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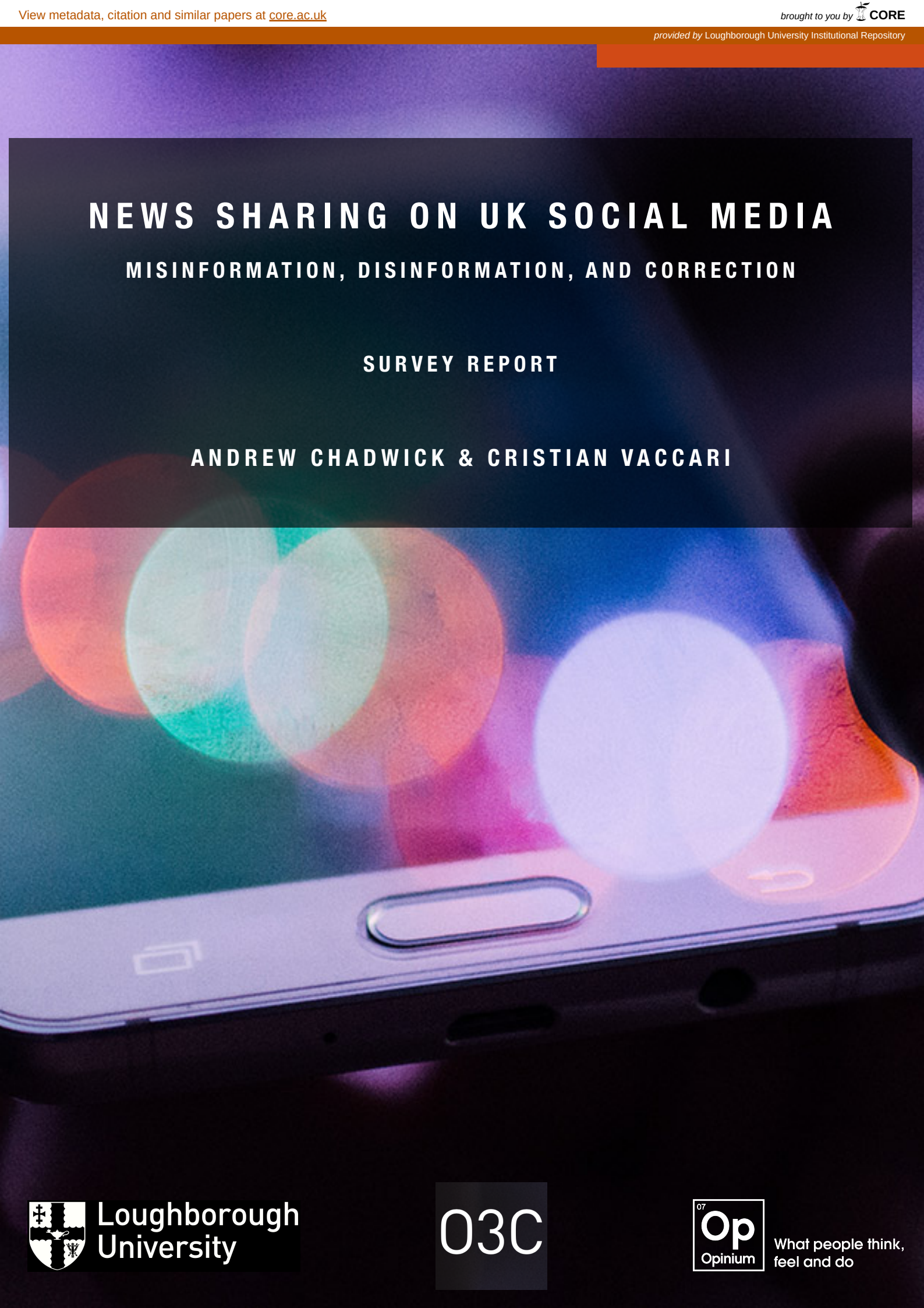
NEWS SHARING ON UK SOCIAL MEDIA

MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, AND CORRECTION

SURVEY REPORT

ANDREW CHADWICK & CRISTIAN VACCARI



Loughborough University

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07 Op Opinium

What people think, feel and do

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About this Report

In today's media systems, large numbers of ordinary citizens circulate political information with great regularity. As a consequence, false and misleading information, whether it originates with elites or non-elites, can become widely distributed—and quickly. Now, people may be more likely to encounter false and misleading information on a daily basis. So if we really want to get to the root of the problem of so-called "fake news" we need to better understand why so many people will readily share false and misleading information online.

Exploring why, and with what effects, people share news about politics on social media is therefore an essential part of the broader debate about the relationship between the internet and democracy. The healthy functioning of liberal democracies relies upon citizens whose role is to learn about the social and political world, exchange information and opinions with fellow citizens, arrive at considered judgments about public affairs, and put these judgments into action as political behaviour.

The problem is that we currently know very little about the motivations that drive people to share political news on social media and how these might be contributing to changes in our online civic culture. If we can learn more about the things people try to achieve when they share news online—and the extent to which these motivations might reinforce or undermine the distribution of false or misleading information—liberal democracies can start to think about how they can reduce important online harms.

This report is the first to address these issues in Britain on the basis of a survey of the news sharing habits on social media of a representative sample of the British public.

Summary of Key Findings

- More than half of British social media users (57.7 percent) came across news in the past month on social media that they thought was not fully accurate.
- 42.8 percent of news sharers admit to sharing inaccurate or false news; 17.3 percent admit to sharing news they thought was made up when they shared it. These users are more likely to be male, younger, and more interested in politics.
- A substantial amount of the sharing on social media of inaccurate or made up news goes unchallenged. Fewer social media users (33.8 percent) report being corrected by other social media users than admit to sharing false or exaggerated news (42.8 percent). And 26.4 percent of those who shared inaccurate or made up news were not corrected. There are some grounds for optimism if we see this particular glass as half full: after all, almost three quarters of respondents who shared news that was exaggerated or made up also reported being reprimanded by other social media users.
- However, the most problematic news sharing does not stimulate many social media users to correct the sharers: in total, only 8.5 percent of British social media users said that they reprimanded another social media user for sharing news that was made up.
- Those who share news on social media are mainly motivated to inform others and express their feelings, but more civically-ambivalent motivations also play an important role. For example, almost a fifth of news sharers (18.7 percent) see upsetting others as an important motivation when they share news.
- There are some partisan differences in sharing inaccurate or made up news on UK social media. Conservative supporters, and those with right-wing ideological beliefs, are more likely to share inaccurate news; they are also more likely to be reprimanded by others for doing so. Labour supporters, and those who hold left-wing ideological beliefs, are more likely to see inaccurate news and to correct other social media users for sharing it.
- About one-third (31 percent) of British social media users share news on social media at least once a month. The demographic and behavioural profile of these users resembles that of the most politically active members of the general public—they are more likely to be male, have higher educational attainment, and be more interested in politics—although younger people are more likely than older people to share news.

