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“Citizen curation” in online discussions of Donald Trump’s presidency: sharing the news on Mumsnet

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Abstract

In an era of fake news and concerns about “social-media bubbles,” we consider how participants in online discussions on the UK parenting website Mumsnet assess the validity and potential subjectivity of news information sources. Building on previous work on the phenomenon of “social media curation” and “news curation”, we argue that there is evidence for the development of a theory and practice of “citizen curation” – the subjective and non-professional collection, assessment and criticism of information by participants in online discussions for the benefit of the group. Participants on Mumsnet collaborate to source, present and curate information from a variety of news sources, and impose a clear hierarchy with reference to these sources’ veracity. Information garnered from mainstream, liberal-leaning news sources is given the highest level of trust, often being used to support information from other sources, which are seen as less trustworthy. Information might also be presented from conservative-leaning news sources, but only when it supports the overall anti-Trump tone. Having acknowledged the selective subjectivity of the curatorial process performed by our participants, we then ask how far this contributes to the creation of a “liberal bubble” effect, and how far our participants are willing to go to validate news stories shared in this way. We argue that our participants demonstrated a clear awareness of the veracity and potential subjectivity of their sources, worked collaboratively to verify news items, and were proud of their ability to “scoop” the mainstream news media on occasion. Given that earlier work on such groups of news-absorbed users has suggested that they tend to be male, the identification of such a group on a female-dominated website also expands the literature and suggests that such gender differentiations should be made with care.

Key words: Mumsnet; citizen curation; social media curation; liberal bubble; Donald Trump; gatewatching

In an era of fake news and concerns about “social media bubbles,” (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Weber 2017; Beckett 2016), this paper considers how participants in online discussions assess the veracity and potential subjectivities of their information sources. Building on the work of Bruns and his collaborators (Bruns 2011; Bruns *et al* 2013; Bruns and Highfield 2015) on what they call “news curation” and what Thorsen describes as “social media curation”, we argue that there is evidence for the development of a theory and practice of what might be described as “citizen curation” – the subjective collection, assessment and criticism of information and information sources by non-professional participants in online discussions for the benefit of the group.

This subject is both timely and important. The contentious nature of Donald Trump and his presidency, the ongoing discussion about the impact of disinformation on the outcome of both the US election and the UK Brexit referendum, and the accusations of ‘fake news’ used by Trump to weaken the power of mainstream news critics mean that the need to investigate how people access and establish the veracity of news items is greater than ever. Social media can allow a wider dissemination of news and opinion, but can also amplify misinformation and give it equal status with the truth. It also offers the opportunity for anyone to produce and share news and opinion – and the attacks on the mainstream news media by Trump and others means that such products may even be granted higher status by some readers. For Trump, ‘fake news’ does not necessarily imply misinformation or inaccuracy, but simply news with which he disagrees. Even the most media savvy of readers now finds it difficult to clearly distinguish between the various types of mis- and dis-information, including satire and parody, that can be found online, particularly on the subject of Trump.

Returning to the first few weeks after the inauguration of Donald Trump, this paper investigates how one group of interested, news-hungry discussants on the online forum Mumsnet searched for and shared a series of news items and opinion pieces on the subject of Trump. It asks how – and whether – they verified their sources, what work they were willing to do to this end, and what subjectivities they brought to this curation. We use the term ‘citizen curation’ to describe their work since we suggest certain similarities with citizen journalism in the way in which these non-professional participants acknowledged (and sometimes gloried in) their subjectivities whilst at the same time working to share and educate their fellow discussants.

Using a series of online discussion threads about Donald Trump in the first two weeks after his inauguration on 20 January 2017, the paper investigates the informal curatorial practices, variety and quality of information sources used by participants in four discussion threads on the UK parenting community Mumsnet. Some participants in our study clearly acted as curators of information for a wider group, collecting material from a range of sources. However, we argue that some of these participants went further than simply collecting materials – they were also active in assessing source veracity, commenting on, and critiquing the materials presented by other participants. We further refine the concept of social-media curation by identifying the subjective nature of this information-collection process. Partisan information that supported the group’s particular opinions was more likely to be curated, from both conservative and liberal sources. We thus borrow from the concept of “citizen journalism” as inherently subjective (Blaagaard 2013, Luce *et al* 2016) in order to suggest that the non-professional participants in the study were undertaking activities and roles which we conceptualise as “citizen curation”.

Having acknowledged the subjectivity of the curatorial process performed by our participants, we then ask how far this subjectivity contributes to the creation of a “liberal bubble” effect, and how far our participants were willing to go to substantiate and validate news stories shared in this way. We argue that our participants demonstrated a clear awareness of the veracity and potential subjectivity of their sources, worked collaboratively to verify news items, and were proud of their ability to ‘scoop’ the mainstream news media on occasion. Given that earlier work on such groups of news-absorbed users has suggested that they tend to be male, the identification of such a group on a female-dominated website also expands the literature and suggests that such gender differentiations should be made with care.

