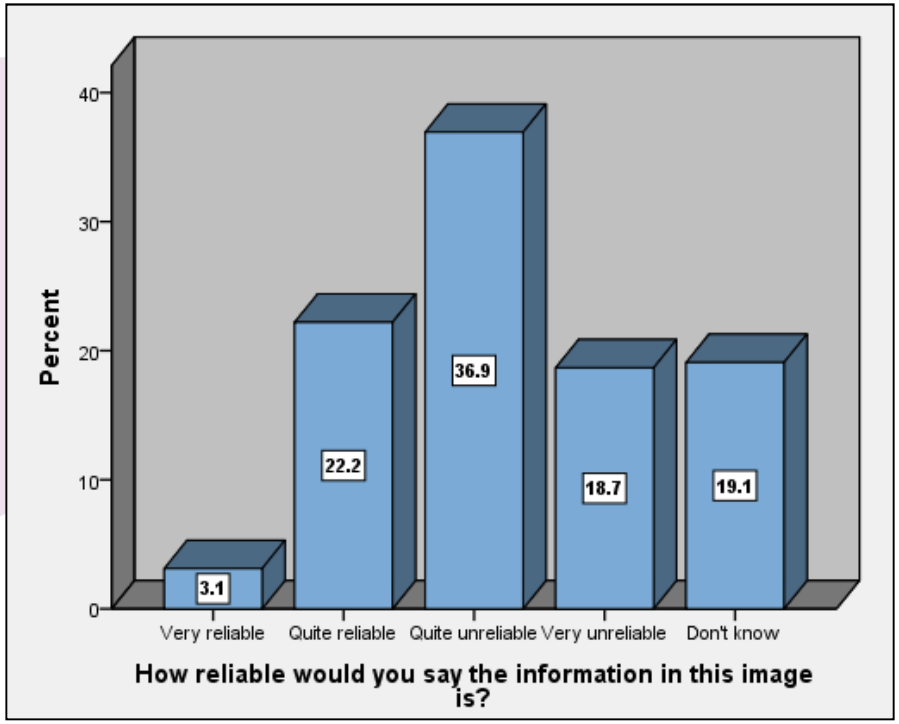


Image 3 (Scottish Labour)

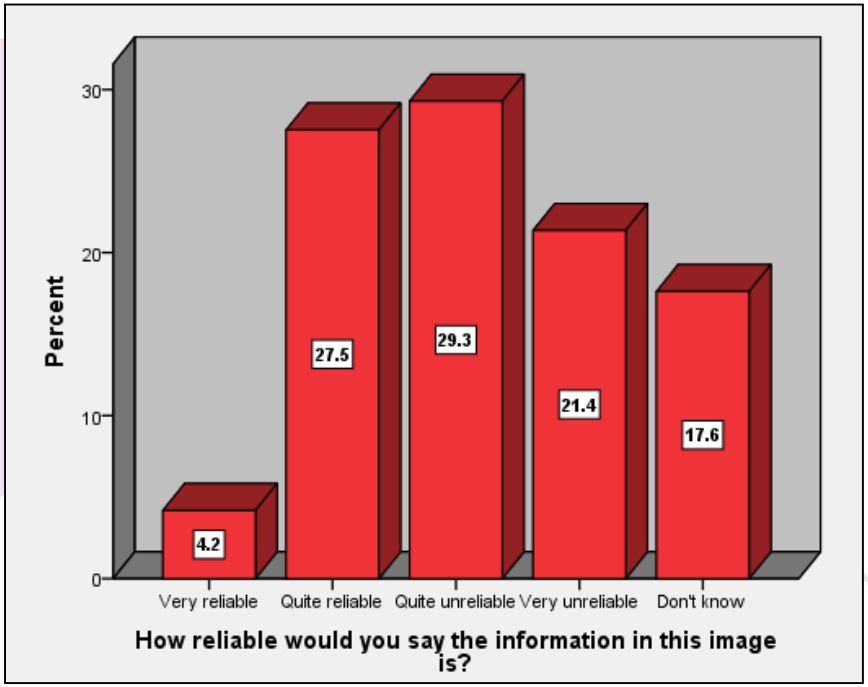


Image 4 (Scottish Greens)

