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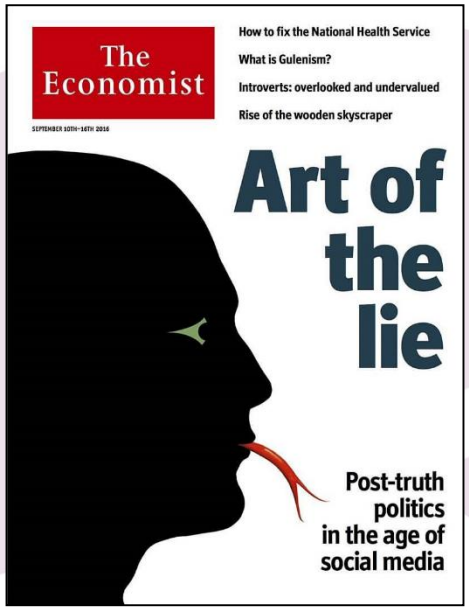
An Exploration of the Relationship Between Post-Truth Politics and Scottish Citizens' Information Behaviour

i³ Conference, June 2017



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School of Creative and Cultural Business
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

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

- **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**

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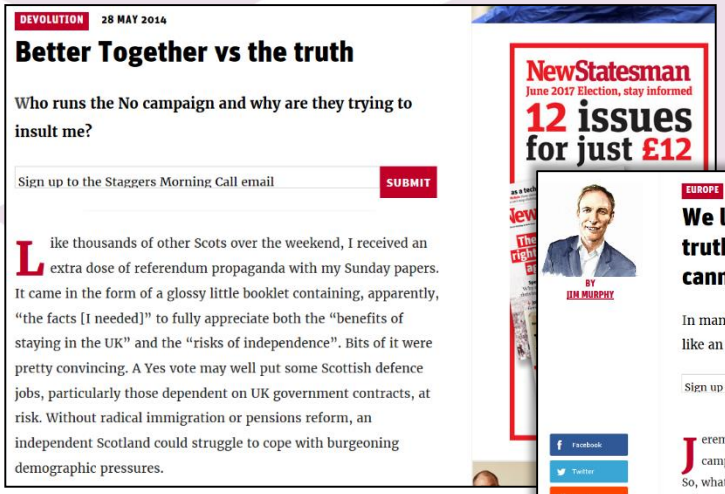
Scottish Independence Referendum
18 September 2014

- **Some accusations of post-truth politicking during and after the campaign**

Image: Electoral Commission



DEVOLUTION 28 MAY 2014

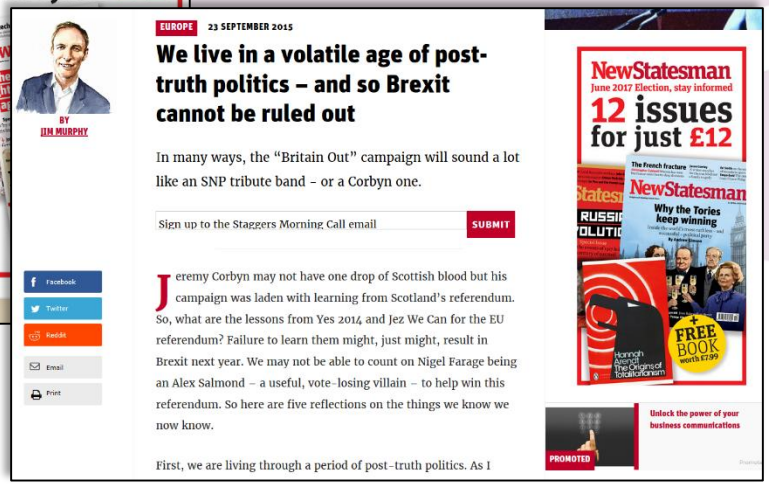
Better Together vs the truth

Who runs the No campaign and why are they trying to insult me?

Sign up to the Staggers Morning Call email SUBMIT

Like thousands of other Scots over the weekend, I received an extra dose of referendum propaganda with my Sunday papers. It came in the form of a glossy little booklet containing, apparently, "the facts [I needed]" to fully appreciate both the "benefits of staying in the UK" and the "risks of independence". Bits of it were pretty convincing. A Yes vote may well put some Scottish defence jobs, particularly those dependent on UK government contracts, at risk. Without radical immigration or pensions reform, an independent Scotland could struggle to cope with burgeoning demographic pressures.

NewStatesman
June 2017 Election, stay informed
12 issues for just £12



EUROPE 23 SEPTEMBER 2015

We live in a volatile age of post-truth politics – and so Brexit cannot be ruled out

BY JIM MURPHY

In many ways, the "Britain Out" campaign will sound a lot like an SNP tribute band – or a Corbyn one.

Sign up to the Staggers Morning Call email SUBMIT

Jeremy Corbyn may not have one drop of Scottish blood but his campaign was laden with learning from Scotland's referendum. So, what are the lessons from Yes 2014 and Jez We Can for the EU referendum? Failure to learn them might, just might, result in Brexit next year. We may not be able to count on Nigel Farage being an Alex Salmond – a useful, vote-losing villain – to help win this referendum. So here are five reflections on the things we know we now know.