Literature review

The advent of social media has stimulated the sharing of news and information between journalists, news organisations and everyday users, particularly at times of crisis (Bruns *et al* 2013). A much cited example of this is the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London when news organisations appealed to members of the public to use mobile phones to provide them with images and video footage to swiftly piece together news reports using a mixture of journalistic and citizen-generated content. Whilst originally focused on moments of crisis, the possibilities offered for interaction and exchanges of information and opinion between journalists and the “people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2006) has completely changed the way in which news organisations now source and disseminate news. Thus social media, and particularly Twitter, is seen as something that “enables people to be more than simply members of an audience” (Heinonen 2011, p. 53). Bruns (2005) has coined the term “gatewatching” for the “collaborative tracking of a wide range of news outlets for new information ... [and] the posting of such information... to the *ad hoc* community of interest which has formed around the topic Twitter hashtag” (Bruns *et al* 2013 n.p.). He thus conceptualises an emerging practice of online real-time curation of news (Thorsen 2013) where users publicise rather than publish news stories (Bruns 2011). In this way, citizens can become engaged in the gathering, processing, selecting, commenting on and distribution of news in a similar way to journalists (Thorsen 2013), and it is argued that such collective efforts can result in a coverage of news that is as comprehensive as those achieved by journalism (Bruns 2011). Scholars have tended to focus on studies of such collaborative tracking on Twitter, which allows a widespread crowdsourcing effort (Bruns 2011; Bruns *et al* 2013). However, the phenomenon can also be found in other parts of cyberspace, such as discussion forums, with the intended recipients of the curated materials being interested members of the public, rather than journalists *per se*. While some members of Mumsnet do work in the media / news industries, there is little evidence in the dataset collected for this article that any of these were involved in the threads analysed. Indeed, the celebration of presenting news not yet covered by the news media, the rejection and support for different mainstream news media, and the description of some of the women contributors monitoring the news whilst undertaking domestic chores all suggest that this was primarily an amateur (‘citizen’) operation. Thus the absence of any professional actors in the communicative space analysed is key in our description of their work as citizen curation.

Bruns rejects the label of “citizen journalism” for such activities, arguing that this both defines journalists as non-citizens and implies that such collaborative tracking is comparable to mainstream journalism (Bruns 2011; Bruns and Highfield 2015). “Citizen” journalism has been described as a response to the “one-way” journalism of the 20th century. It offers the possibility of interaction and participation in current affairs, and the chance for non-professional journalists to report on and offer their own opinions on the news. Gillmor (2006) sees such sites as places where a new breed of grassroots journalists take the news into their own hands. Citizen journalism is often described as inherently subjective (Blaagaard 2013, Luce *et al* 2016). Allan (2013, n. p.) describes it as “raw, immediate, independent and unapologetically subjective”. Some citizen journalists see themselves as the “fifth estate”, acting as watchdogs on the press and claiming to offer evidence of mainstream media’s distortions and bias (Pedersen 2010). However, Bruns and Highfield (2015) suggest that citizen journalists should be seen more as a second tier in the news process, commenting on and critiquing mainstream news content rather than producing many genuinely new news stories themselves. In other words, “gatewatching”.

There is a growing concern in both academia and the media about so-called “echo chambers” or “bubbles” within which individuals expose themselves only to information that reinforces their existing views, and the extent to which the advent of social media has exacerbated this problem. On the other hand, some scholars suggest that technological change has increased exposure to diverse perspectives (see Flaxman *et al* 2016 for a useful summary of both sides of this debate). Focusing specifically on political news, Barberá *et al* (2015) suggest that the discussion of

political issues online is particularly prone to the echo-chamber effect, although they also suggest that liberals are more likely than conservatives to engage in “cross-ideological dissemination”. Borah *et al* (2015) also suggest that political blog users are less likely to use mainstream news sites and blogs that disagree with their views. Garrett (2009), however, argues that – even when investigating political news – there is no evidence to suggest that individuals abandon new stories that contain information with which they disagree, and that there is little evidence that they will use the Internet to create echo chambers. Messing and Westwood (2014) introduce a further element to the discussion by suggesting that social media’s distinctive feature of social endorsement also increases the exposure of individuals to a wide-ranging supply of news. This is of particular relevance to this study, focusing on Mumsnet, which was originally built around the concept of mother-to-mother communication and recommendations.

Providing a conceptual backdrop to the work, we draw upon Bourdieu’s theory of social fields. Bourdieu (1995, p. 30) argues that: “A field is a field of forces within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these positions-takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field.” Given this, the fourth estate may be viewed as a field which, according to Sparrow (1999), is framed by homogenous journalistic praxes resulting from organisational norms. These, in juxtaposition with the sector’s relative autonomy, provide the news sector with a significant degree of power in relation to other sectors (Benson, 2006). However, these factors collaboratively enable the manipulation of communication by the fourth estate, and potentially mislead the public. Johnson and Kelling (2017) suggest that social media is challenging professional journalism, and is concomitantly challenged by professional journalism in its engagement with, and redefining of, boundary work within the journalistic field.

In this paper we argue that the “social media curation” we have identified in our study is subjective and non-professional and that therefore the term “citizen curation” is more appropriate to illustrate the acknowledged subjectivity of the crowd-sourcing taking place, and to emphasise the significance of the role of the non-professional within the sphere of professional journalism, and its influence on the field itself. This perspective echoes the perspective of Fulton (2015), who suggests that media producers who have entered the journalistic field via other non-traditional channels (such as blogging) exercise caution around personal definitions of journalists and indeed journalism, due in part to the legitimacy placed on the organisational structures within which traditional journalism operates.