1. Introduction

We are now in the midst of an important public debate about the extent to which social media platforms are contributing to the spread of false and misleading information.[1] Many commentators have argued that social media are playing a role in the development of a new political culture animated by a wilful disregard for the truth. In the long term, if left unchecked, these developments will make it more difficult for societies to operate on the basis of important liberal democratic principles: authenticity, rationality, tolerance, trust, and the recognition and institutional integration of political differences.

We see this as a debate about online civic culture.[2] Online civic culture refers to the cultural expectations, norms of behaviour, and social, economic, and technological incentive structures that shape how people behave online. Changes over time in these expectations, norms, and incentive structures mean that online civic culture is constantly evolving. But importantly, there will occasionally be key transition periods, during which there are decisive breaks with the past and when changes in online civic culture become embedded in ways that reconfigure aspects of liberal democracy. The online civic cultures of liberal democracies around the world are arguably going through such a transition. One challenge for social science is how to develop independent, evidence-based analysis of this shift's most significant features and likely long-term consequences, while avoiding hurried calls for government action on the basis of patchy or inapposite evidence.

2. Threats to Online Civic Culture

Liberal democracies now feature political communication environments in which people are much freer to engage in three interconnected types of action that are reshaping online civic culture in negative ways.

The first of these is action deliberately designed to spread false or misleading information in ways that promote ignorance, misunderstanding, conflict, division, and intolerance.

The second is action that, for various reasons, results in the inadvertent spread of false or misleading information.

The third—and in our view the most damaging—is action that aims to foster cynicism and detachment by undermining trust in the very possibility that citizens can come together, agree on basic definitions of truth and falsehood, engage in meaningful discussion, and solve important social and political problems.

3. Sharing News on Social Media: Why It Matters for Online Civic Culture

In contrast with the broadcast media era, large numbers of ordinary citizens now circulate political news, and with great regularity. As a consequence, false and misleading information, whether it originates with political elites or non-elites, can become widely distributed—and quickly. Now that so many receive their news from interactions on social media, people are more likely to encounter false and misleading information on a daily basis. If we really want to get to the root of the problem of so-called "fake news" we need to better understand why so many people will readily share false and misleading information online.

The forces underlying the recent shifts in our political communication environment are complex and manifold.[3] But a salient theme in current debates is well-known to researchers of

online communication, even if they have sometimes disagreed about the overall implications. It is that many of the constraints that typically shape face-to-face communication apply only weakly in online settings. In social media interactions, anonymity or pseudonymity are widespread, or people use their real identities but have weak or no social ties with many of those with whom they discuss politics. As a result, when interacting on social media, people are generally more likely to question authority, disclose more information, and worry less about facing reprisals for their behaviour. The fact that many social media users feel less bounded by authority structures and reprisals does not necessarily lead to democratically undesirable interactions. Social media environments encourage the expression of legitimate but underrepresented views and the airing of grievances that are not addressed by existing communicative structures. However, social media may afford a political communication environment in which it is easier than ever to circulate ideas, and signal behavioural norms, that may, depending on the specific context, undermine the relational bonds required for tolerance and trust.[4]

Exploring how, why, and with what effects people share news on social media is therefore an essential part of the broader debate about the internet and democracy. The healthy functioning of liberal democracies relies upon citizens whose role is to learn about the social and political world, exchange information and opinions with others, arrive at considered judgments about public affairs, and put these judgments into action as political behaviour.

In the UK context, where the non-public service media are divided on partisan lines, purely fabricated news is just one part of a spectrum of information that is problematic for the maintenance of liberal democratic norms. Information that is exaggerated, sensationalized, selective, or assembled from a web of partial truths, compiled from reputable and less reputable sources, has long been a key force in British public life and this kind of information is alive and well in today's media system. All of this means that false and misleading information is often introduced by political and media actors of various kinds, for a variety of strategic reasons, before being shared across social media and private messaging by a wide range of individuals and organizations.[5]

News sharing on social media is implicated in all three of the threats that are negatively reshaping online civic culture. Those who seek to promote intolerance and misunderstanding share narratives and examples from news reports to try to sow division among different social and cultural groups. They invoke the authoritative status of journalism to deflect attention from the problematic nature of the content they share; others, who may share false or misleading information without realising it, may be convinced by these signals of authority. And those who seek to undermine trust in the very possibility that citizens can engage in meaningful discussion about politics will try to spread information designed to distract and confuse, to chip away at the minimal shared understandings required for political discussion.

3.1 People, Motivations, and Behaviour

The field of online misinformation studies is blossoming, but most of the research to date has not focused on the attitudes and behaviour of social media users. There is valuable research on the role of automation in deliberate disinformation and on changes in the news and journalism industry.[6] But there is also a need to understand people—their motivations, and their behaviour.

One problem is that we still know very little about the motivations that drive people to share news on social media, and still less about how these motivations are contributing to changes in online civic culture. If we can learn more about the things people try to achieve when they share news, and the extent to which these motivations might reinforce or undermine the distribution of false or misleading information, we can start to think about how we might reduce these important online harms.

Social media platforms are fundamentally interactive, networked environments, where

millions of users with diverse interests and goals participate on a daily basis, so the range of possible motivations for sharing is very broad. Motivations that obviously link news sharing to the performance of citizenship, such as informing others or finding out other people's opinions, have long been seen as important in online life. More recently, however, we have begun to learn more about motivations, such as trolling and deliberate attempts to deceive, that have become important for online civic culture but which have more ambivalent relationships with liberal democratic citizenship. We have also begun to learn more about the challenges of content moderation by social media platforms and the often surprising behaviour of people when they go online.[7]

This report is the first to address these issues in Britain on the basis of a survey of the news sharing habits on social media of a representative sample of the British public.

There are three key questions guiding our study.

3.2 Key Questions

- How widespread is the sharing of false and misleading political news among British social media users?
- To what extent is there a persistent and damaging "anything goes" culture among those who share political news on social media?
- To what extent does the correction of false and misleading news through the "wisdom of crowds"—a previously much-lauded feature of the internet—actually operate on British social media?