First, we are living through a period of post-truth politics. As I

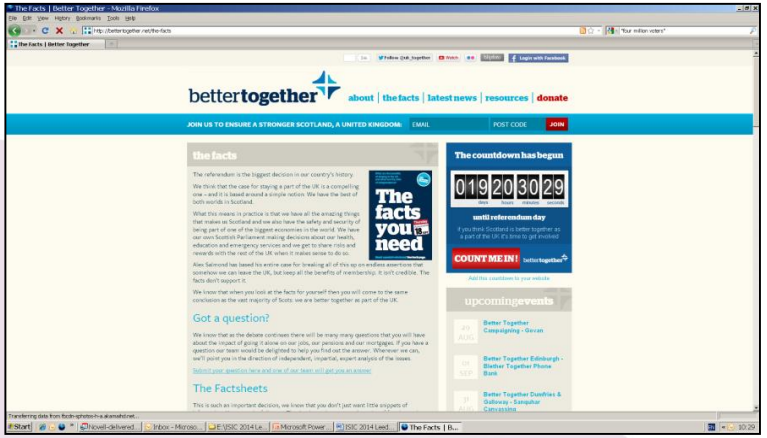
NewStatesman
June 2017 Election, stay informed
12 issues for just £12
NewStatesman
Why the Tories keep winning
+ FREE BOOK worth £7.99
PROMOTED
Unlock the power of your business communications

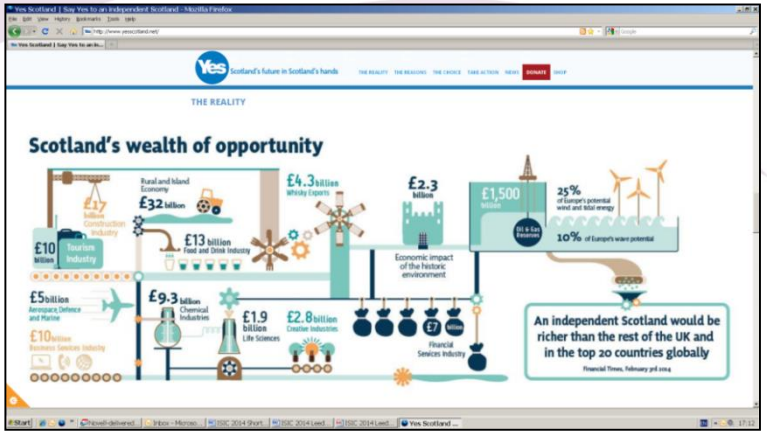
Scottish Independence Referendum 2014
Voters' Online Information Behaviour Study (1)

- **Hosted by a community centre, RGU Library, and a church; all in Aberdeen**
- **Used the 'interactive, electronically-assisted interview' method**
- **Used laptop and mobile broadband 'dongle', iPad and smartphones**
- **54 participants**

Scottish Independence Referendum 2014
Voters' Online Information Behaviour Study (2)

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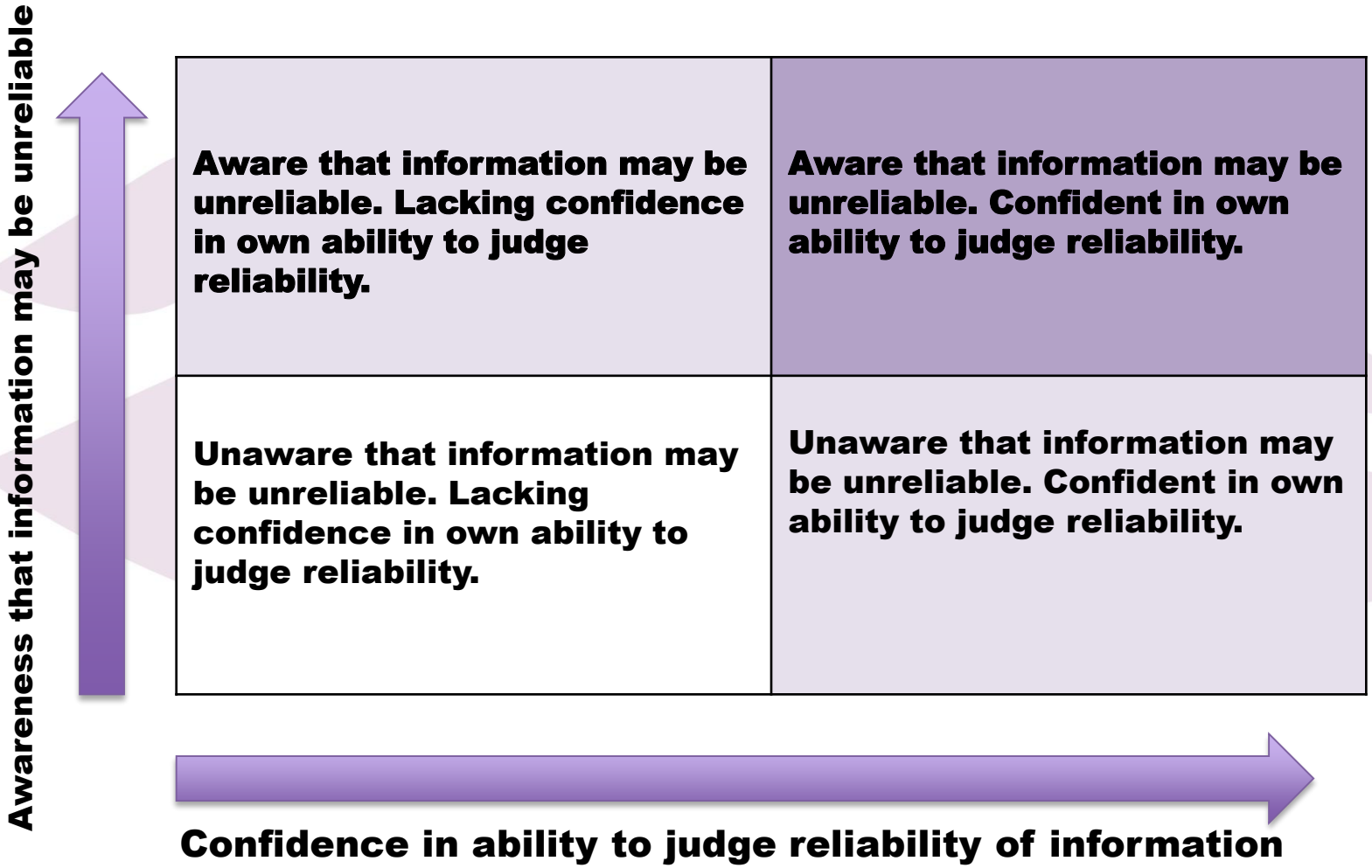
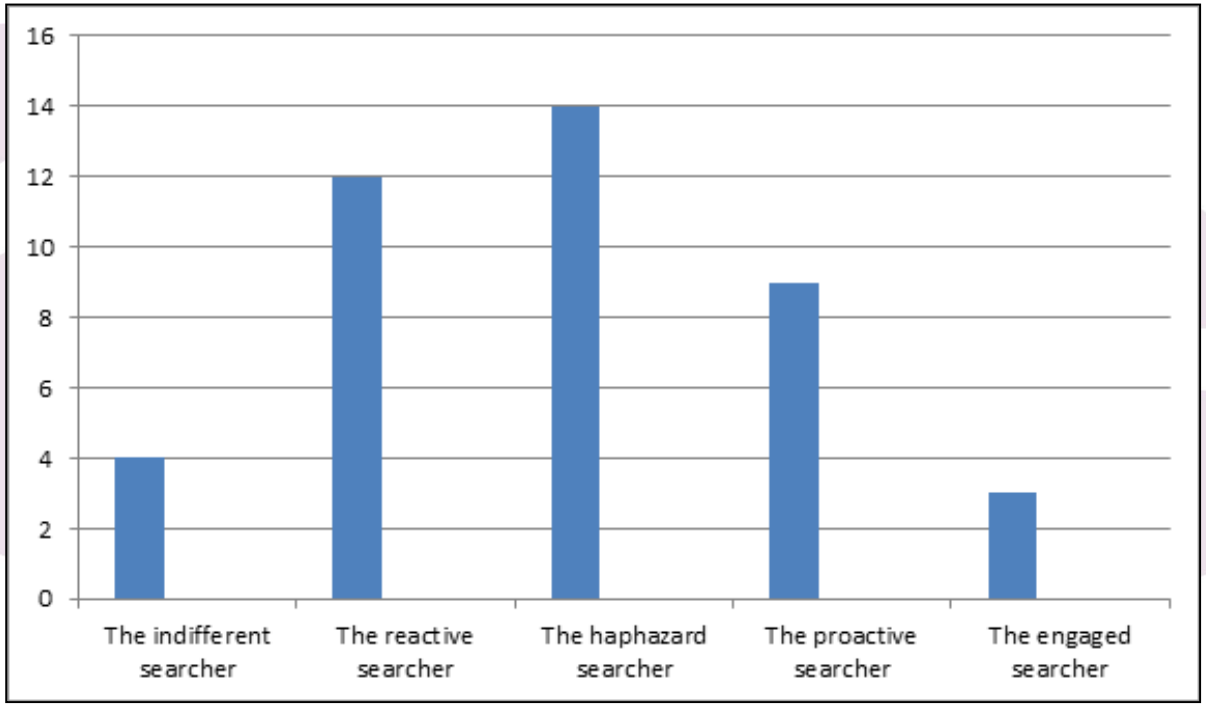
Participants' Self-Perceptions of Their Ability to Recognise and Evaluate Questionable Political 'Facts'



