

BAXTER, G. and MARCELLA, R. 2019. If your mother says she loves you, check it out: citizens' approaches to evaluating the credibility of information provided online by political actors in Scotland. Presented at the 2019 Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association annual conference (MeCCSA 2019), 9-11 January 2019, Stirling, UK.

If your mother says she loves you, check it out: citizens' approaches to evaluating the credibility of information provided online by political actors in Scotland.

BAXTER, G., MARCELLA, R.

2019

“If your mother says she loves you, check it out”

Citizens' approaches to evaluating the credibility of information provided online by political actors in Scotland



Graeme Baxter and Rita Marcella
School of Creative and Cultural Business
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen



ROBERT GORDON
UNIVERSITY ABERDEEN

“Post-truth Politics”, “Alternative Facts”, “Fake News”...



Image: CNBC



Image: Huffington Post



Image: NBC News



Concerns about the credibility of online information are not new...

- Tim Berners-Lee's **"Oh, yeah?"** button (1996)
- Many early observers suggested the application of the criteria traditionally used to evaluate printed sources (i.e. **authority, accuracy, objectivity, currency, coverage**)
- But others argued that 'checklist' approaches were too mechanistic



TR: The Web has a reputation in some quarters as more sizzle than steak--you hear people complain that there's no way of judging the authenticity or reliability of the information they find there. What would you do about this?

BERNERS-LEE: People will have to learn who they can trust on the Web. One way to do this is to put what I call an "Oh, yeah?" button on the browser. Say you're going into uncharted territory on the Web and you find some piece of information that is critical to the decision you're going to make, but you're not confident that the source of the information is who it is claimed to be. You should be able to click on "Oh, yeah?" and the browser program would tell the server computer to get some authentication--by comparing encrypted digital signatures, for example--that the document was in fact generated by its claimed author. The server could then present you with an argument as to why you might believe this document or why you might not.



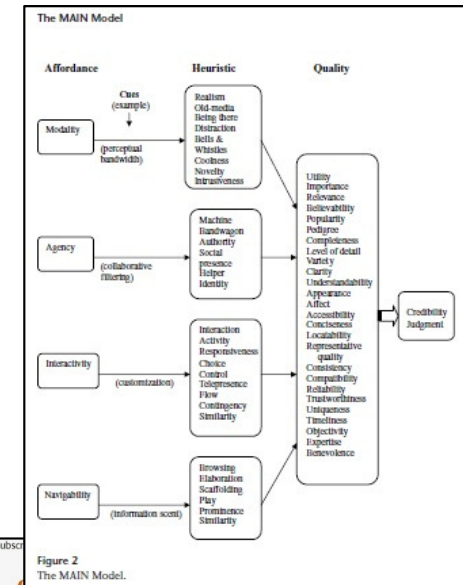
**ROBERT GORDON
UNIVERSITY ABERDEEN**

Subsequently...

Body of work emerged that focused on **cognitive** aspects of evaluating credibility. Most notably:-

- Fritch & Cromwell (2001) – drew on cognitive authority
- Wathen & Burkell (2002) – credibility evaluation as an iterative process
- Fogg (2003) – Prominence-Interpretation (P-I) Theory
- Metzger (2007) – Dual-Processing Model
- Sundar (2008) – MAIN Model (Modality-Agency-Interactivity-Navigability)
- Hilligoss & Rieh (2008) – Unifying Framework of credibility assessment

Lewandowsky *et al.* (2017) – “technocognition”



Credibility research during 2017 General Election campaign

- **Online survey on SurveyMonkey (538 responses)**
- **Electronically-assisted interviews with 23 citizens in Westhill, Aberdeenshire**