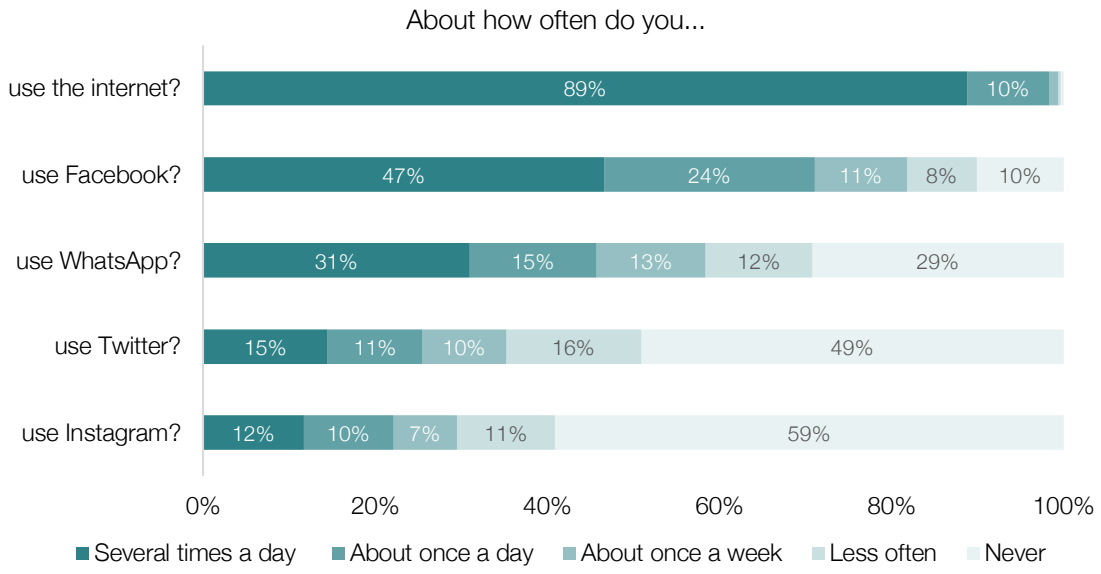
To answer these questions, we designed a survey and asked Opinium Research to administer it to an online sample representative of the UK adult population, based on key demographic variables such as age, gender, and region of residence. 2,005 respondents completed the questionnaire between July 5–16, 2018.[8]

4. Who Shares Political News and How Regularly?

In this study, we were interested in people's experiences of sharing news about politics on social media. So we began by applying a screening question to filter out the respondents who had never used at least one of the four most prominent social media platforms in Britain: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Those who remained after applying this filter we call *British social media users*. Our analysis in this report either focuses on these members of the British public or on the sub-group of *social media users who share news on social media*.

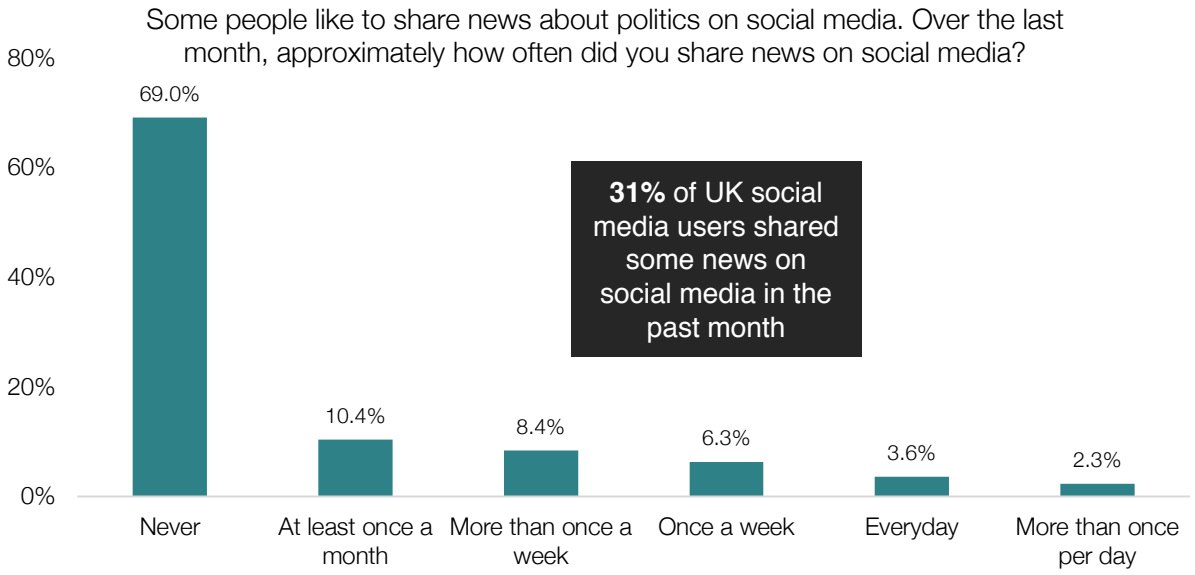
As Figure 1 shows, of the four platforms, Facebook and WhatsApp are currently by far the most popular, followed by Twitter and Instagram. Almost 90 percent of our respondents used Facebook, with 46.6 percent saying they used it several times a day; 70.8 percent used WhatsApp, with 31 percent saying they used it several times a day.

Figure 1. Frequency of Internet and Social Media Use (N=2,005)



Our first aim was to identify the extent to which British social media users share news about politics on social media. As Figure 2 shows, about a third (31 percent) of British social media users share news at least once a month or more frequently. A substantial minority—20.6 percent—share news at least once a week or more. Clearly, sharing news about politics has become a popular activity among British social media users—perhaps surprisingly so, given the wide range of activities possible on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

Figure 2. News Sharing on Social Media (N=1,903)