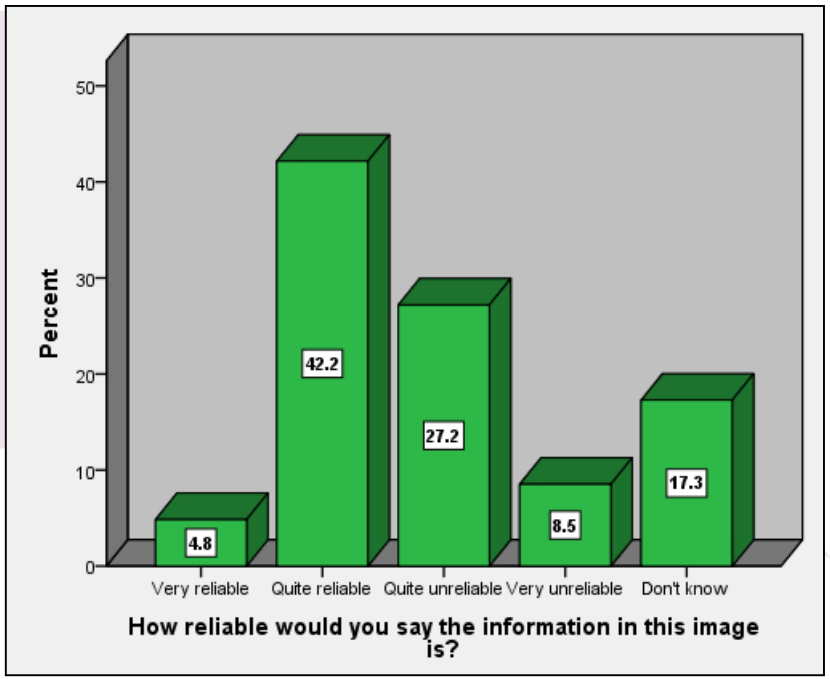


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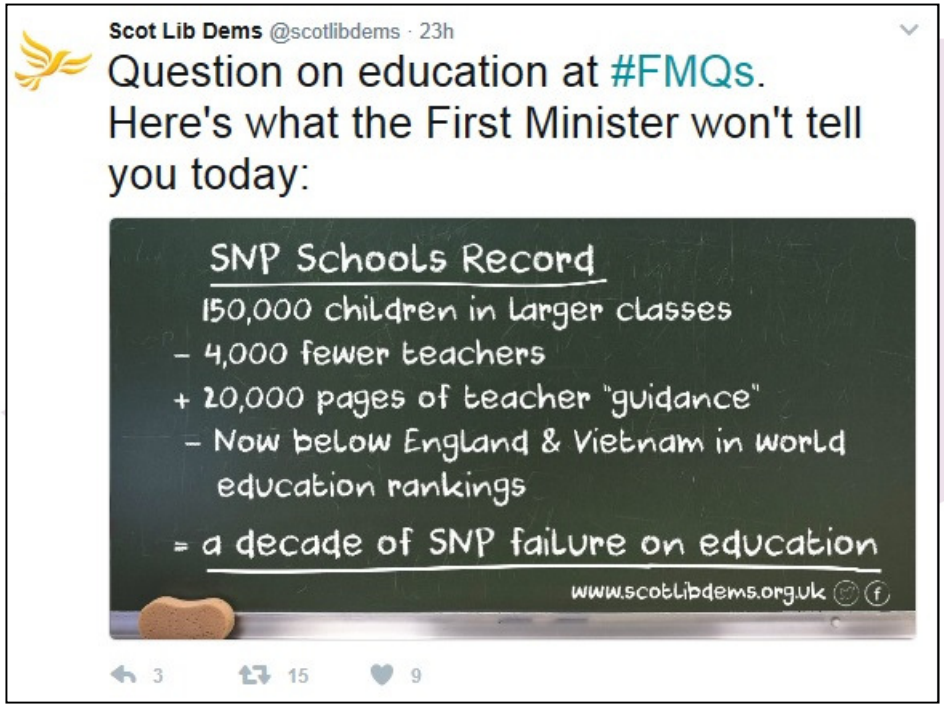