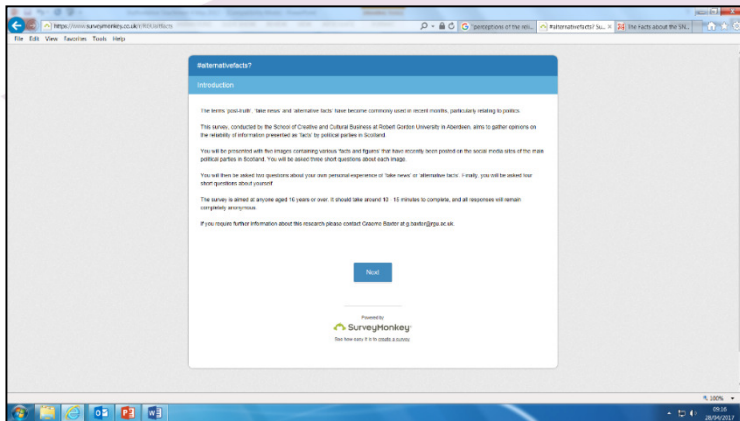
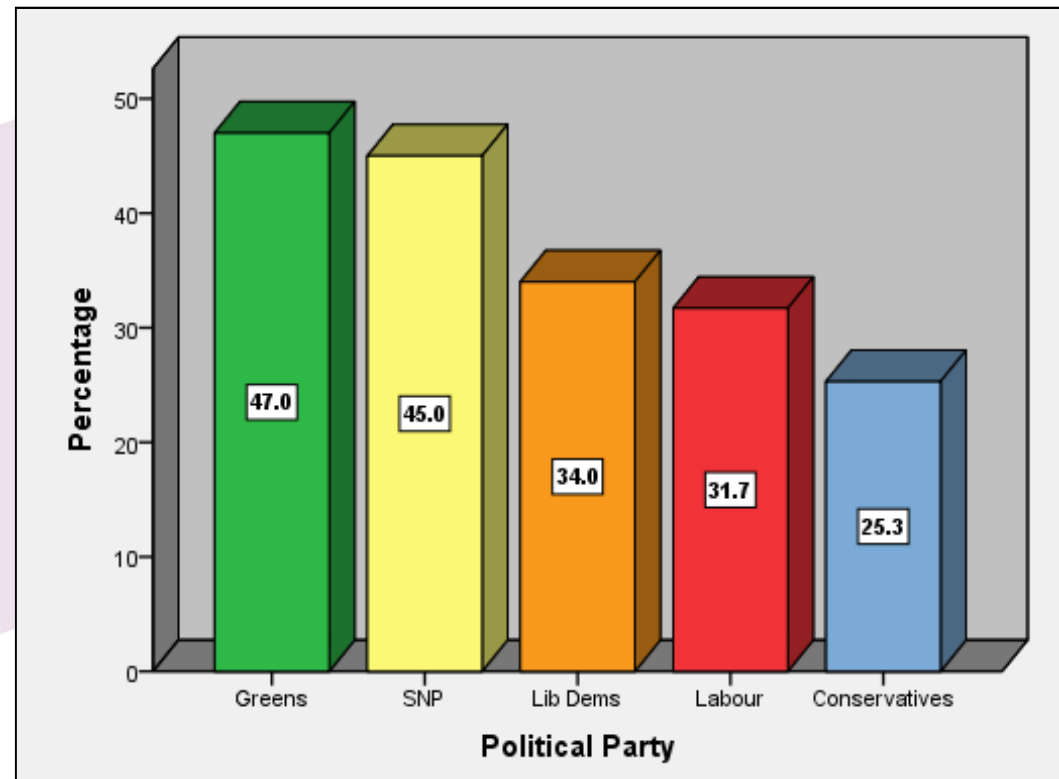
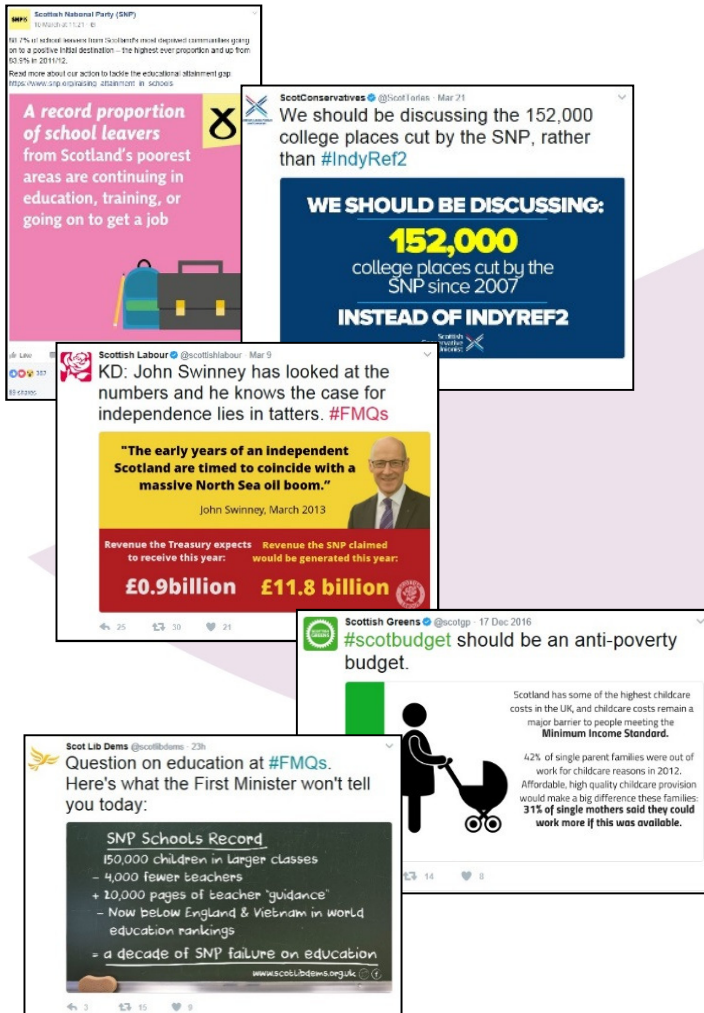