The participants in our study acted as curators of information for a wider group, collating material from a wide number of sources, assessing its validity, and commenting on and critiquing the information and information sources presented by others. One element of citizen journalism is an acknowledgement, sometimes an embrace, of subjectivity – often contrasted to the “so-called” neutrality of the mainstream news media. Our citizen curators were aware of their political subjectivities within a liberal “bubble” and, while there was some attempt at balance in their curatorial practice, their aims were primarily to curate information that supported their own view of the world.

Further to our view of citizen curation as a refinement of social-media curation, we also suggest that citizen curation is an important and hitherto under-researched area within the field of digital curation. By recognizing citizen curation as a discrete extension to the field, this paper contributes to the theory of digital curation, which has traditionally focussed on the management of digital resources by information professionals in formalised contexts such as libraries and museums (Ray, 2017). Beagrie (2006) suggests that “the term implies not only the preservation and maintenance of a collection or database but some degree of added value and knowledge”, both of which can be seen to be present within the samples identified for this research. By acknowledging the significant role played by citizen curation, this research extends understanding of digital curation beyond formalised professional environments and into contexts in which knowledgeable “laymen”

can contribute their own understanding of a topic like the US Presidential Election through their curatorial practices.

The concept of citizen curation therefore provides a nexus drawing on the theories of both social and digital curation, as well as the contextual backdrop provided by field theory. The role of social curation in defining citizen curation is naturally defined by the role of groups or communities in the curation of resources of materials, whereas definitions of digital curation are reliant on the nature of the assets being curated. In addition to the significance placed on both the curators and the objects being curated, citizen curation is characterised by a number of features that are not shared by either social or digital curation. Citizen curation both highlights the importance of non-professionals in the curation of collections of materials, and further their partisan approach to the materials themselves. Another significant distinction between digital curation and citizen curation is that digital curation is focussed on the preservation of digital resources for current and future usage, whereas citizen curation is focussed almost exclusively on their use in the present (Yakel, 2007).

Methodology

The study makes use of the discussion boards of the online parenting site Mumsnet as a source of primary data. Established in 2000, the site is seen by both media and politicians in the UK as being particularly influential with affluent, middle-class women and has hosted a number of online chats with political leaders. The 2010 general election was dubbed “the Mumsnet election” (Davies 2010). During both the 2015 and 2017 election campaigns, party leaders undertook online chats on Mumsnet. “Mumsnetters” offer a distinct demographic in contrast to other UK parenting websites, overall being more middle class, educated and wealthier than alternatives such as Netmums (Jensen 2013, Pedersen and Smithson 2010). McRobbie (2013) describes the site as embodying professional middle-class maternity. Its discussion boards receive over six million monthly unique visitors and it has a growing feminist voice (Pedersen and Smithson 2013). Mumsnet has previously been used as a data source for assessments of political discussion in the UK (Jackson *et al* 2013), with Fallon *et al* (2011) pointing out that sites like Mumsnet demonstrate that women are discussing politics online in places that would traditionally be perceived as non-political.

The selection of a female-dominated site also contributes to research into what a Reuters Institute study defines as “news-absorbed users in the UK who access significantly more sources of news, are more likely to comment on news, and twice as likely to share news” (Newman, 2012 p. 11). The Reuters study suggested that such users tend to be male. The identification and investigation of news-absorbed users on Mumsnet complicates this finding, although Pedersen and Smithson (2013) suggest that Mumsnetters’ overall online behaviour breaks other gendered norms such as swearing, flaming and aggressive humour.

The discussion boards on Mumsnet offer over 100 different thread themes, including baby names, parenting, education and weight loss, as well as current affairs and women’s politics. In the two weeks after Donald Trump’s inauguration, a series of fast-moving discussion threads (each containing 1000 comments) ran on the site. Contributions came from both British and overseas Mumsnetters, particularly from the US and latterly Australia following a difficult telephone call between the new President and the Australian Prime Minister. The majority of comments were critical of Trump, and many posters supported their criticisms with links to information sources. By the second week, commentators were noting that they relied on the threads to keep them updated with news about Trump and that the threads regularly scooped mainstream news sources. One participant commented “*Love this thread - breaking Trump news before Sky/BBC!*”

This study analyses the information and information sources shared by participants in four discussion threads about Trump that ran on the “Am I Being Unreasonable?” forum on Mumsnet. This forum was chosen because of its popularity amongst users of the site (Pedersen and Smithson 2010). The forum encourages argumentative and sometimes splenetic opening posts starting with the phrase ‘Am I being unreasonable...’ (to shout at my husband, to rant about this school policy, to be annoyed about, etc....) A series of threads about Trump, starting from the day of his inauguration, quickly attracted 1000 comments (the maximum number of comments for one thread) in less than

24 hours. Four linked threads in a series on the subject of Trump were therefore selected for analysis, providing 4000 comments for analysis. The threads selected were the first four in what became a continual series of threads about Trump all leading on from and referencing each other (still continuing in October 2017).