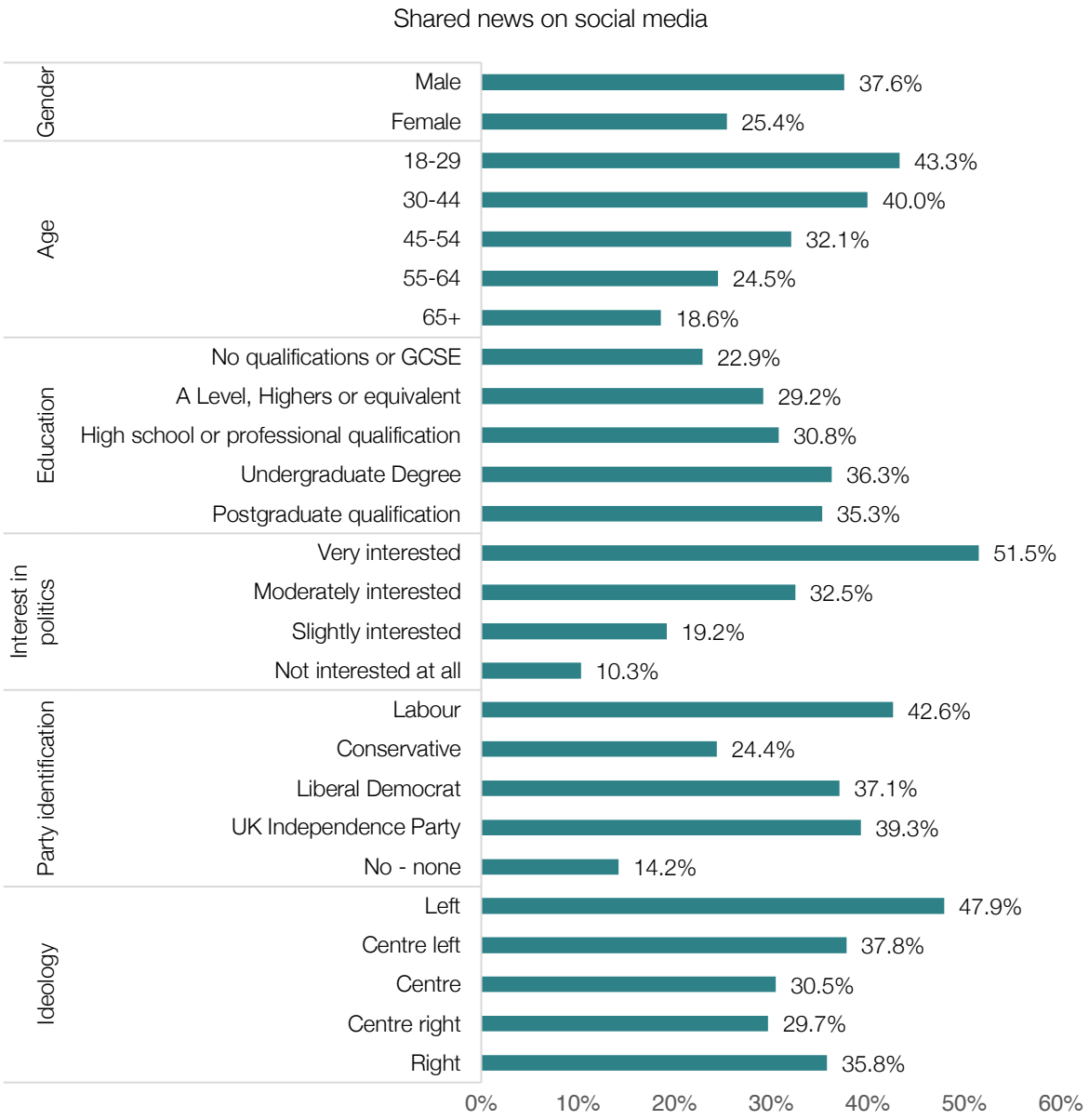


What kinds of people tend to share political news on social media?[9] As Figure 3 shows, males share news more than females, and by a fairly large margin: while 37.6 percent of the male respondents shared news on social media at least once a month, this figure drops to 25.4

percent among females.

There is also a fairly clear age divide. Younger individuals—defined here as those under the age of 45—share news more than the over-45s. Those with higher educational attainment also generally tend to share more news.

Figure 3. Social and Political Characteristics of News Sharers on Social Media (N=1,903)



Perhaps unsurprisingly, people with higher levels of interest in politics share news about politics on social media, but there are also some interesting party and ideological divides. Labour, UKIP, and Liberal Democrat supporters are more likely to share news on social media than Conservative supporters. Those who described themselves as either on the ideological left or the ideological right share news more than those at the centre, and overall, those who placed themselves to the left and centre-left are more likely to share news than those placing themselves to the right and centre-right. We will return to the significance of these party and ideological differences later in the report, when we examine how partisan affiliation and ideology shape people's sharing of false and inaccurate news.

Overall, when assessed in light of these basic demographic and political characteristics, political news sharers bear a strong resemblance to those who tend to be more politically active in British society more generally. Social media news sharers tend to have higher educational attainment, be more interested in politics, and are more likely to identify with a political party than an average member of the public. These are all characteristics that we know from studies of political participation, such as the British Election Survey, are associated with higher levels of political involvement, such as party membership, campaign volunteering, and voting.[10]

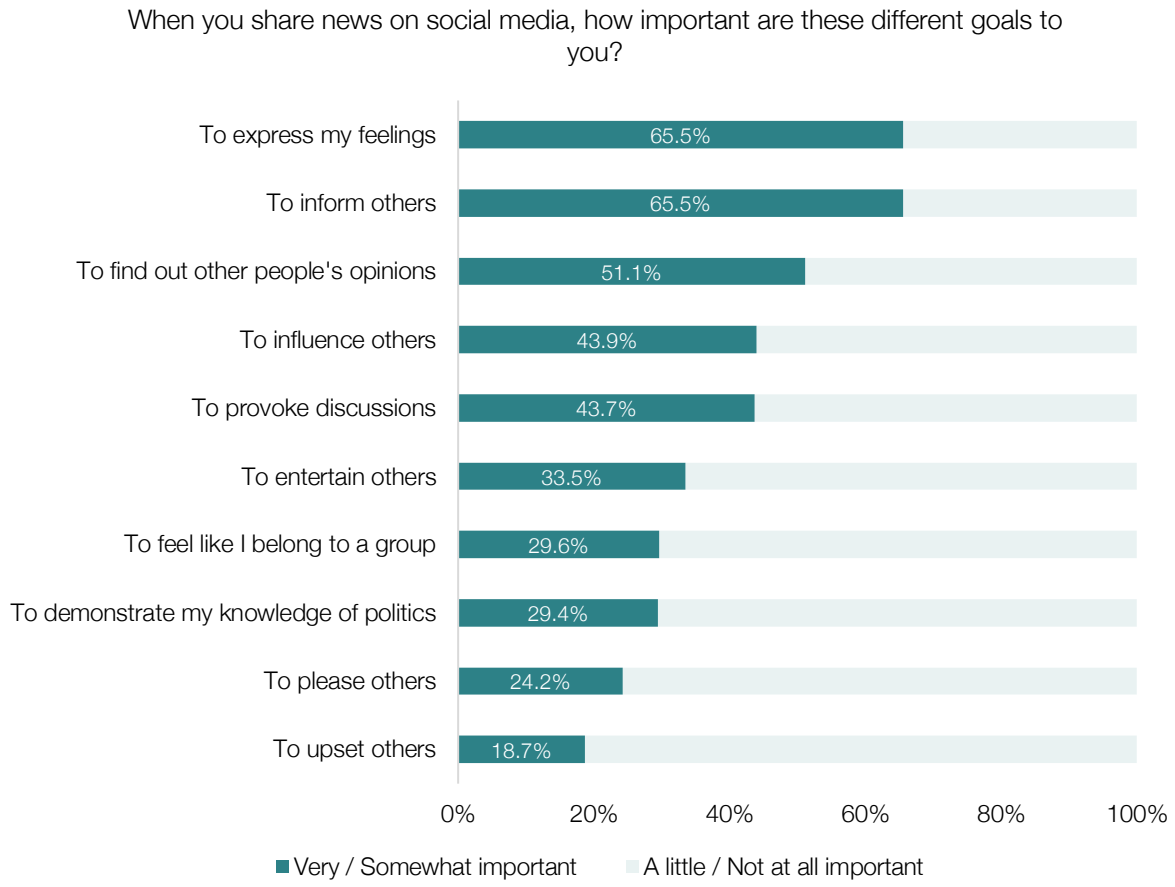
It is, however, important to note that, as a group, social media news sharers differ in one respect from those among the general population who are politically active: social media news sharers tend, on average, to be younger, rather than middle-aged or older.

5. What Motivates People to Share Political News on Social Media?

Since we are interested in how patterns of sharing news on social media might be embedding particular norms online, it is important to consider what motivates British social media users to share news about politics. Why do people share news and what do they aim to achieve when they share it?

To find out, we asked those respondents who share news on social media at least once a month "When you share news on social media, how important are these different goals to you?". Figure 4 shows the results.

Figure 4. Importance of Different Motivations for Sharing News on Social Media (N=589)



The most important motivations for sharing were to express feelings and to inform others. In each case, 65.5 percent of social media users who share news considered these goals to be very important and somewhat important. Next in importance were the motivations to find out other people's opinions (51.1 percent), to influence others (43.9 percent), and to provoke discussions (43.7 percent). It is clear that many see sharing news as a form of self-expression but also as a purposive behaviour—a means of stimulating a response or gaining influence over other people. These influence-related motivations are particularly important in light of what we show later in the report about the extent to which news sharers share news that is false or misleading.