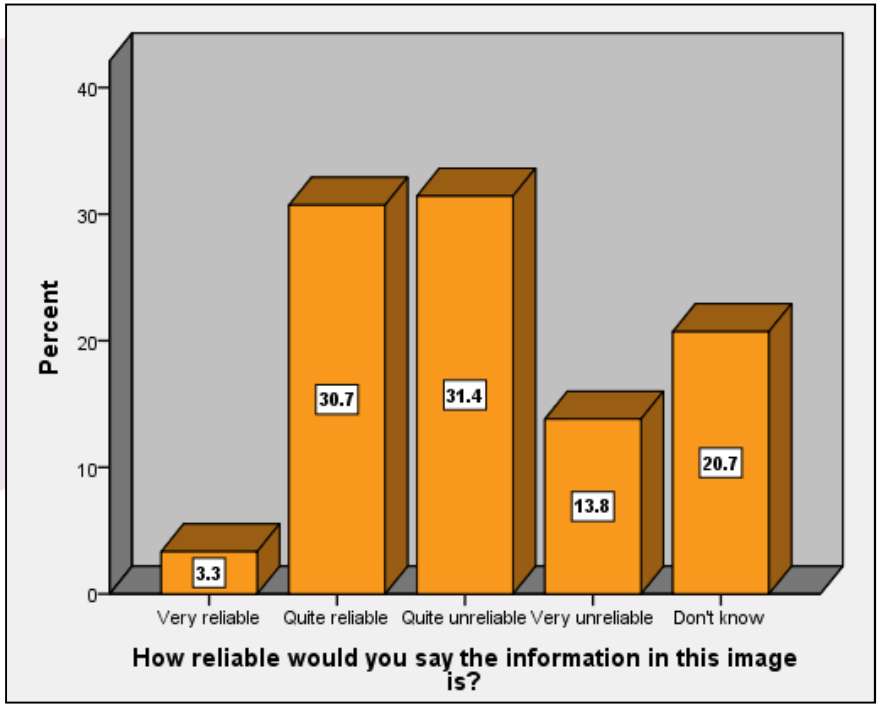
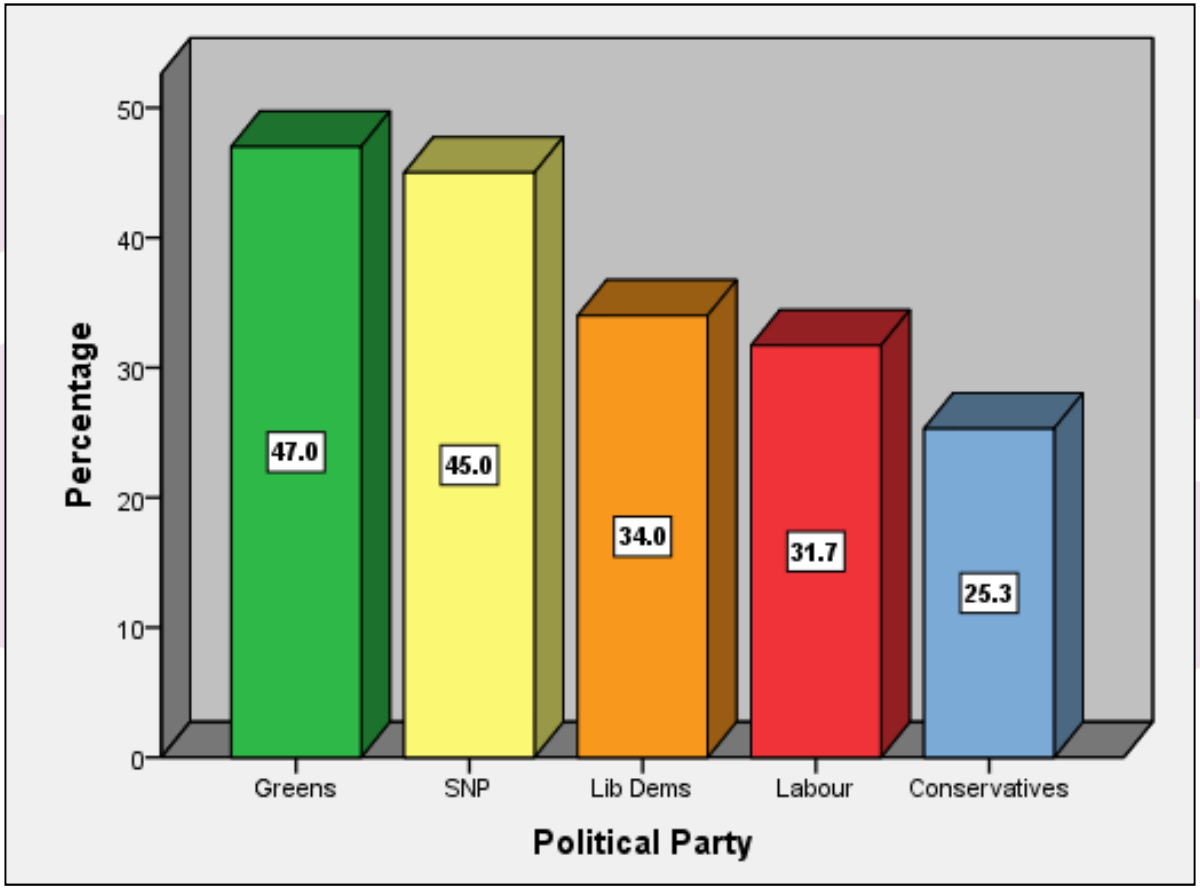
Image 5 (Scottish Liberal Democrats)