All information sources mentioned in the threads were collected and analysed. This yielded 1009 different sources, ranging from mainstream newspaper sites to individual Twitter accounts. The variety of sources was analysed and positioned on a liberal-conservative news axis. Following Flaxman *et al* (2016) we assessed article slant at the outlet level using this study's assessment of outlets' conservative share. Whilst the Flaxman *et al* study focuses on US media, it also includes the majority of non-US sources discussed in our own study. In addition, given the US-based subject matter and high number of US sources used by the Mumsnetters in our study, Flaxman *et al*'s analysis of news media was judged to be appropriate for this study. We were thus able to identify the overall right or left-wing leanings of each news source and to use this to build a picture of the overall frame within which the conversations about Trump were constructed. Instead of a liberal bubble, we found that our participants were accessing news items from both the left and right wing of politics, and that their choice of which story to share was driven more by its criticism of Trump than by political affiliation – in fact, as will be discussed below, right-wing news sources that criticised Trump were in many ways given more credibility by the participants.

Using a process of thematic analysis using the framework developed by Braun (2006), participants' discussion about these sources was identified and analysed, particularly in relation to their validity, how they were sourced and how the sources were discussed amongst the group. Braun proposes six stages within her framework which were applied to our data set: becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and report production. Several runs through the data were undertaken by both authors to identify all discussion about sources and the key themes that arose in such discussions. In particular, our aim was to establish how aware participants were of the potential subjectivities of their sources and how concerned they were about these subjectivities. Thus all discussions between participants about sources were followed – sometimes over several threads – to establish how sources were discussed and evaluated by participants. We were also interested in the ways in which participants introduced their sources to the group and how they were discussed within the group to establish the level of interrogation of sources. Our wider analysis also identified which participants shared which news sources and the number and type of sources shared by individual participants, although this is not the subject of this paper.

Findings

In all, 1009 sources were referenced in the four threads analysed, made up of 188 different sources. The top 15 sources in terms of frequency are given in Figure 1 below.

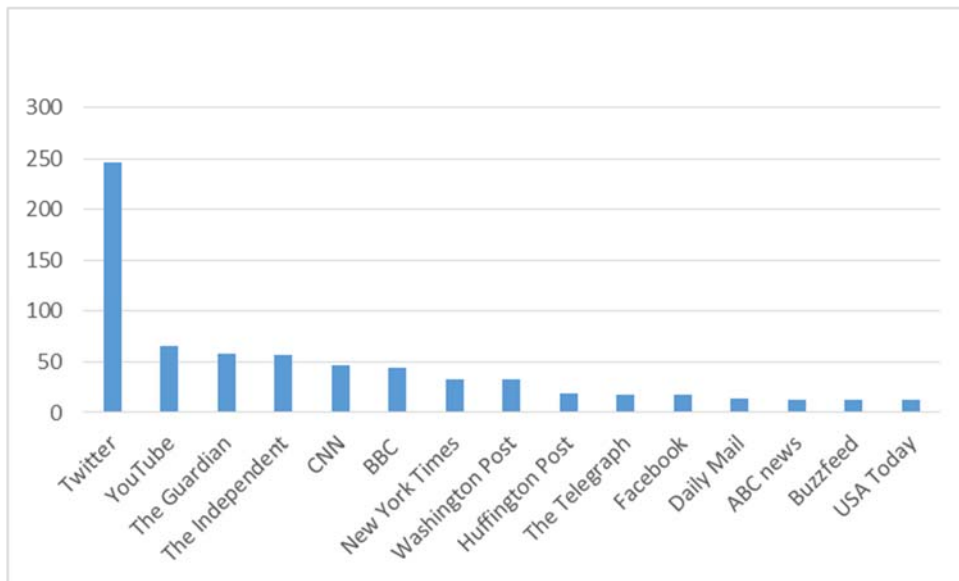


Figure 1: 15 most cited primary sources

As can be seen from Figure 1, the most frequently cited sources were a mix of mainstream and online-only news media. Twitter dominated the threads. What is represented as Twitter-sourced information in Figure 1 are the direct tweets from individual Twitter accounts, for example Donald Trump, other politicians or individual actors. In addition to these direct tweets, the majority of the links to mainstream media sources used by participants were linked via Twitter. Twitter therefore might better be considered as a medium used to further disseminate news. Quality mainstream media dominated overall – a finding that agrees with Bruns *et al's* 2013 analysis of online news-sharing of Australian Twitter users, which found a strong focus on quality information sources.

Mainstream newspapers

Perhaps confounding fears of the creation of a liberal 'bubble', participants accessed news items from both the left- and right-wing news media, although the majority of stories were from more liberal news sources. The choice of stories to share was driven more by criticism of Trump than by political affiliation and, in fact, right-wing news sources that criticised Trump were in many ways given more credibility by the participants, although sources such as *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* were still targets of criticism for their editorial approach and overall support of right-wing politics.