Emerging Typology of Information Searchers in a Political Context



#alternativefacts? : Methodology

- **Online survey, 3 April to 8 June 2017 (538 responses)**
- **23 electronically-assisted interviews with citizens in Westhill, Aberdeenshire, conducted in April 2017**

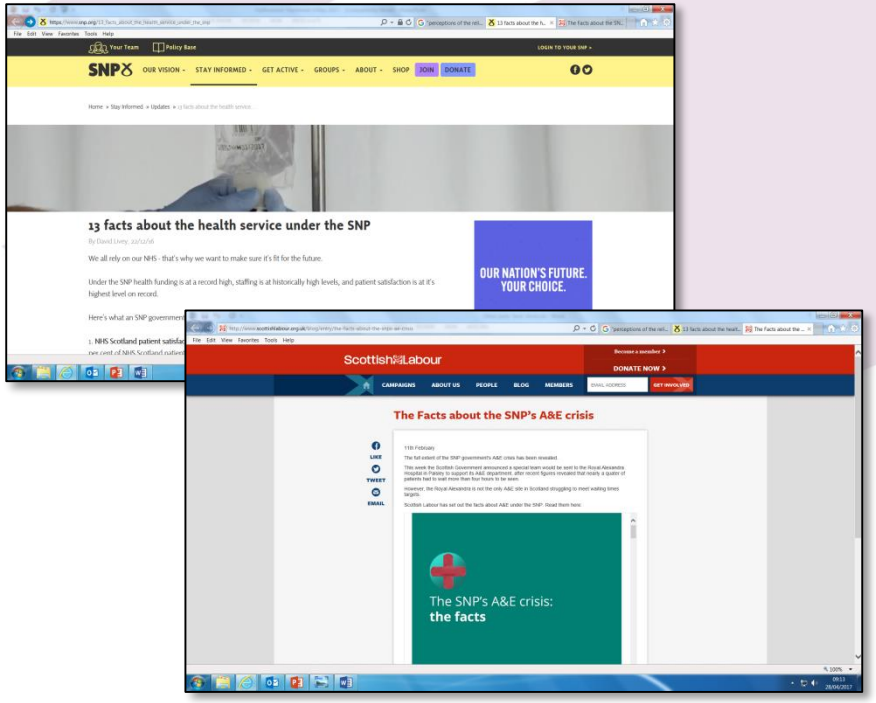


Image: Aberdeenshire Council

Image: Urban Realm

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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 (*n* = 537)