Image: Urban Realm



Image: Aberdeenshire Council

Online survey: based on responses to five social media posts



% who believed 'facts' in post would be 'very' or 'quite' reliable

Survey: factors affecting trust in 'facts' in posts

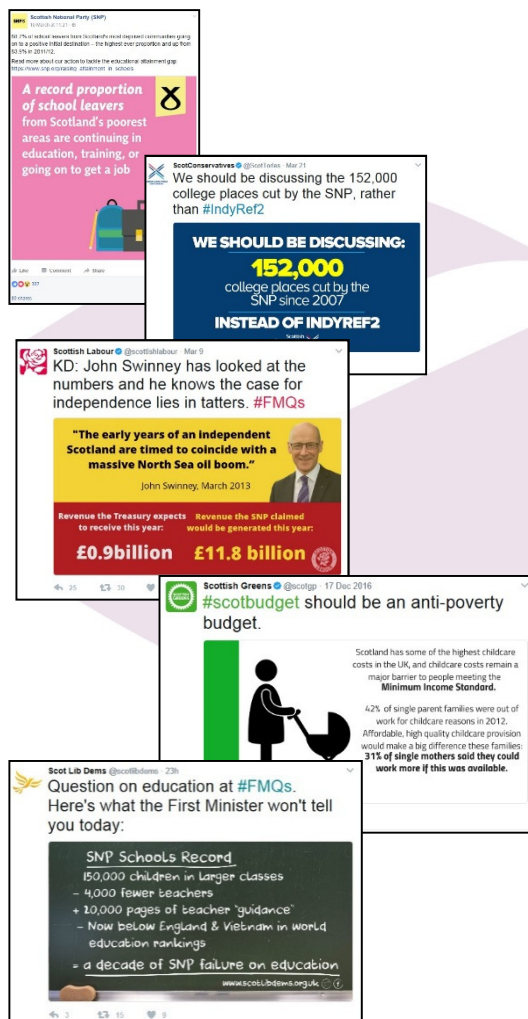
Factor	Fig 1. SNP (%)	Fig 2. Cons (%)	Fig 3. Lab (%)	Fig 4. Greens (%)	Fig 5. Lib Dem (%)
Trust in specific party	18.2	3.5	2.9	12.2	3.6
Mistrust of specific party	3.2	14.7	4.0	2.3	3.6
Mistrust of politicians and parties in general	5.8	3.1	2.4	1.6	2.6
Mistrust of attack politics	-	16.1	7.3	-	12.6
Bias or spin likely to be present in posts	26.2	23.8	24.2	14.7	18.1
Posts lack detail, definitions or context	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
Figures appear 'reasonable' or 'credible'	21.9	14.7	28.0	30.3	22.1