The most frequently referenced mainstream newspapers were *The Guardian* (58 – all figures relate to the number of mentions) and *The Independent* (57): both liberal and British. If we include mentions of Indy100.com (4), the sister site established by the *Independent* in 2014 as a "shareable journalism site", then there were slightly more mentions of *The Independent* than any other mainstream news source. Given that *The Independent* has been online-only since 2016 this is a significant finding that reflects the importance of online sources to this new group of citizen curators. One poster commented "I think I love the *Independent*". Other British newspapers frequently referenced were the *Daily Mail* (14) and *Daily Telegraph* (18), both conservative-leaning newspapers. The *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express* received three mentions and the *London Standard* two. It can therefore be seen that thread participants accessed both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers and, although mostly referencing the liberal-leaning press, would also discuss news stories appearing in more Conservative sources.

However, it must be noted that, when such Conservative sources were used, participants were more likely to critique or even apologise for the source. This was particularly true of the *Daily Mail*. The *Mail* is disliked more widely on Mumsnet, both for its politics and for its habit of lifting threads from the discussion boards of Mumsnet for re-use on its online site without permission. For this reason, several Mumsnet posters have adopted posting names making rude comments about

the *Mail* or its editor Paul Dacre in an attempt to stop their own posts being used in this way. For example, one of the posters on the Trump threads was called “FuckOffDailyMailQuitQuotingMN”. There is also a general dislike of clicking through on *Daily Mail* online links. Thus many of the links to the *Daily Mail* on these threads were accompanied by apologies.

Respondents on the Trump threads tended to use the *Daily Mail* to demonstrate how even the *Mail* was reporting a particular story:

Sorry about this, but even the daily fail is printing this.... European press is having a big laugh at May holding hands with fascist. Baltic states aren't.

I just checked out the Mail's website to see how the right wing rags are covering this - you know Trump's gone way, way over the mark when even the coverage in the Mail is uniformly negative.

Credit where credit's due. This is the Daily Mail website lead.

In reference to a Piers Morgan column in the *Daily Mail*, one poster commented “*And it's just a sad fucking day all around when even Piers Morgan agrees with us*” while a later poster explained “*for those who won't click DM links, he's basically saying Trump is in the wrong for both the ban on the 7 countries and the refugee ban*”.

Thus *Daily Mail* news stories were selectively used to illustrate how even a conservative-leaning newspaper much scorned on Mumsnet sometimes agreed with the general condemnation of Trump’s policies and behaviour on the threads. *Daily Mail* stories that were positive about Trump were not discussed, however, although it was clear from the accompanying commentary that participants were aware of such positive coverage, thus demonstrating that they were reading these stories if not sharing them.

Conservative-leaning newspapers were also criticised for their lack of coverage of news relating to Trump. In the first day after Trump’s attempt to impose a travel ban on travellers from some Muslim countries, one poster noted:

Quelle surprise... The Fail, Express and Torygraph are leading with much more important matters this morning like... the memorial planned for Princess Di amongst others.

Other mainstream newspapers referenced included newspapers from outside the UK, mostly from the liberal side of the debate. From the US, the *New York Times* (33) and the *Washington Post* (32) were both referenced frequently. Other US newspapers used as sources of information included *USA Today* (12), *Los Angeles Times* (2) and the *New York Daily News* (1). Reference was also made to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (5). Both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* operate a policy of offering free access to a limited number of online articles per month in the hope that this will lead to subscriptions to the site. This evidently worked for some respondents, with comments such as “*I've just subscribed to the NY Times and the Washington Post. I read enough of their articles anyway*”. More generally, support for the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* in the face of open criticism from Trump has led to both newspapers’ subscriptions rising (Huddleston 2016). However, others attempted to get around the paywalls by searching for similar stories on other more accessible sites or asking those with subscriptions to give them a synopsis of the stories. One poster suggested that it was possible to access further news stories on such sites by opening “*a private or incognito window*”. There are British mainstream newspapers that also operate such paywalls, such as *The Times*. Interestingly, however, *The Times* was not referenced at all in the threads analysed, suggesting that although a small number of respondents was willing to subscribe to US newspaper sites, they were able to access sufficient freely available UK-based news without the need to pay.

Mainstream broadcasters

Given that the majority of respondents were based in the UK, it was more problematic for them to access a similarly wide range of broadcasters. There was also less discussion of the veracity of stories

on the main broadcasters accessed, BBC and CNN, although more criticism of the right-wing Fox News. Again, when this source criticised Trump it was seen as almost more important than the criticisms from left-wing or more neutral sources. Some insight was also gained in to the domestic settings in which some respondents were accessing the news, emphasising again that these were amateur or citizen curators rather than professionals.

British and US broadcasters BBC and CNN were both frequently referenced throughout the threads. Including all references to individual BBC programmes on both radio and television in addition to BBC news sources, the BBC was referenced 43 times and CNN 47 times. Individual BBC programmes referenced included *The Moral Maze*, *Question Time* and *Newsnight*. The BBC was evidently the UK mainstream news broadcaster of choice for respondents on these threads in comparison to Sky News (5), ITV news (3) and Channel 4 news (2).

Posters' comments about these sources rarely discussed their veracity but instead commented on their own personal response to a news item:

Seeing all the marches on the BBC made me very happy.