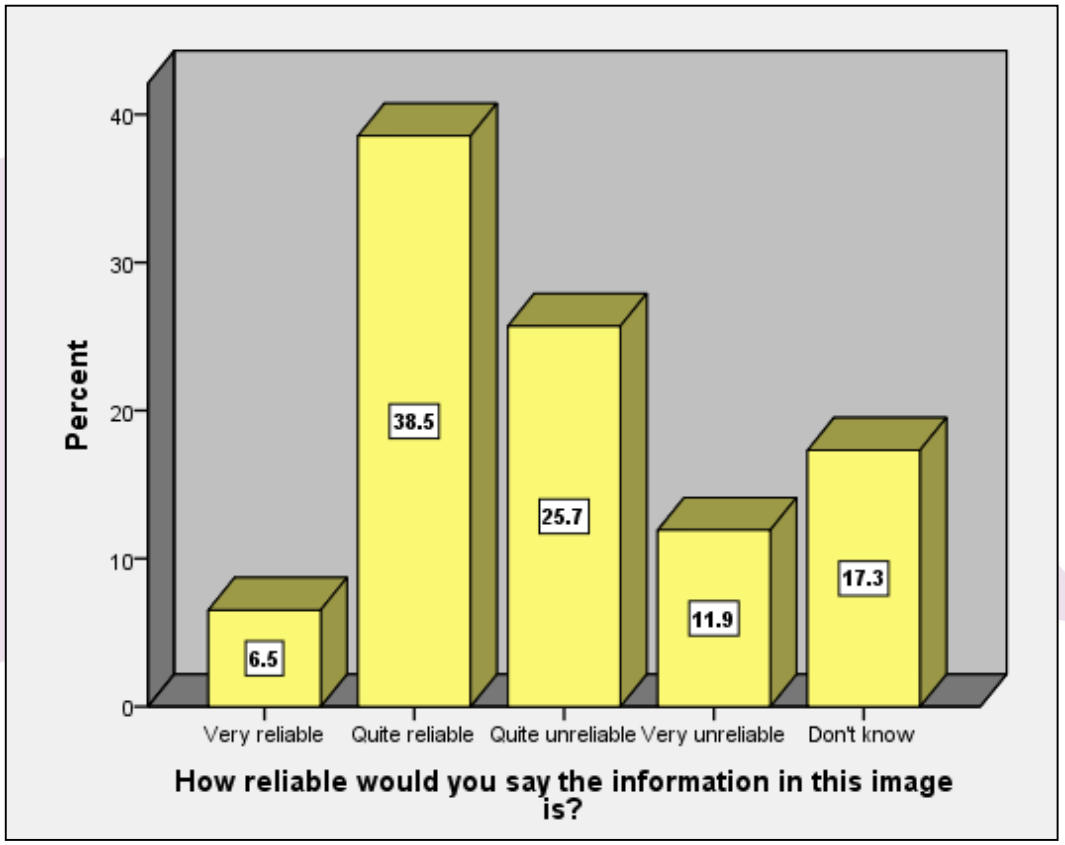

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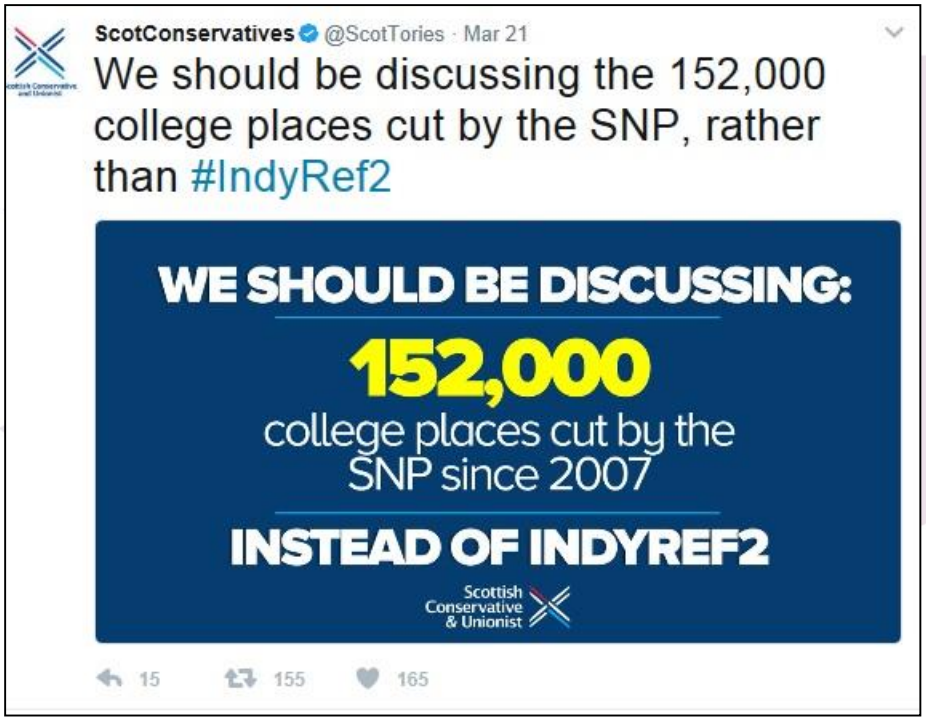
Image 2: Scottish Conservatives (*n* = 482)