Survey: likely sources of information to verify or debunk ‘facts’

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

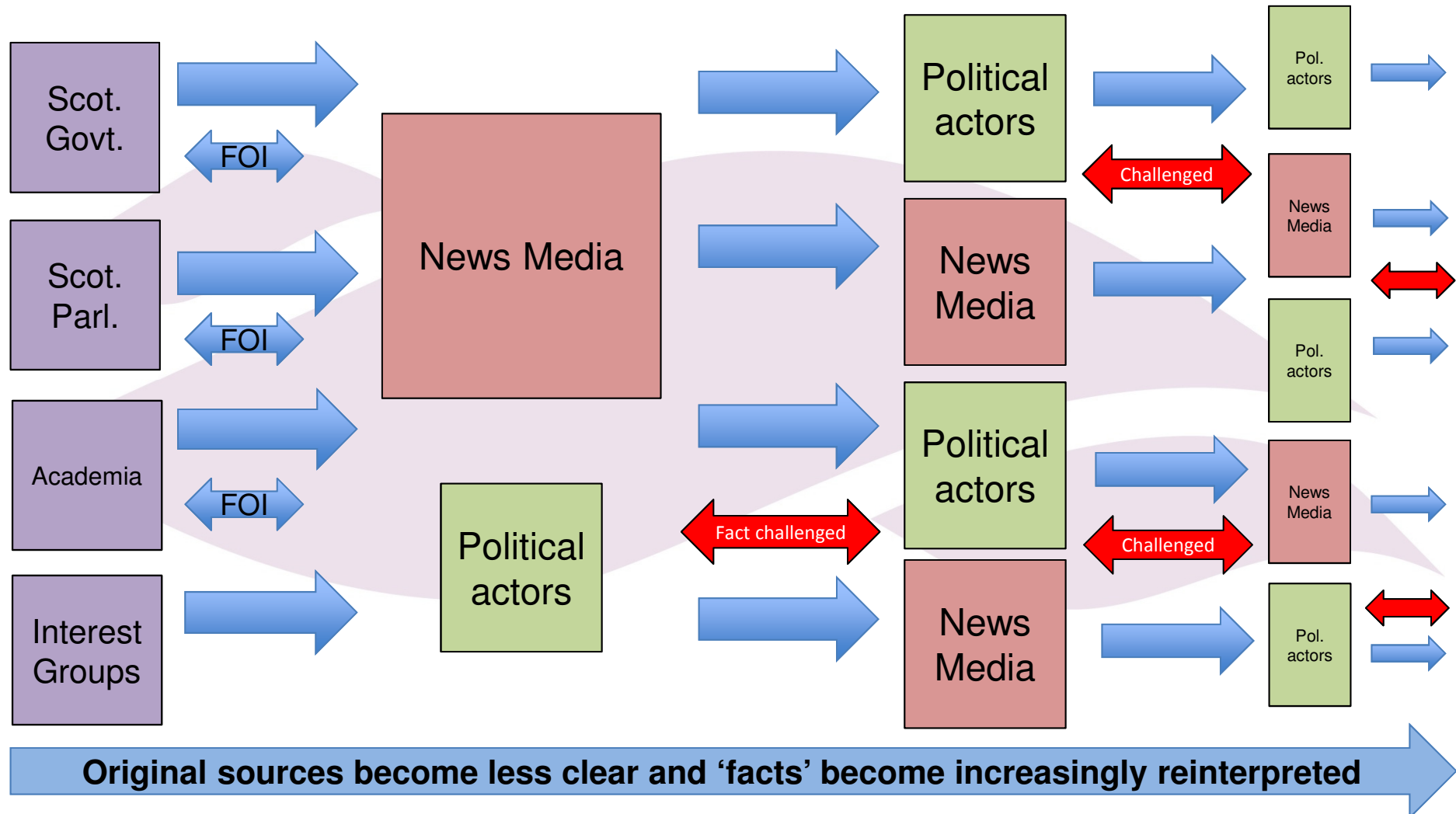


Survey image 'facts': original sources traced



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

Mapping the Journey of a Political 'Fact' in Scotland

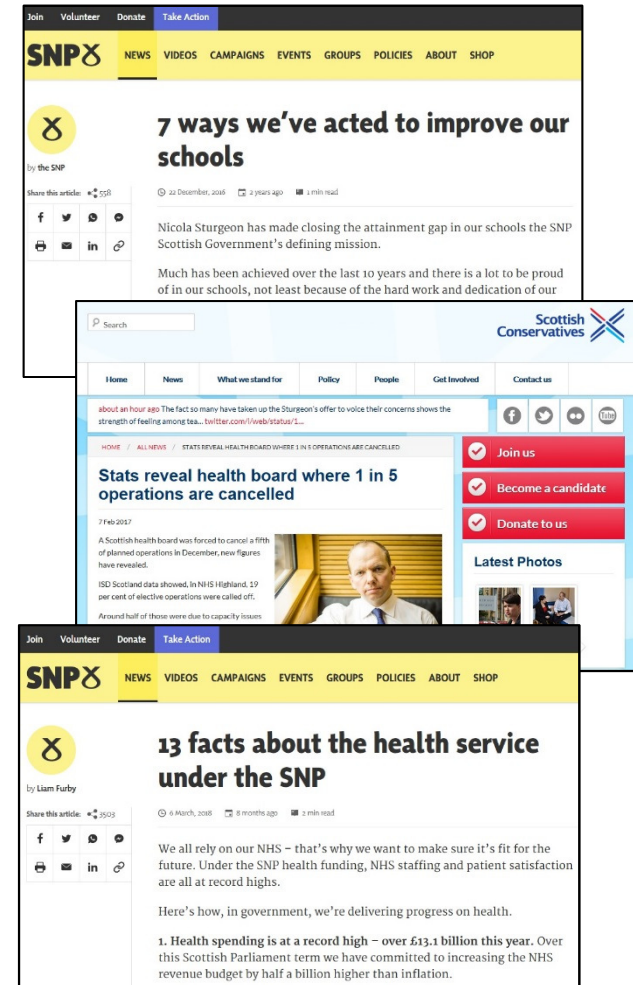


Interviews: Web pages viewed most frequently

Party	Page Title	Number of Interviewees
SNP	7 ways we've acted to improve our schools	13
SNP	13 facts about the health service under the SNP	5
SNP	Scotland's strong export performance: get the facts	4
Scottish Conservatives	Stats reveal health board where 1 in 5 operations are cancelled	3
Scottish Labour	We'll trust teachers, not the SNP, on the future of our schools	3
Scottish Conservatives	SNP letting down hundreds of youngsters with mental health problems each year	2
Scottish Labour	Expert report reveals staggering levels of SNP mismanagement of the NHS	2
Scottish Labour	The Tories' £2 billion cuts bombshell for Scotland	2
SNP	We're delivering a safer Scotland – here's how	2