As we go down the hierarchy of motivations in Figure 4, we can identify responses that are more civically ambivalent.

About one-third (33.5 percent) of British social media users who share news say that they do so to entertain others. The informal or playful nature of social media interaction is arguably what appeals to many people who normally do not engage with mainstream channels of political communication. However, those who share news to entertain others may also be less careful about the truthfulness of what they share. And those who maliciously share news they know to be false may use irony as a rhetorical device to encourage their audiences to lower their guards as they assess the quality of the content they share.[11]

Almost one-third (29.6 percent) of British news sharers on social media share news to feel like they belong to a group. There are, of course, positive democratic benefits of group belonging, particularly for building the social solidarity that is essential for collective political action.[12] Sharing news that sustains a sense of collective agency is an important democratic good. At the same time, however, the positive aspects of this behaviour always exist in tension with some negative aspects. A concern in current public debate is the role played by social media platforms' algorithmically-generated "feeds" in social, cultural, and political polarisation. Feeds have become the central organising experience of most people's online activity. The dominant business model of social media platform companies has been based on selling individuals' attention to advertisers. To this end, companies strive to design user experiences that are sufficiently attractive to keep people interacting and sharing information. In practice, this has meant that the software algorithms that shape users' feeds often (though not always) tend to reinforce what network scientists call homophily: humans' long-observed bias toward forming bonds with those who are similar to themselves. Those who share news to increase their sense of group belonging are perhaps less likely to see the social media environment as an opportunity to learn from others and bridge political divisions. They are more likely to see their news sharing as a way to advance their own group's identity and are less likely to be interested in engaging with those they consider to be outsiders.[13]

A surprisingly large number of British news sharers on social media—18.7 percent—consider it important to upset others when they share news. This finding speaks to recent concerns about how, for some, social media may have contributed to the "coarsening and toxifying of our public debate" and made it more acceptable to engage in public discourse that is based on intimidation.[14] While only a minority shares news to antagonize others, it is, at almost a fifth of news sharers, a sizeable minority.

As with the finding that sharing news is motivated by the desire to belong to a group, there is no straightforward relationship between emotional antagonism and online civic culture. Outrage is an inescapable part of politics. Upsetting others is often an effective means of grabbing people's attention in a cluttered information environment. And yet, emotions can be exclusionary and divisive.[15] However, it is the widespread nature of this particular motivation that is troubling. If almost one fifth of UK social media users who share news sees upsetting others as a distinct priority, a mutually-reinforcing relationship between social media and emotional antagonism may become embedded in online civic culture.

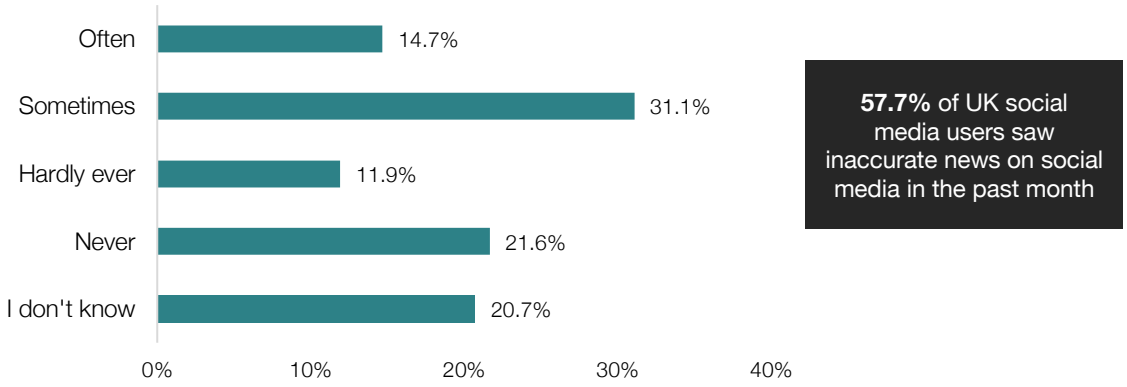
6. Problematic News Sharing

We have seen that a substantial number of British social media users who share news do so to achieve goals that are potentially problematic for online civic culture. But what can we say about how people perceive the quality of the news they share? To what extent do British social media users share news that is inaccurate, exaggerated, or false? And, to what extent do people who share inaccurate, exaggerated, or false news online experience criticism of their behaviour from others in their social media networks?

We start by identifying the overall extent to which problematic news is encountered by British social media users. See Figure 5.

Figure 5. Encountering Problematic News on Social Media (N=2,005)

Sometimes people might post articles on social media that are not fully accurate. In the past month, how often did you come across news on social media that you thought was not fully accurate?



Almost half (45.8 percent) of British social media users said that, in the last month, they had often or sometimes seen news on social media that they thought was not fully accurate. Also notable here is that a surprisingly large number of respondents (20.7 percent) said that they did not know if they had encountered news that was not accurate. In itself this might be a cause for concern because it reveals widespread uncertainty about the veracity of news on social media. When we exclude the group of individuals who did not know how to answer, well over half (57.7 percent) of British social media users reported that they saw inaccurate news on social media in the past month.

It is clear that encountering inaccurate news is a very common experience on British social media. But what about sharing inaccurate news?

6.1 Measuring Problematic News Sharing: Distinguishing Between Misinformation and Disinformation

Asking people if they share false or misleading news is fraught with difficulty. Many people are likely to under-report this kind of behaviour, in part due to social desirability bias—the understandable motivation to avoid answering a survey question in a way that makes you look like a "bad person." This is a particular problem with face-to-face surveys. With online surveys, social desirability bias still exists, but it has a weaker influence on people's responses.[16] When people respond to questions on a computer screen, they tend to be less concerned about how they come across than when they respond to questions from a person in the same room.

Further problems here are, first, there is seldom a clear distinction between "good quality"

news and "poor quality" news; second, people may only become aware that the news they shared was false or misleading after they shared it, and, third, the context in which people share false or misleading information is important.[17]

The closest thing to questions that are simple enough to use in a large-scale survey but nuanced enough to capture some of the range of people's experiences when they share problematic news on social media comes from the Pew Research Center's 2016 survey of news sharing.[18]

Following Pew, our survey asked:

> "Sometimes people might share news on social media that turns out not to be fully accurate or is exaggerated. In the past month, do you recall sharing a news story that ..."
>
> - Seemed accurate at the time, but you later found was made up
> - Was exaggerated, and you were not aware of this
> - Was exaggerated, and you were aware of this
> - You thought was made up when you shared it

Individuals could choose up to four responses, or no response if they did not recall sharing any problematic news. Respondents could choose more than one answer, so the percentages shown in Figure 6, below, total more than 100.

When a person shares news that was exaggerated but they were not aware that it was exaggerated, or when a person shares news that seemed accurate at the time but they later found it was made up, our reasoning is that this is the lesser problem: it does not imply a bad intention in the original moment and it indicates a person at least bothered to make themselves aware that a news article was misleading after sharing it. We term these behaviours *misinformation*, because they are unintentional behaviour that inadvertently misleads.