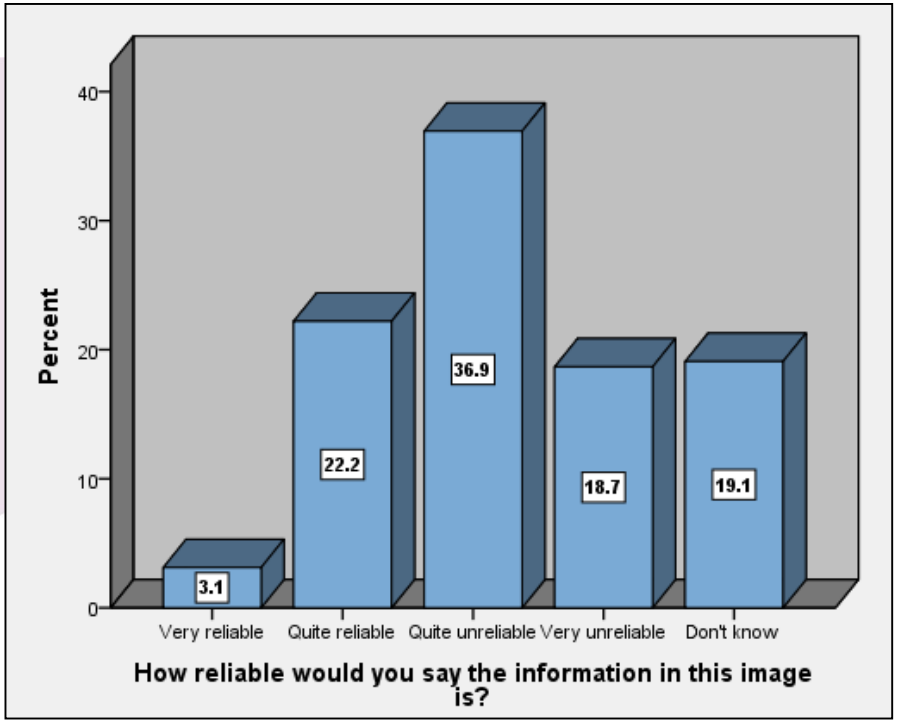


Image 3: Scottish Labour (*n* = 454)

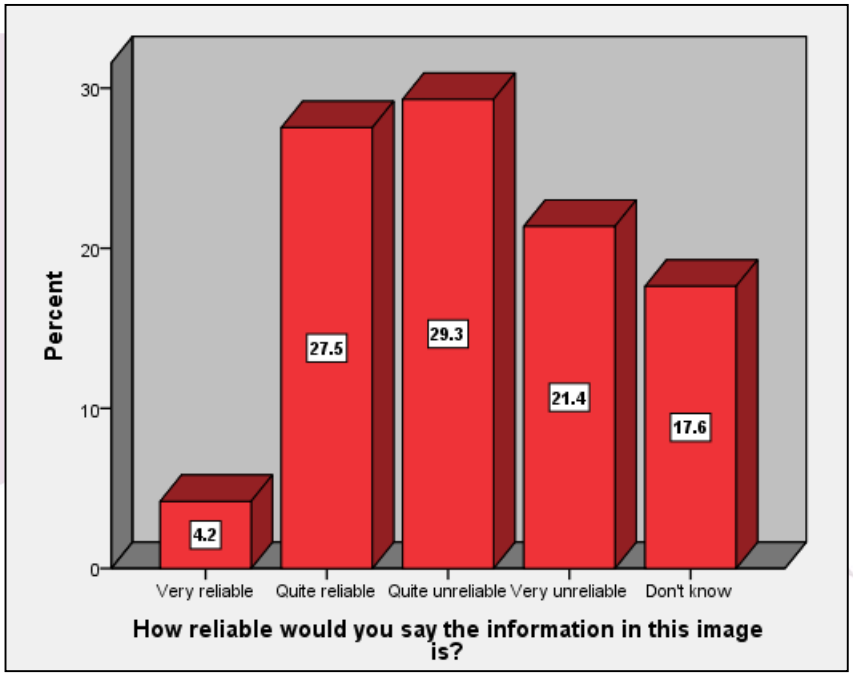


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Image 4: Scottish Greens (*n* = 434)