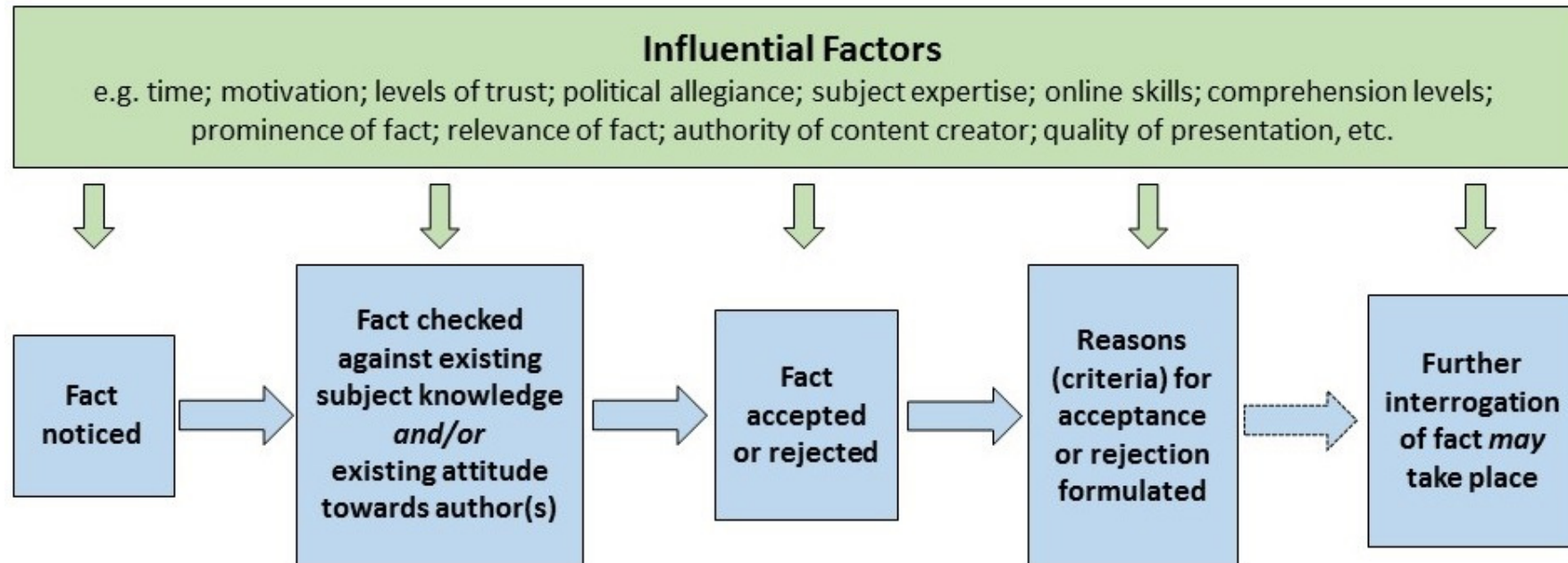
Interviews: key findings

- Participants' behaviour bore little relation to existing theory (with the possible exception of Fogg's P-I Theory);
- They judged facts swiftly and largely intuitively;
- Thus, facts were frequently consumed, accepted or rejected without any further process of verification or testing;
- Previous knowledge of a subject may influence trust in facts;
- They tended to notice and respond to facts with which they disagreed, or those painting an extremely positive or negative picture;
- Most acknowledged limitations in their capacity to evaluate facts, but some were delusionally confident.