The other two potential responses capture the most problematic behaviours—sharing news that a person knew was exaggerated and sharing news that a person thought was made up when they shared it. Both of these are damaging for online civic culture, but the latter is particularly so, because it reveals a wilful attitude to misleading others. We term these behaviours *disinformation* because they are intentional behaviours that purposively mislead.[19]

When asking about sharing false information, there is no such thing as the perfect survey question. These questions have the advantage that they allow people to express a number of different options on a continuum of possible behaviours and they are much more preferable to a blunter question that simply asks people if they "shared 'fake news.'"

We asked this question only of respondents who said that they shared news on social media at least once in the previous month, so the figures we report on pages 15–18 only refer to British news sharers on social media.

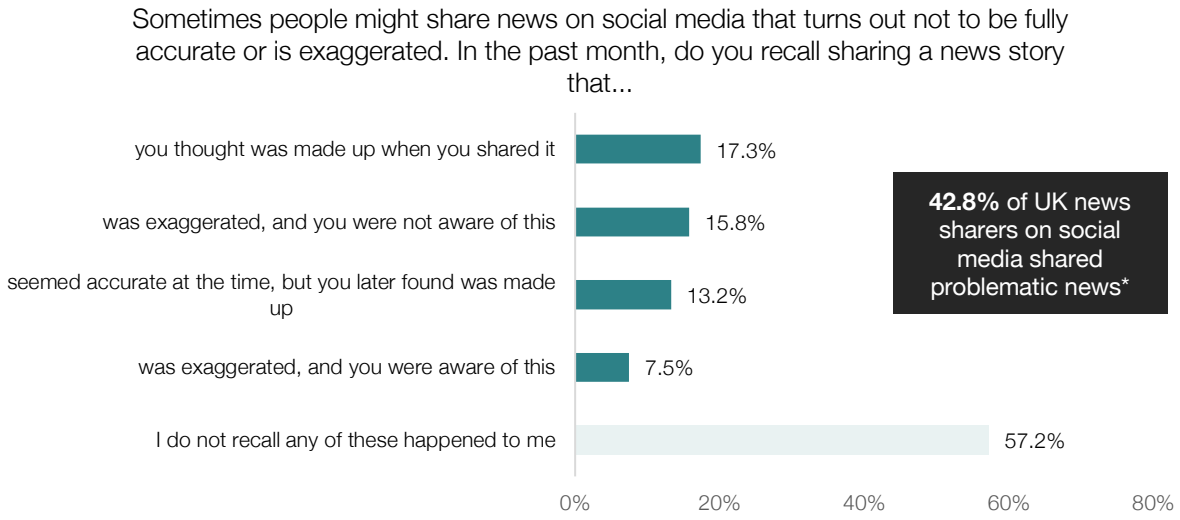
6.2 The Extent of Problematic News Sharing Among Sharers

As Figure 6 shows, 42.8 percent of news sharers on social media admitted at least one of the problematic news sharing activities we measured. Almost half of the British social media users who shared some news in the past month were willing to acknowledge that some of the news they shared was either false or exaggerated. This finding, in itself, speaks volumes about the current quality of public discourse on social media platforms.

If we drill down into the results, we can see some worrying findings. Fully 17.3 percent of those who share news on social media admitted to sharing news in the past month that they thought was made up when they shared it. This is the most problematic of the four news sharing behaviours we measured: it is knowingly engaging in disinformation and yet it was the most popular response to the question. This was contrary to our expectations. Before the survey, we reasoned that this question would receive the lowest response of the four options. We expected people to be more willing to select the responses that enabled them to express the ambiguity involved in sharing news about politics. To some extent, these shades of grey do exist, because relatively few (7.5 percent) stated that they knowingly shared news that was exaggerated, while a larger number of news sharers (15.8 percent) said they shared news that was exaggerated without being aware of it. But, overall, it should be a cause for concern that 17.3 percent of British news sharers on social media knowingly shared news that they thought was false.

Almost half (42.8 percent) of the British social media users who shared some news in the past month were willing to say that some of the news they shared was either false or exaggerated. This finding, in itself, speaks volumes about the quality of public discourse on British social media.

Figure 6. Problematic News Sharing on Social Media (N=589)



* The total is more than 100 percent because respondents could choose more than one answer from among options 1, 2, 3, and 4.

6.3 Who Engages in Problematic News Sharing?

What do we know about the demographic and political characteristics of those who tend to engage in problematic news sharing? On the next page, Figure 7a provides a social and political profile of British news sharers who engaged in disinformation—they admitted to sharing news that they knew was exaggerated or made up when they shared it. Figure 7b reports the same statistics for British news sharers whose actions resulted in misinformation—they shared news that either seemed accurate at the time but they later found was made up, or news that was exaggerated and they were not aware of this.

Figures 7a and 7b show that males are more likely than females to engage in disinformation when sharing news. Younger news sharers—those under the age of 45—are more likely to engage in both disinformation and misinformation than older groups. Those with higher levels of interest in politics appear to be more likely to engage in disinformation than those with lower levels of interest. Even though Conservative supporters are, on the whole, less likely to share news (as we showed above, in Figure 3), those Conservatives who do share

news are more likely than Labour supporters to admit to engaging in disinformation and misinformation when they share. Figures 7a and 7b also show that disinformation and misinformation are more common among those news sharers who identify with the right, the centre-right, and centre of the ideological spectrum, than among those who identify with the left or centre-left.

Figure 7a. Social and Political Characteristics of News Sharers on Social Media who Engaged in Intentional Disinformation When Sharing News (N=589)