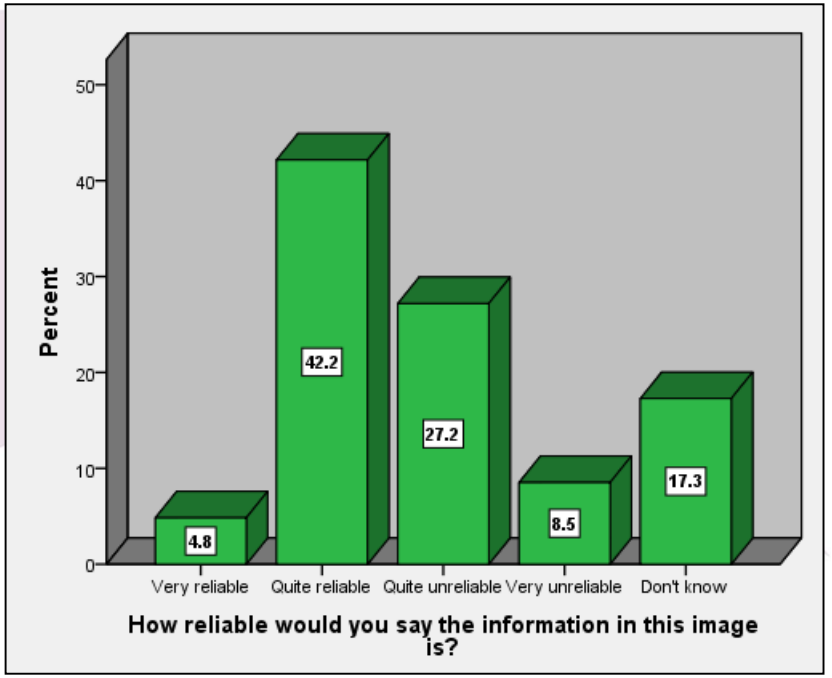
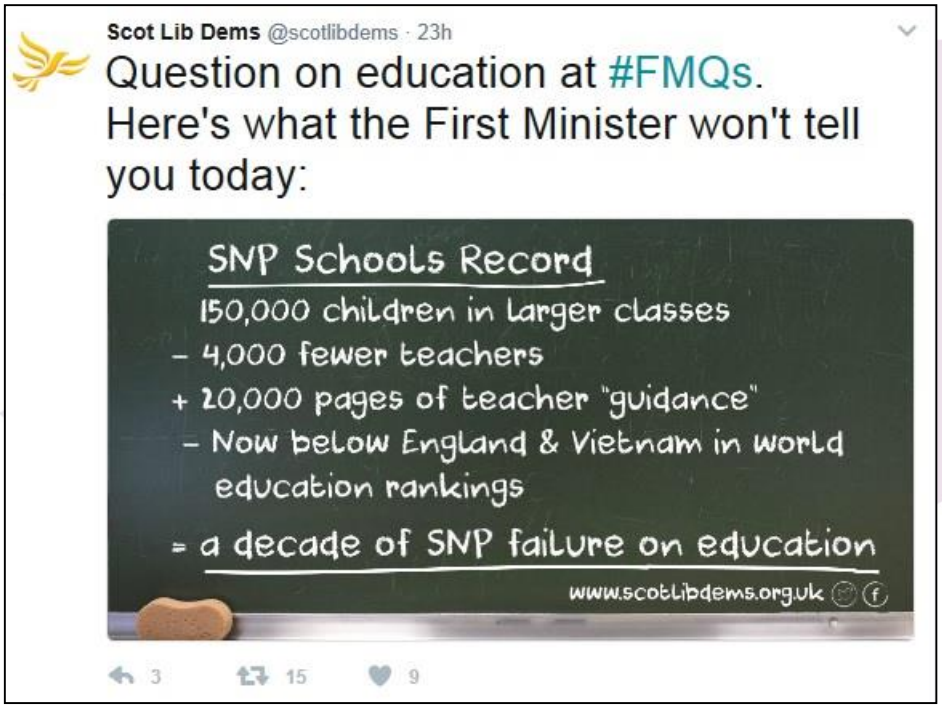
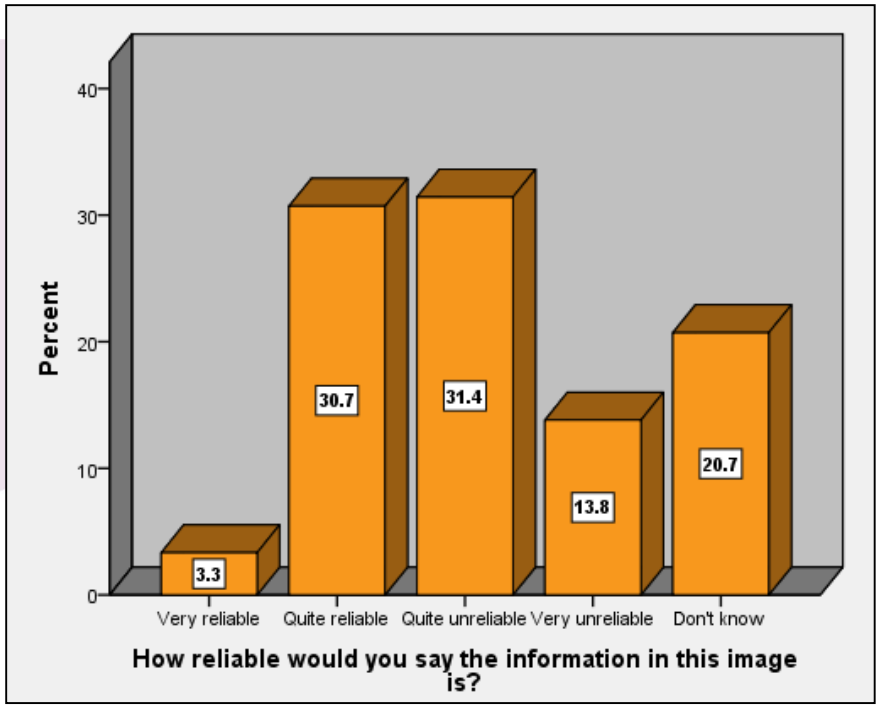
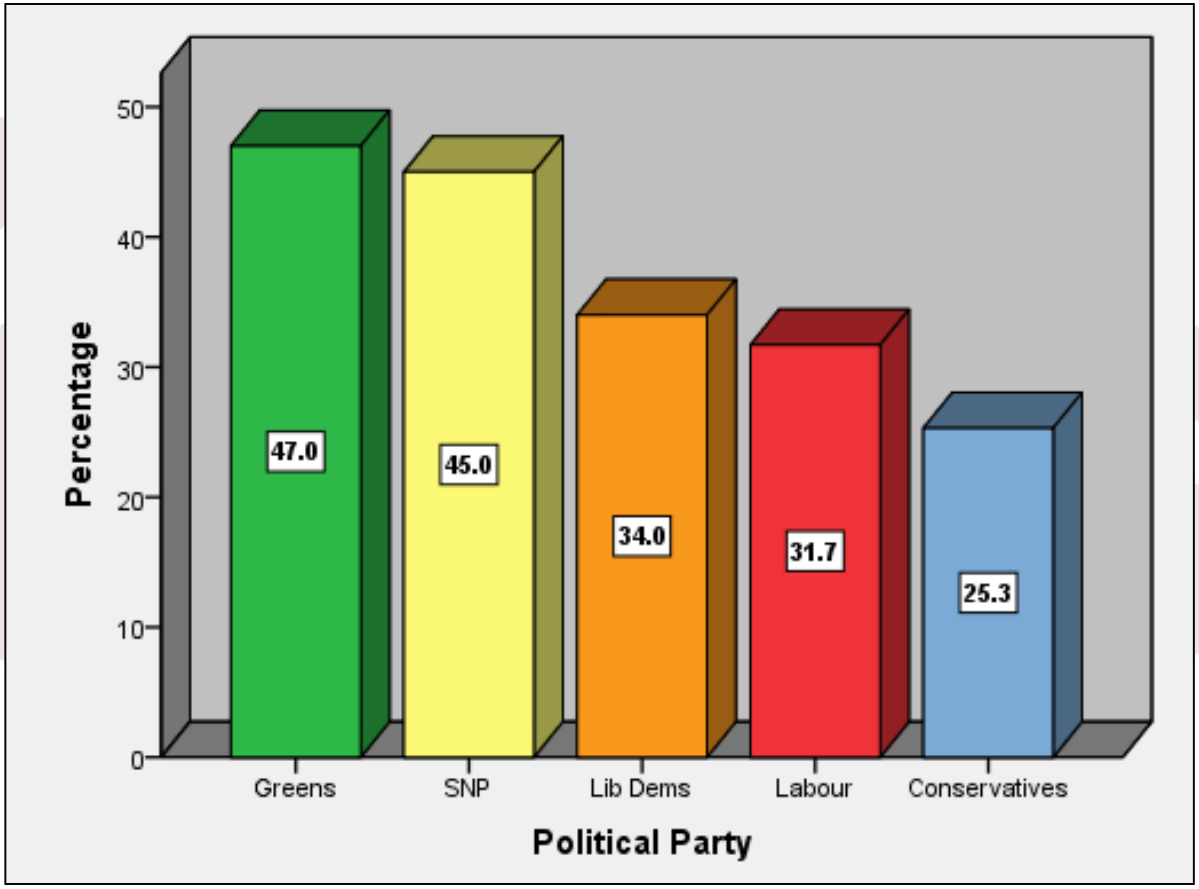