Cross-Party Summary:
% Describing Image as ‘Very’ or ‘Quite’ Reliable



Examples of ‘Facts’ Exposed as Falsehoods?

- **Iraq and weapons of mass destruction**
- **Brexit bus**
- **US presidential campaign**
  - **inauguration attendance figures**
  - **‘terrorist incident’ in Sweden**
  - **‘Pizzagate’**
  - **Bowling Green ‘massacre’, etc.**

Image: Huffington Post

Image: CNBC

And in Scotland…

- **SNP Government’s oil & gas revenue forecasts**
- **‘The Vow’ of more devolved powers for the Scottish Parliament**

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Factors Affecting Trust in 'Facts' (1)

- **Levels of trust in politicians in general**
- **Levels of trust in particular politicians or parties**
- **Political allegiance – e.g. 74.5% of SNP supporters felt the SNP 'facts' were very or quite reliable (cf. 44.8% of entire sample)**
- **Perception that 'facts' will be biased in some way, subject to some form of 'spin', or 'cherry-picked'**
- **Whether or not the source of the 'facts' has been given; but also wary of unfamiliar sources (e.g. Audit Scotland, ISD Scotland)**
- **Respondents' professional or personal experience, particularly in relation to education, healthcare and childcare**

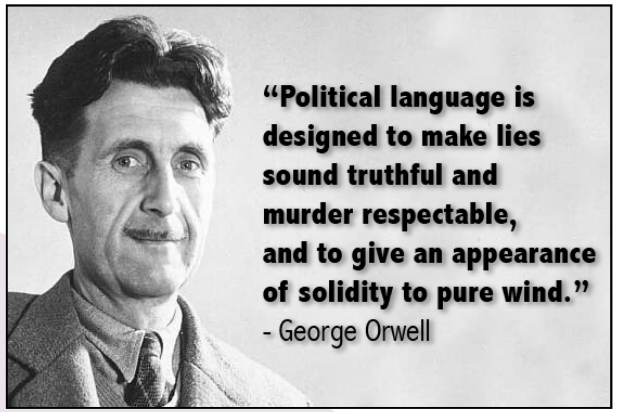


Image: reddit.com

Factors Affecting Trust in 'Facts' (2)