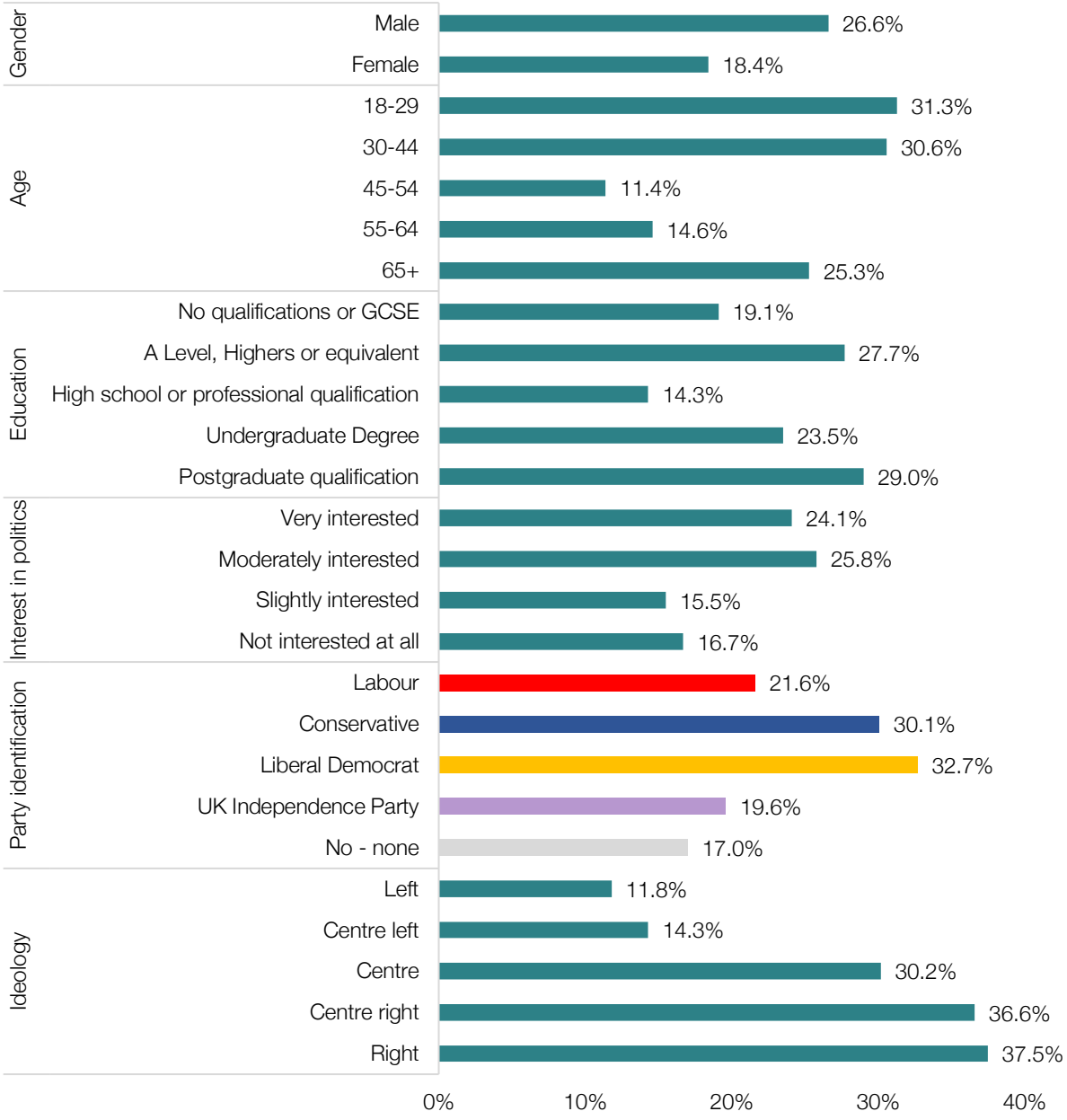
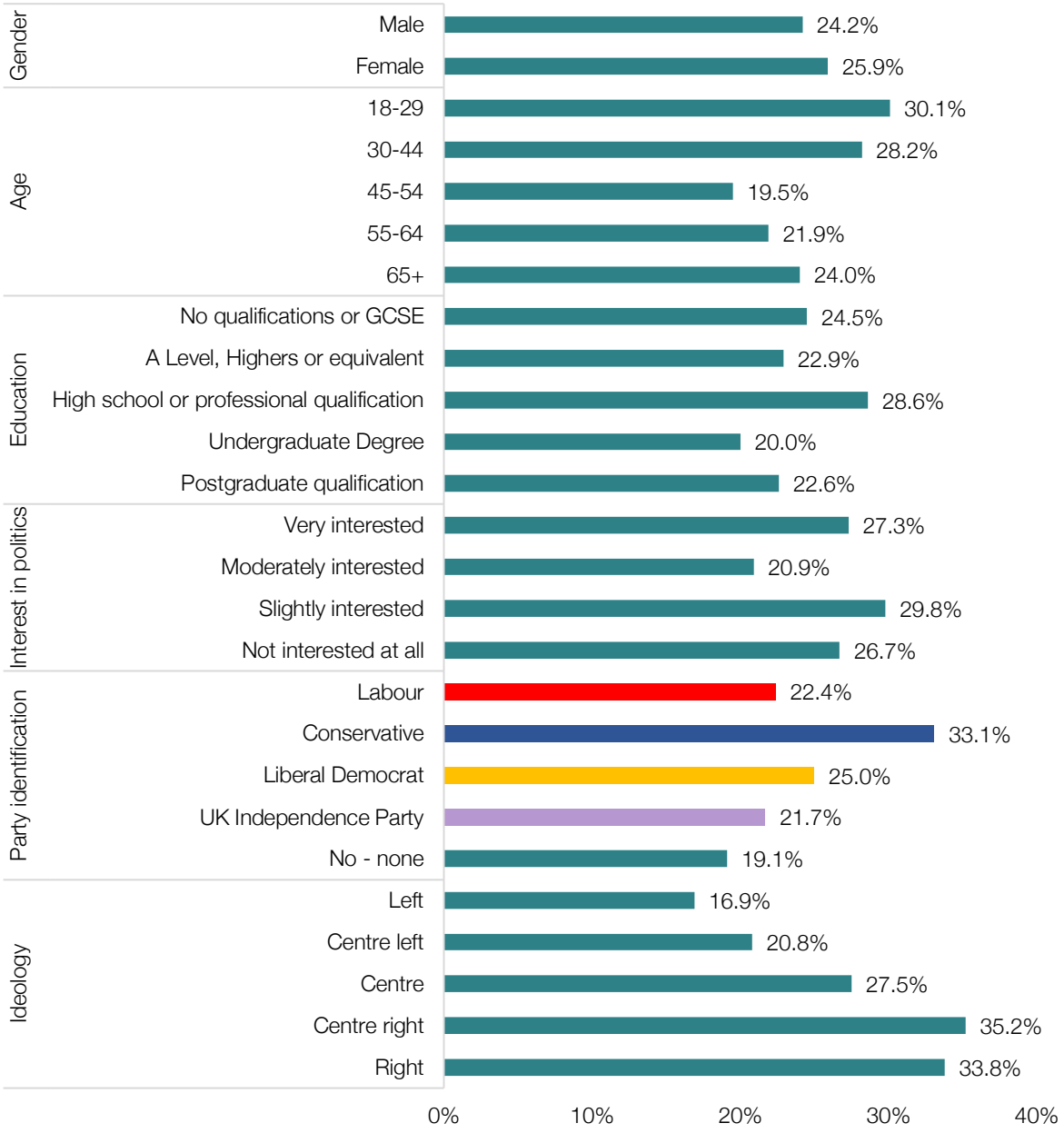


Figure 7b. Social and Political Characteristics of News Sharers on Social Media who Unintentionally Misinformed Others When Sharing News (N=589)