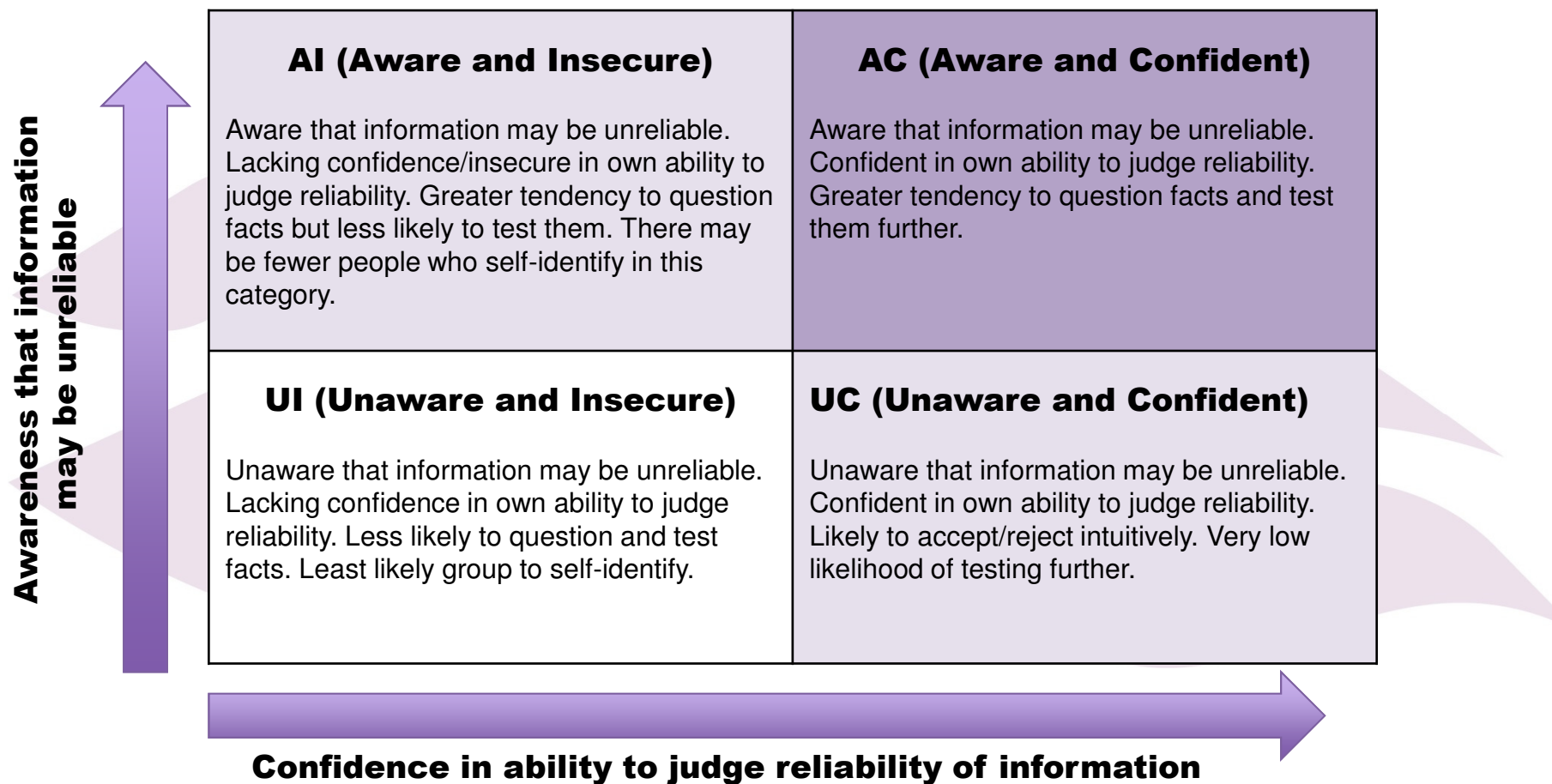


**ROBERT GORDON
UNIVERSITY ABERDEEN**

(Preliminary) Fact Interrogation Model



(Emerging) Information Quality Awareness Model



Most interviewees in AI and AC quadrants; some in UC; none in UI.



**ROBERT GORDON
UNIVERSITY ABERDEEN**

Typology of Information Searchers (in the political information setting)

- **The indifferent searcher** – no interest in obtaining political information; or has already made their political decision and closed to the idea of receiving new information.
- **The reactive searcher** – receives political information through their normal channels (TV, the press, social media, etc.) but does not actively seek out additional information.
- **The haphazard searcher** – actively looks for political information, but in limited sources and without a structured search strategy.
- **The proactive searcher** – looks for political information in a more systematic way, often with a focus on a particular policy area. May consult multiple sources from different parts of political spectrum. Gives some thought to credibility of these sources.
- **The engaged searcher** – carries out more extensive, widespread searches, *and* consults with family, friends and colleagues, with ultimate aim of making a democratic decision, or confirming/adjusting an existing political stance.

Most interviewees clustered in haphazard and proactive categories

Future Research Plans...

- **Develop a typology of flawed ‘facts’**
- **Further explore the ‘journey’ and ‘life cycle’ of a flawed or contested ‘fact’, i.e.**
 - i. from its origin;
 - ii. through intermediation;
 - iii. through the fact becoming the object of discussion and concern;
 - iv. through any processes of checking and validation; and
 - v. through any attempts to correct the fact;
- **Conduct a more extensive, UK-wide study of citizens’ interaction with contested facts**



Thank you...



Image: citywatchla.com



**ROBERT GORDON
UNIVERSITY ABERDEEN**