Comments were also offered on *how* the BBC news was consumed by Mumsnetters, demonstrating how watching BBC news programmes was part of normal daily life:

I'm watching Trump's speech at the CIA just now "live" on BBCNews24 as I paused it for half an hour to get the kids to bed.

When using BBC sources there seems to have been little consideration of the credentials of the source, again particularly when they agreed with the poster's views:

The BBC have done a factcheck article on the voter fraud allegations. A really nice short summary of Trump's allegations and why it is bollocks.

Similarly, posters reported "*I'm watching the marches on cnn*". One poster commented on a piece on the CNN news site "*TRUE! So so TRUE. The most truest reporting. Because they're like smart.*" One of the ways in which posters on these threads mocked Donald Trump was by writing in a similar style to his tweets. However, this post also suggests links made by participants between the news accuracy of such mainstream broadcasters and intelligence.

Unlike the BBC, there were occasional comments justifying the use of CNN as a news source. For example, in reference to countries not included in the travel ban one poster linked to a CNN story noting "*Link to reputable news source (CNN) list of foreign countries in which Trumpleforeskin has business interests*".

It is perhaps not surprising to find that Fox News came in for much criticism within this group of participants.

Fox News practically kiss his [Trump's] feet, which is why he watches them. Their twitter only posts little bursts of the press meetings of Angry Spice [Press Secretary Sean Spicer] - they edit out anything that looks bad and keep in the good. Doesn't leave much ha ha.

And Fox news is rabbiting on saying the polls are saying people approval rate is going up and up.... Fox news is firmly wedged up Trump's ass.

Nonetheless, just as in the case of the conservative press, any suggestion that Fox News was critical of the President was seized on and reported:

When Fox turns on a republican, you know there's a massive issue.

Social media

Social media played a key role in both the delivery of news to respondents (for example via the Twitter feeds of the mainstream news media) and as a source for their own news-gathering. It is

their use of the social media of official and unofficial sources that establishes this group as primary news providers and not just discussants of news provided by other sources. Participants followed and shared the Twitter feeds of some of the main protagonists in the news stories that were breaking during the first weeks of Trump's presidency, including Trump himself, members of his new cabinet, and other politicians. They also accessed raw data from official and unofficial sources and presented the group with their own experiences in actions against Trump, such as marches, and the evidence of other friends and relations. It is their actions with regards to social media sources that most entitle this group to the title of 'citizen' in their news-gathering, curation and sharing.

The majority of the mainstream media links shared by the group came from Twitter. Thus links to stories from newspapers such as *The Washington Post* or broadcasters such as CNN were sourced on Twitter and then shared with the group. However, it is clear that participants were also picking up on the tweets of individual users on Twitter. Direct tweets from users as diverse as the Swedish Foreign Ministry, Kim Kardashian, J K Rowling and British politician Michael Gove were shared on the threads. References to Twitter also offers good evidence that some participants sought to access information directly from politicians or government departments rather than waiting for it to be filtered through the news media, with tweets from Justin Trudeau, Betsy DeVos, the Mayor of Boston and the governor of New York reported, with links. Given the focus of the threads, it is not surprising that the most frequently mentioned Twitter account was that of @realDonaldTrump, with 23 distinct mentions. Other Twitter accounts mentioned more than once include @AltNatParkSer (7), @Funder (6) and @khanoisseur (6). The "Alternative" National Parks Service Twitter account was established in January 2017 after Trump ordered a media blackout on certain US government agency social media accounts. @Funder is the Twitter account of Scott Dworkin, the co-founder of the Democratic Coalition against Trump. @khanoisseur is the Twitter feed of Adam Khan, described by BuzzFeed as "a former marketing consultant and tech guru turned Twitter investigator" and an "indefatigable presence on Twitter" (Warzel 2017). This Twitter account in particular was highly recommended by a series of participants in the threads, with one poster commenting "That guy has a LOT of knowledge". She later called his Twitter feed "a complete eye opener. And he has facts to back up his claims". A further post described him as "a guy with his finger on the pulse". Another poster worried "That guy needs to be careful. I can see him disappearing or dying in an 'accident'".

The Twitter accounts of supposed rogue White House staff were enjoyed and shared by the group, but were not seen as trusted sources. As one poster put it, "*The Guardian seems to think this Twitter account may be real... I'm going to keep looking in on it,*" demonstrating a reliance on the fact-checking of *The Guardian*. Apart from Donald Trump's own tweets, the majority of tweets shared by the group were either from the liberal mainstream media, including individual journalists, or from other critics of the Trump administration, again demonstrating a selectively subjective approach to information curation.

Just as with the conservative mainstream media, while social-media sources were perceived as less reliable by participants, they might be used if they supported the main thrust of the poster's argument. Thus one participant posted the text of an email she had seen on the Facebook wall of a friend: "*This has jst [sic] been posted by an American friend of mine who received this email.... Can't vouch 100% for its accuracy but she believes it to be true and that's good enough for me.*"

There was a clear awareness that materials from social media had less veracity than items sourced from the mainstream media. One poster shared a Facebook post stating, "*This is super anecdotal, but I thought I would share it here anyway*". Another posted "*I've just read from a friend (no time to verify it at present) that EPA grants have been frozen.*" Note the "at present" – the implicit promise that verification of the story using more reliable sources would take place in future. Links from social media such as personal Facebook pages were often used to break news, which posters then sought to verify by searching for further information from more mainstream sources.