Image 5: Scottish Liberal Democrats (*n* = 420)

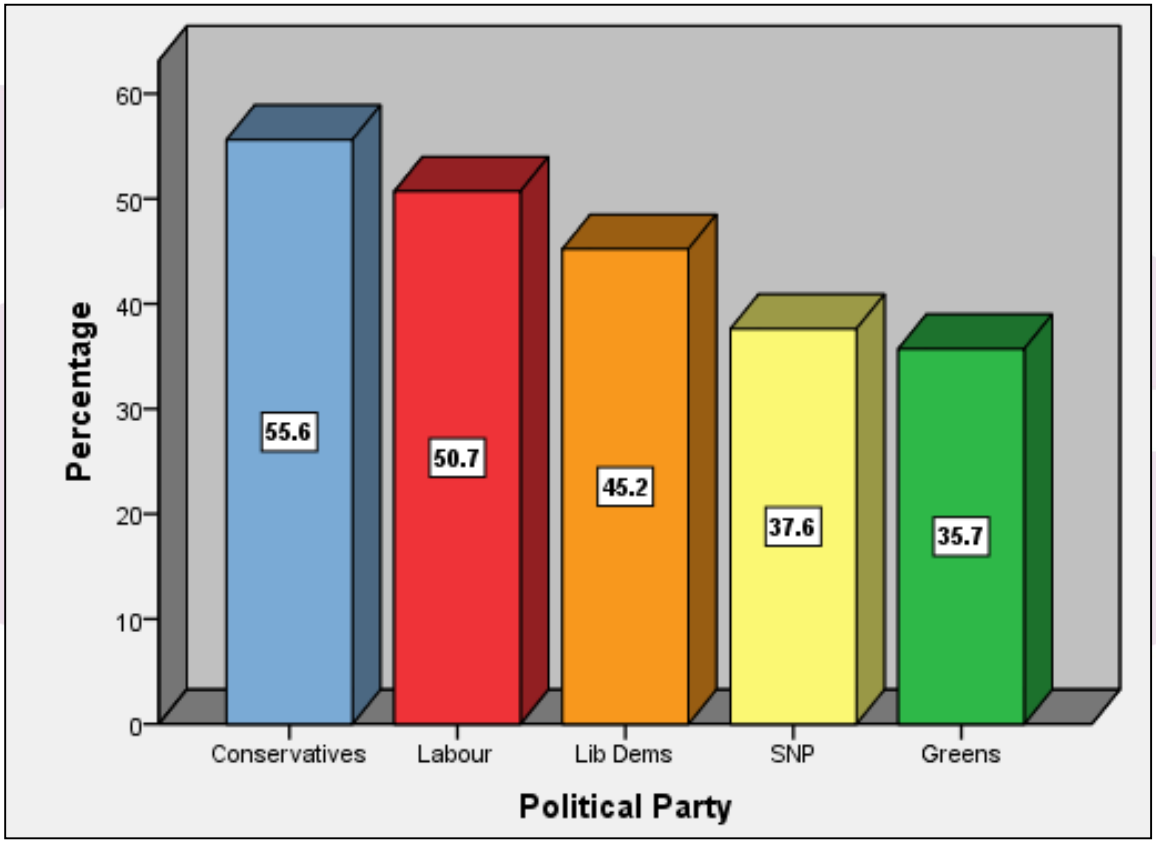




Cross-Party Summary:
% Describing Image as 'Very' or 'Quite' Reliable



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



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'