Factors affecting trust in the reliability of the data in the social media posts					
Factor	Fig 1. SNP (%)	Fig 2. Cons (%)	Fig 3. Lab (%)	Fig 4. Greens (%)	Fig 5. Lib Dem (%)
Trust in specific party	18.2	3.5	2.9	12.2	3.6
Mistrust of specific party	3.2	14.7	4.0	2.3	3.6
Mistrust of politicians and parties in general	5.8	3.1	2.4	1.6	2.6
Mistrust of attack politics	-	16.1	7.3	-	12.6
Bias or spin likely to be present in posts	26.2	23.8	24.2	14.7	18.1
Figures appear 'reasonable' or 'credible'	21.9	14.7	28.0	30.3	22.1
Posts lack detail or definitions	28.8	35.2	35.7	29.7	30.9
No source(s) provided	26.4	24.8	20.3	35.2	32.3
Respondents' professional or personal experience	6.1	5.4	3.1	9.4	6.0

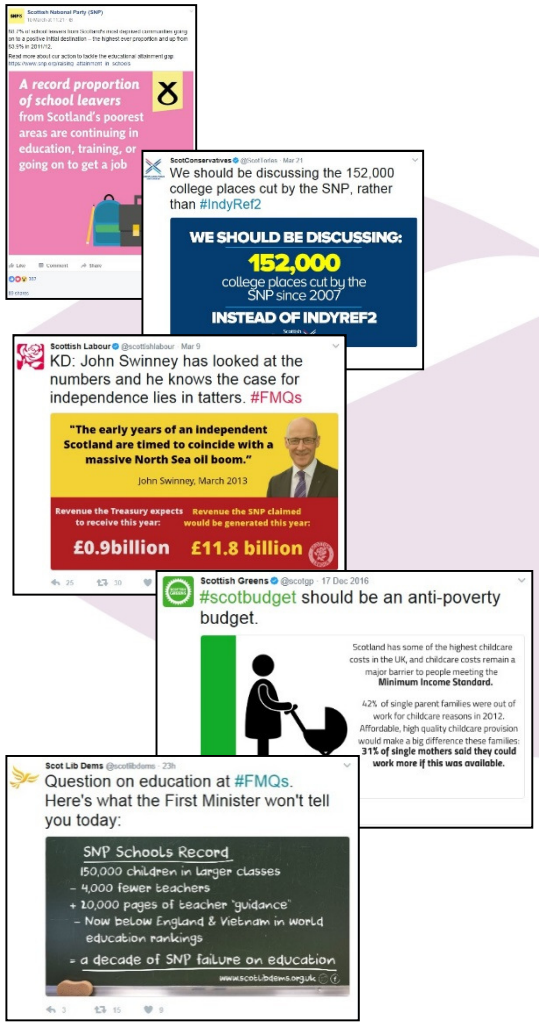
Likely Sources of Information to Verify or Debunk 'Facts' (1)

- **UK or Scottish Government websites**
- **Websites of government agencies, e.g. Office for National Statistics**
- **Universities or think tanks**
- **Third sector organisations and interest groups**
- **Newspaper and news media websites, e.g. BBC, ITN, Herald, Scotsman**
- **Use Freedom of Information legislation**
- **But, emphasis on Google as first port of call**

Likely Sources of Information to Verify or Debunk 'Facts' (2)