Other posters gave further information about their sources if using social media. For example, a link to a law blog post was scrupulously described as *“Greg Makiw states that he is the Robert M Beren Professor of Economics at Harvard”*.

While the majority of sources accessed were news media sources, either newspapers or broadcast, the group was also happy to source raw data from governmental or other sources. The live-streaming of events was particularly popular, with embedded links added to the threads to help Mumsnetters watch live events such as the speakers at the Women’s March in Washington on 21 January 2017, President Trump’s speech at the CIA memorial on the same day, and a speech by Theresa May. One poster recommended, *“Worth watching the nominated Secretary of Education hearings”*. Other links included the White House information pages for both Presidents Obama and Trump, as posters pointed out deletions and changes.

Working together

It was apparent that participants might find a news item through one channel and then search for further information to clarify the news or support its credibility. Thus a poster linked to an article from *The Guardian* commenting *“Just heard this on the news as well”*. Another posted *“Breaking news. The entire senior level State Department has resigned to avoid working with Trump?”* and later commented *“Not hearsay as it’s just come up on TV. Here’s the story”*. When the death of a Russian diplomat was reported by the *Daily Star*, one poster commented *“Can’t keep up with it all. (is the dailystar reliable?)”* Another poster responded *“I’m not seeing that news on bbc or CNN”* while a third commented, *“Oh I saw that about the dead Russian somewhere else as well ... I’ll try and find it again.”* She returned with a link to *The Telegraph* commenting *“Here you are. The Telegraph are running it as well”*. Thus participants in the thread worked together quickly to verify a news item and to present a source that was deemed sufficiently reputable. This also supports Bruns *et al* (2013) identification of a strong focus on quality information sources amongst online news-sharers on Twitter in Australia.

Information about the decisions behind the news might also be presented. A poster directed others *“If you look at News and Guts on Facebook (by Dan Rather), there is a very good summary of the press conference by Trumps press secretary and why CNN refused to air it.”*

Participants were encouraged not to take the word of other posters about a source but to read and research for themselves. Commenting on an ABC News interview with Trump, a poster provided a link to the transcript of the interview, encouraging others to *“read it and judge for yourself”*. Another participant encouraged others to read an article on a law blog with the words *“Long article but worth reading”*. Others followed up their original posts with links to further sources in order to verify what was claimed. For example, *“Here’s the CBS report my first link cited”*. Participants were also encouraged to listen as well as read, with one participant recommending *“This podcast is worth a listen. It’s This American Life and they’re interviewing Americans from both sides about how they feel at the moment”*. Another recommended *“Michael D’Antonio, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and a biographer of Donald J Trump, [who] shares hours of audio interviews he conducted with Mr Trump, three of his children and his first wife.”* Note the scrupulous detail verifying the quality of the source. A few hours later another poster thanked her, commenting *“I had them on in the background whilst cleaning and tidying up.... Well worth listening to, thanks.”* (As noted above, this image of a Mumsnetter listening to such sources while undertaking domestic tasks recurred several times.)

Participants in the threads not only shared links to information, but also encouraged direct action on the part of others. For example, links were made to Facebook pages organising demonstrations against Trump in London and elsewhere in the UK, to the writetothem.com website which enables correspondence with MPs and MEPs, and also to the UK government’s petition pages which hosted a petition against Trump’s visit to the UK. Even these links might be subjected to scrutiny, with one participant posting a link to a government webpage showing the geographical location of those who had signed the petition against Trump’s visit and commenting *“Worth noting*

the areas of London with a large Jewish community have a lot of signatories, no?" Another poster encouraged participants to show their support for a BBC reporter via Twitter.

Laura Kunisberg is getting a lot of stick and abuse on twitter and in the press (daily mail) for daring to ask a question about "what SOME people at home are thinking". Please show your support for her. It think it's so important to show our press they should not worry about holding truth to power.

Participants demonstrated a clear understanding that their view of the situation was subjective. The overall tone of the threads was explicitly anti-Trump, with news items that supported this point of view being sought, mainly from the liberal press. News items from conservative news media that agreed with the anti-Trump tone were also used, with provisos. There was no pretence amongst participants that the news media was objective, or indeed that it needed to be. Indeed one participant commented

I suppose it goes towards the call for the media to stop being neutral. In some things they can't. and it looks like they won't. Even Fox are asking difficult questions, even if not as hard as the BBC. hard as nails.

Another poster commented

The BBC 11 O'clock news followed up Theresa May's non answer in the opening headlines bit with a John Hurt quote about anarchy descending. I know they have to be neutral but that was hardly subtle.

Others made contrasts between the news media and the Trump presidency: *"It's Al Jazeera but that's probably as reliable and believable as Spicer and Trump at the moment"*.

Offline sources

With all the discussion of online information sources it should also be noted that there were some mentions of offline sources. A daughter of one of the participants sent her some photographs of one of the marches in London, which led to another poster reporting *"My wedding photographer was at the march in Washington taking photos of some of the posters. Some great ones."* When one poster commented on a story in her local newspaper, the *News Shopper*, another responded *"if you get the News Shopper you're not far from me"*. Another participant described how she had read an article in the *London Standard* newspaper on her way home and then searched for it online so that she could share it with the group.