- **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**

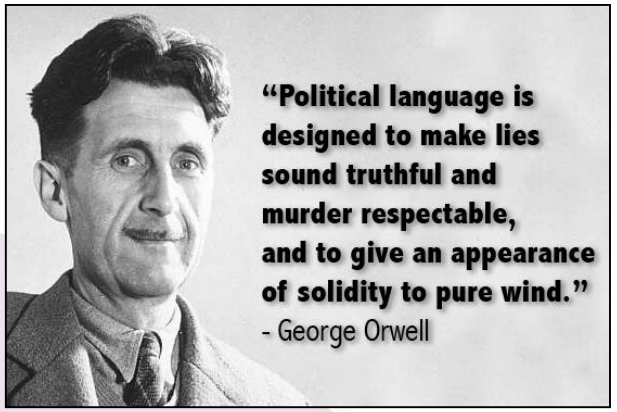
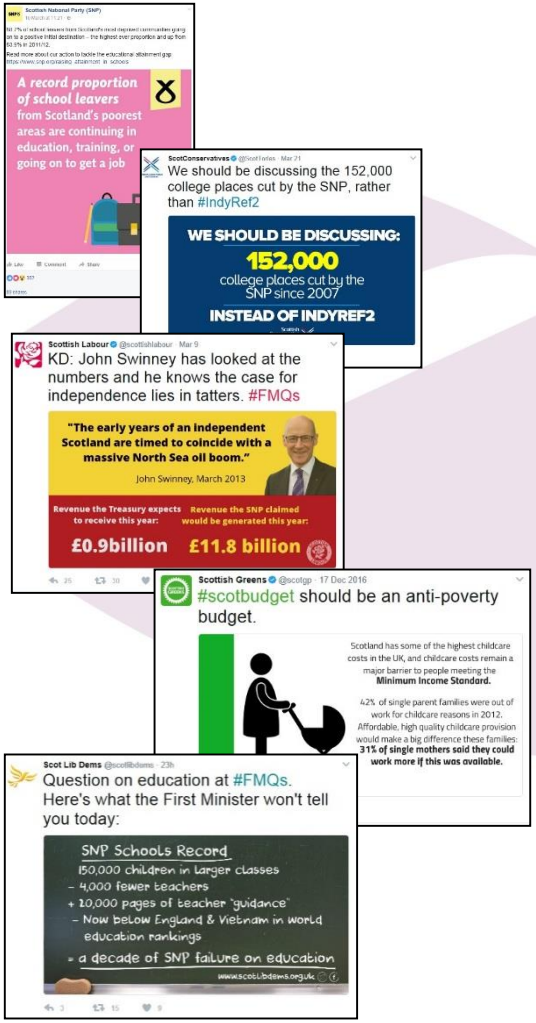


Image: reddit.com

Likely Sources of Information to Verify or Debunk 'Facts'

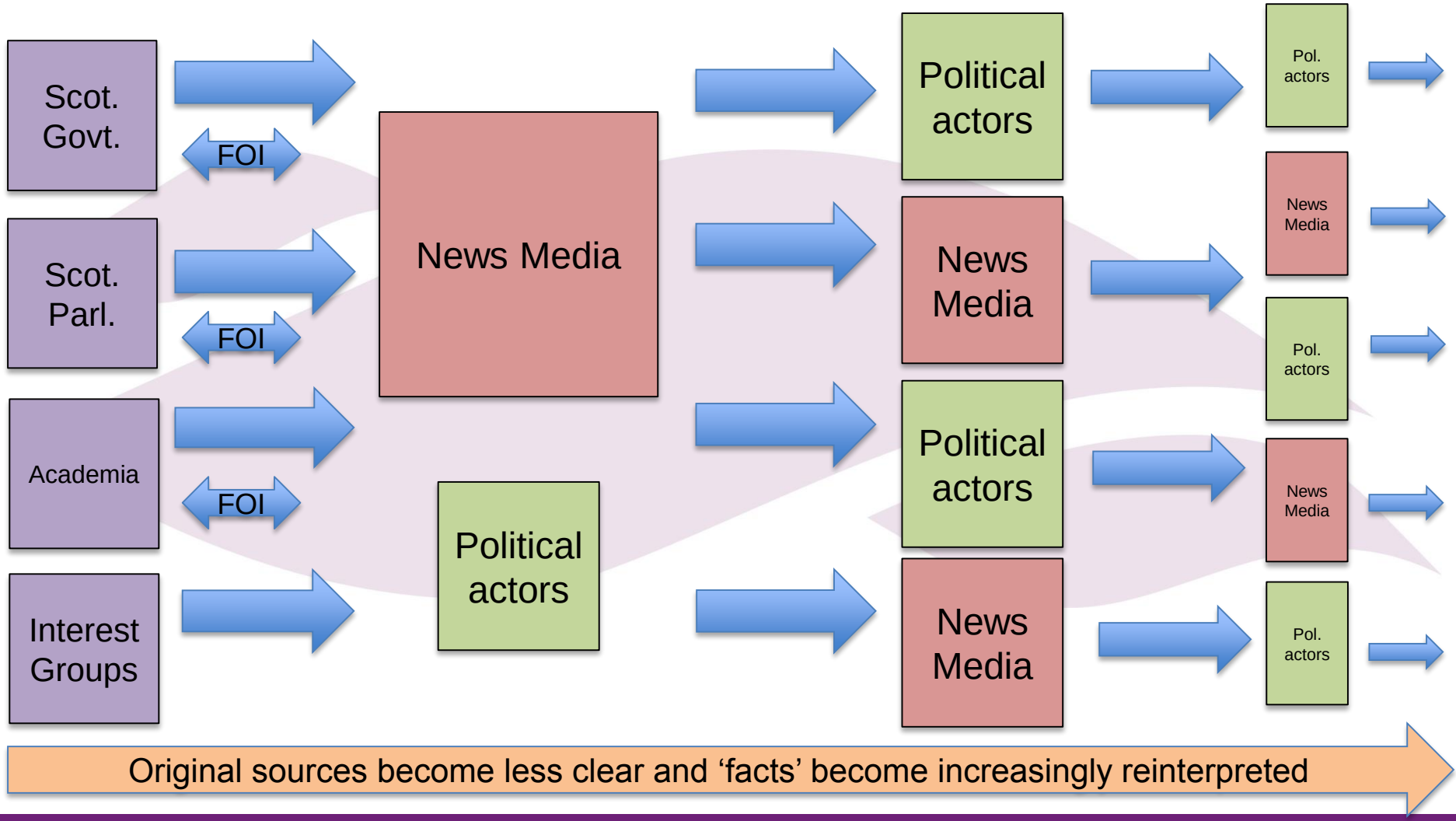
- UK or Scottish Government websites
- Websites of government agencies, e.g. Office for National Statistics
- Universities or think tanks
- Third sector organisations and interest groups
- Newspaper and news media websites, e.g. BBC, ITN, Herald, Scotsman
- Use Freedom of Information legislation
- But,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

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.*

Mapping the Journey of a Political 'Fact'



Thank you...

Image: NBC News