How the respondents would find out more about the issues discussed in the social media posts					
Source	Fig 1. SNP (%)	Fig 2. Cons (%)	Fig 3. Lab (%)	Fig 4. Greens (%)	Fig 5. Lib Dem (%)
Not interested, so would not bother	4.1	6.0	9.5	7.8	7.1
No idea about how to find out more	2.8	5.2	7.9	5.7	4.3
Unspecified search/research	21.9	27.3	25.8	29.9	31.0
Unspecified online search/research	11.7	12.4	9.7	9.7	10.7
Search on Google	19.9	19.7	15.0	14.9	13.3
Follow link on social media post	25.1	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.4
Consult political parties' websites or social media sites	3.5	7.0	7.7	7.4	7.6
Request information directly from the party, or from local MP/MSP	2.8	4.3	2.2	6.2	4.0
Consult government websites	12.3	10.1	16.7	8.5	11.6
Consult government agency websites	6.9	6.0	2.6	2.1	3.8
Make an FOI request	0.9	0.4	0.4	0.2	1.2
Consult universities or think tanks	1.9	4.1	1.3	0.9	0.7
Consult NGOs	1.3	1.2	2.4	4.8	3.8
Consult news media	6.9	9.7	9.3	5.1	6.6
Consult family, friends and colleagues	0.6	0.4	0.9	1.8	1.9

Journey of the Fact - Survey Image Figures: Original Sources Traced



1 (SNP)	Scottish Government (2017). *Initial Destinations of Senior Phase School Leavers.*
2 (Conservatives)	Scottish Funding Council (2016). *Baseline Report for Academic Year 2014-15.*
3 (Labour)	Office for Budget Responsibility (2017). *Economic and Fiscal Outlook, March 2017.* Scottish Government (2013). *Oil and Gas Analytical Bulletin 2013.*
4 (Greens)	Engender (2016). *Unlocking the Pipeline – Gender and Employability in Scotland.* Save the Children (2011). *Making Work Pay – the Childcare Trap.* Gingerbread (2016). *Statistics – Work and Looking for Work.* Office for National Statistics (2014). *Families in the Labour Market.* Department of Education (2014). *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2012-2103.*
5 (Lib Dems)	Scottish Government (2016). *Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland, No.7.* Scottish Government (2016). *Teachers – Teacher Numbers – High Level of Summary of Statistics Trend.* Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee (2016). *Official Report, 30 November 2016.* Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2016). *PISA 2015 Results (Volume 1): Excellence and Equity in Education.*