Discussion

'Thank you to everyone on here who posts REAL facts and links.'

Participants in the online discussions on the subject of the early weeks of Donald Trump's presidency on Mumsnet clearly demonstrate that the phenomenon of news-absorbed users is not limited to either Twitter or male users. The participants on these threads collaborated to source, present and curate information from a variety of sources, and imposed a clear hierarchy with reference to these sources' validity and usefulness. Information garnered from mainstream, liberal-leaning broadcasters and newspapers was given the highest level of trust, often being used to support information from other sources, which were seen as less trust-worthy. Information might also be presented from conservative-leaning newspapers and broadcasters, but only when it supported the overall anti-Trump tone of the threads – used to prove that *even* the *Daily Mail* or Fox News was critical of the new President.

As far as social media is concerned, Twitter was used as both a primary and secondary source of information. Good use was made of the Twitter feeds of the above-mentioned mainstream

news sources in order to access up-to-the-minute information about fast-breaking news stories. The dominance of the use of Twitter as an initial source for such stories may explain the popularity of *The Independent* on the threads since this newspaper has been digital-only since 2016. Twitter was, however, also used as a primary source for information – and it is here that the participants on the thread became more than simply a mainstream news audience. They also used the Twitter feeds of politicians, journalists and others to access information in the raw – and from both sides of the debate. Blogs and Facebook were also used as sources, and here we should note that posters were careful to discuss the credentials of the source but might also use information garnered, for example, from a friend’s Facebook account if it served their purpose.

This selective subjectivity was core to the information curation performed by the participants. Whilst there was a clear hierarchy of trusted sources, if a piece of information was critical of Donald Trump or added a new aspect to an issue, then it would be presented to the rest of the group. Its antecedents would be carefully explained, but these were not seen as a reason not to share the information. Indeed, in some ways, the right-wing leanings of a critic of Trump might be given more validity by the group than more left-wing criticism. However, the poster and other members of the group would then work to verify the information aiming to support it with information from what were seen as more valid sources, such as the mainstream news media.

Such an approach is reminiscent of Allan’s (2013 n.p.) description of citizen journalism as “raw, immediate, independent and unapologetically subjective”. Another aspect of the curation undertaken incorporating a more active approach to citizenship are the links to events and petitions, where users were encouraged not just to learn more about the news but to directly participate in making it.

While we would agree that the participants in our study might not be described as citizen journalists – and would probably not seek that title themselves – what they were doing was a very active and also subjective selection and interrogation of information, which we have called “citizen curation”. This term acknowledges previous discussion of “social media curation” and “news curation” but also incorporates elements of citizen journalism such as an explicit (and proud) subjectivity. It also acknowledges the small amount of primary information-gathering undertaken by some participants and also the encouragement of direct action through petitions and marches.

How do such citizen-curation practices impact on the question of the so-called liberal bubble (Vance 2016)? It is clear that the Mumsnet participants in these threads about the early weeks of Donald Trump’s presidency approached their information gathering and sharing in a subjective frame of mind. Sources that criticised or even mocked Trump were shared with recommendations, and while mainstream media sources were preferred, other less verified sources might also be used if they took a critical view of the President or his appointees. Nonetheless, there is evidence that participants might also access conservative-leaning news media, even if such sources were only recommended to others if they supported criticism of Trump. It is also clear that there was a limited amount of primary information gathering from right-wing American sources, including the President and his office. Again, however, such sources were only used to support the overall argument of the threads rather than to present an alternative point of view. The participants were conscious of the subjective nature of their discussion, but demonstrated satisfaction with this state of affairs. Positive comments made by other participants about particular pieces of information or new sources also encouraged posters to share information with the group. Whilst sources might be criticised, individual posters were not, creating an exciting, fast-moving and supportive atmosphere. Messing and Westwood (2014) suggest that social endorsement via social media increases the exposure of individuals to a wide-ranging supply of news. However, in this study, whilst it is evident that the group used the discussion forum to make recommendations to each other, there is less evidence to suggest that all sides of the argument were covered. This may, however, be related to the subject under question. In the UK the majority of mainstream media discussion of Trump has also been negative. At the same time as the threads on Donald Trump, Mumsnet discussion forums also hosted two other series of political discussions on the topic of Brexit – one positive and one

negative, suggesting that, on other topics, a more balanced argument might be possible within the politics discussion forum on Mumsnet. It is interesting to note that discussion of Donald Trump during the time period of the threads analysed mainly occurred in the Am I Being Unreasonable forum rather than as Politics threads, implying that balanced discussion of Trump was considered to be unnecessary or impossible by the participants on the threads studied. The choice of this forum obviously encourages more polarised discussion, but in fact few dissenting voices were raised on the threads, which were presented by participants as unashamedly partisan. Further analysis of these and other discussions of politics on the site will enable us to continue to refine the concept of citizen curation and its potential contribution to the theory of journalistic fields, and widen the discussion of social media curation to include both women and other forms of social media outside Twitter.

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