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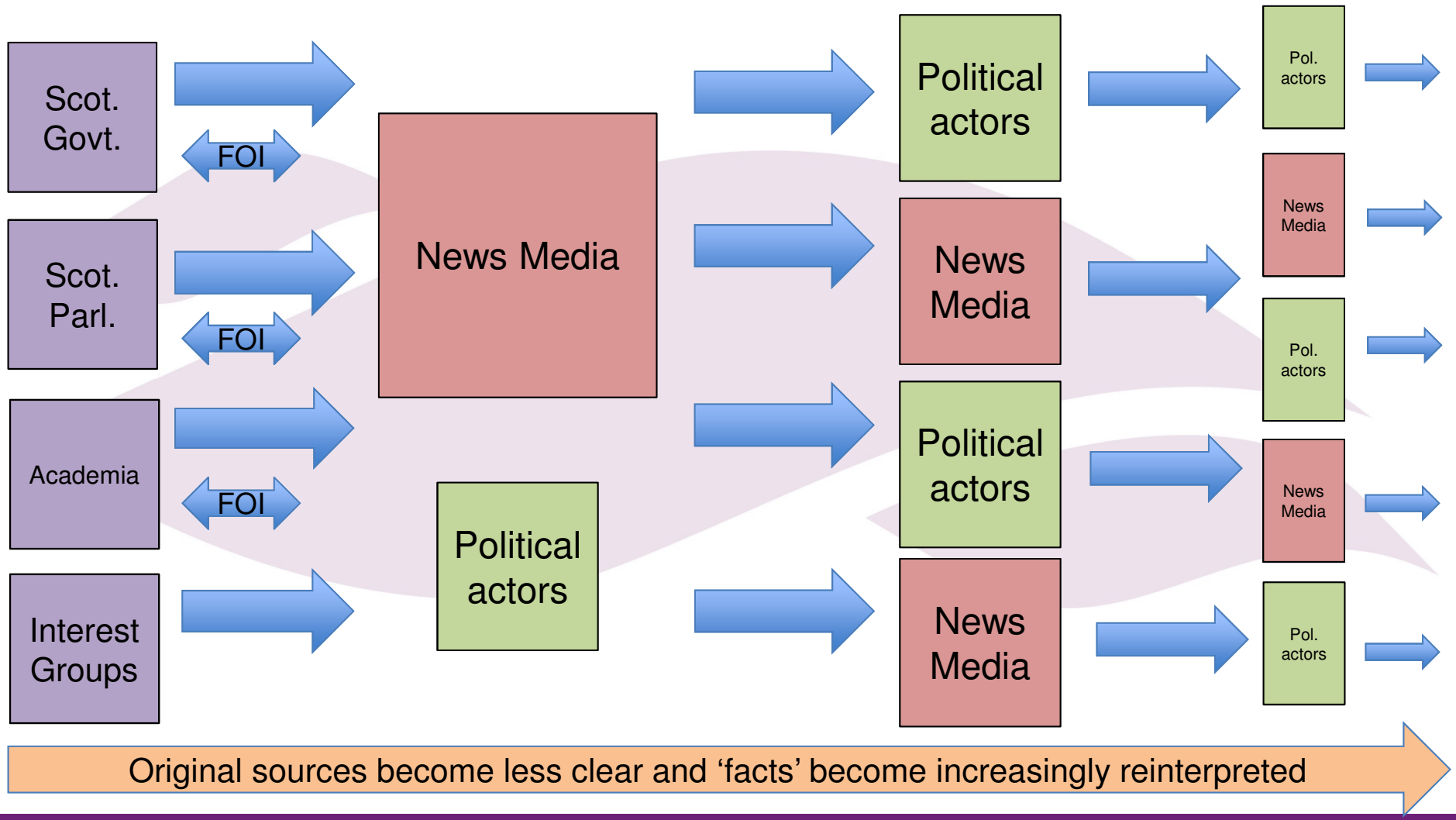
Mapping the Journey of a Political 'Fact'



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Personally Misled by ‘Facts’?

- **In the survey very few respondents admitted to having been personally misled by political ‘facts’**

- **But a number gave examples of being misled by other ‘facts’, including:-**
  - **Food labelling**
  - **Purchase of endowment policies**
  - **Slimming tablets**
  - **April Fool jokes in the media**

Image: timeanddate.com

Interviews – high level findings

- Evidence that flawed facts are frequently consumed, accepted or rejected without any further process of verification;
- Participants demonstrated cognitive, affective and critical responses to single facts;
- When they did check participants tended to go to people they know, “expert” agencies or people and the media;
- Agencies were often unrecognised but even if they were their bona fides were not checked;
- While participants referenced information quality criteria, they did so unsystematically and had often rejected a fact before rationalising around criteria for rejecting them;
- Most acknowledged strengths and weaknesses in their capacity to evaluate facts (apart from the delusional self confident);
- None of the participants referred to or expressed awareness of the role that libraries and fact checking agencies might play in assisting in the verification of facts.

Proposed future research

Fake news and alternative facts: user response to facts and their verification or correction

The aims of the proposed research are to develop a categorisation of and evolutionary model for flawed facts and explore how human interaction with these might be enhanced to build individuals' capacity to judge the factual reliability of the information with which they are presented.

- **Phase 1: Analysis of the questionable 'fact' and its journey**
- **Phase 2: User study**

Questions for the audience

1. How can LIS make more visible the significance of our contribution to the fake news agenda?
2. What is the major research priority for libraries in terms of the fake news debate?
3. How can academics and librarians work better together to enhance user service provision?