7. The Promise—and the Reality—of Online Correction

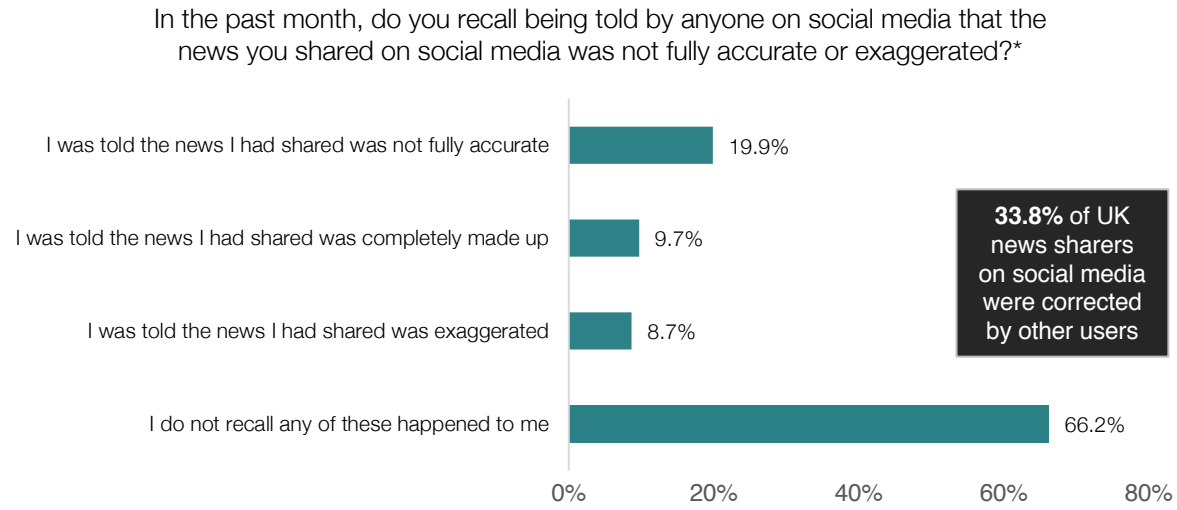
These findings might be of less concern if people who spread misinformation and disinformation when sharing news are being systematically criticised for doing so by others on social media. Evidence that people are being reprimanded would indicate that the so-called "self-correcting" nature of social media interactions is at work.[20] If sufficiently widespread, this may, over time, lead to the embedding of cultural norms that dissuade people from sharing news they know to be exaggerated or false—because they can expect social sanctions if they do. On the other hand, if corrections are not sufficiently widespread, it might indicate that there is an emerging cultural norm that "anything goes" when one shares news on social media.

Our survey revealed that corrective behaviour is not as common as we might expect. Figure 8 shows responses to our question:

> "In the past month, do you recall being told by anyone on social media that the news you shared on social media was not fully accurate or exaggerated?"
>
> - I was told the news I had shared was completely made up
> - I was told the news I had shared was not fully accurate
> - I was told the news I had shared was exaggerated
> - I do not recall any of these happened to me

As with the question measuring disinformation and misinformation, this question was only asked of respondents who said they had shared news on social media at least once in the previous month. Respondents could choose more than one answer, so the percentages shown in Figure 8 add up to more than 100.

Figure 8. Being Corrected by Others for Sharing Problematic News (N=589)



* The responses total more than 100 percent because respondents could choose more than one from among options 1, 2, and 3.

At first glance, it could be seen as heartening that two-thirds (66.2 percent) of those who shared news on social media did not recall being reprimanded for sharing news that was exaggerated, inaccurate, or false. This might be taken as a sign that problematic news sharing is not particularly widespread. And yet, as we showed in Figure 6, above, problematic news sharing *is* widespread—42.8 percent of British news sharers on social media admitted to at least one of our four types of problematic news sharing in the past month. What we therefore see in Figure 8 is that corrections appear to be significantly less common than problematic news sharing. For example, while we saw above (Figure 6) that 17.3 percent reported sharing news that they knew was made up when they shared it, here we see that only 9.7 percent reported having been told by anyone on social media that they had shared news that was made up. There is, therefore, an imbalance between the extent of problematic news sharing and the extent of its correction through reprimands.

Corrections appear to be significantly less common than problematic news sharing. There is an imbalance between the extent of problematic news sharing and the extent of its correction through reprimands.

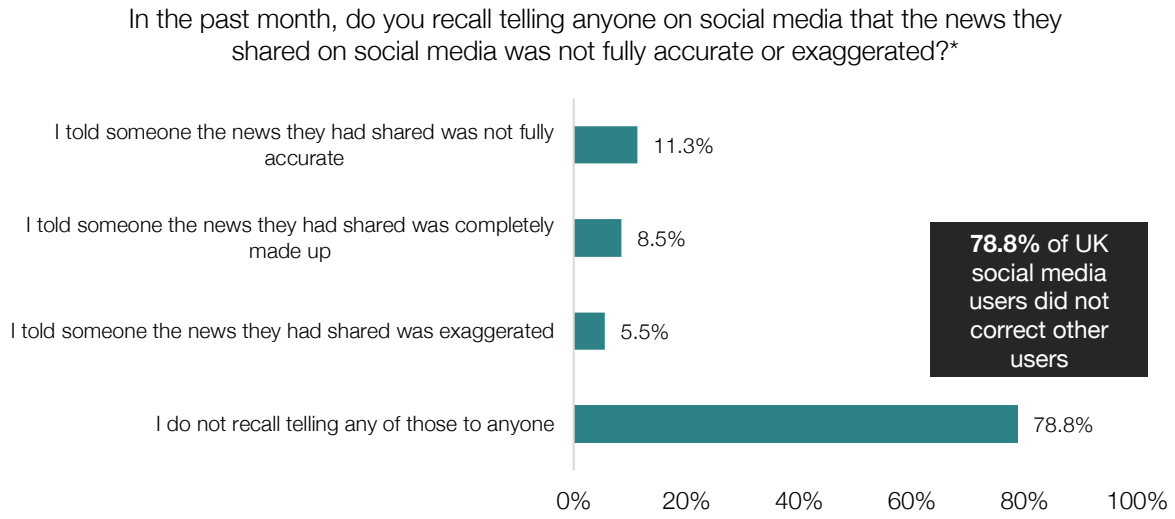
This finding about the relative sparsity of corrective action is reinforced if we consider the responses when we turned the tables to gauge the extent to which people had reprimanded

other social media users for their problematic news sharing. We asked:

> "In the past month, do you recall telling anyone on social media that the news they shared on social media was not fully accurate or exaggerated?"
>
> - I told someone the news they had shared was completely made up
> - I told someone the news they had shared was not fully accurate
> - I told someone the news they had shared was exaggerated
> - I do not recall telling any of those to anyone

Unlike the previous question, we asked this question of all our respondents, irrespective of whether an individual had shared news on social media, so the percentages of the answers to the two questions are not fully comparable because they refer to different groups—British news sharers on social media for Figure 8 and British social media users for Figure 9.

Figure 9. Correcting Other Social Media Users for Sharing Problematic News (N=2,005)



* The responses total more than 100 percent because respondents could choose more than one from among options 1, 2, and 3.

As Figure 9 shows, the vast majority (78.8 percent) of British social media users had not corrected other social media users for sharing news that was exaggerated, inaccurate, or false. Even the most problematic behaviour did not stimulate people to issue reprimands: only 8.5 percent of British social media users reported calling out another social media user for sharing news that was made up. And only 11.3 percent performed the less socially-onerous task of telling someone that the news they shared was not fully accurate.

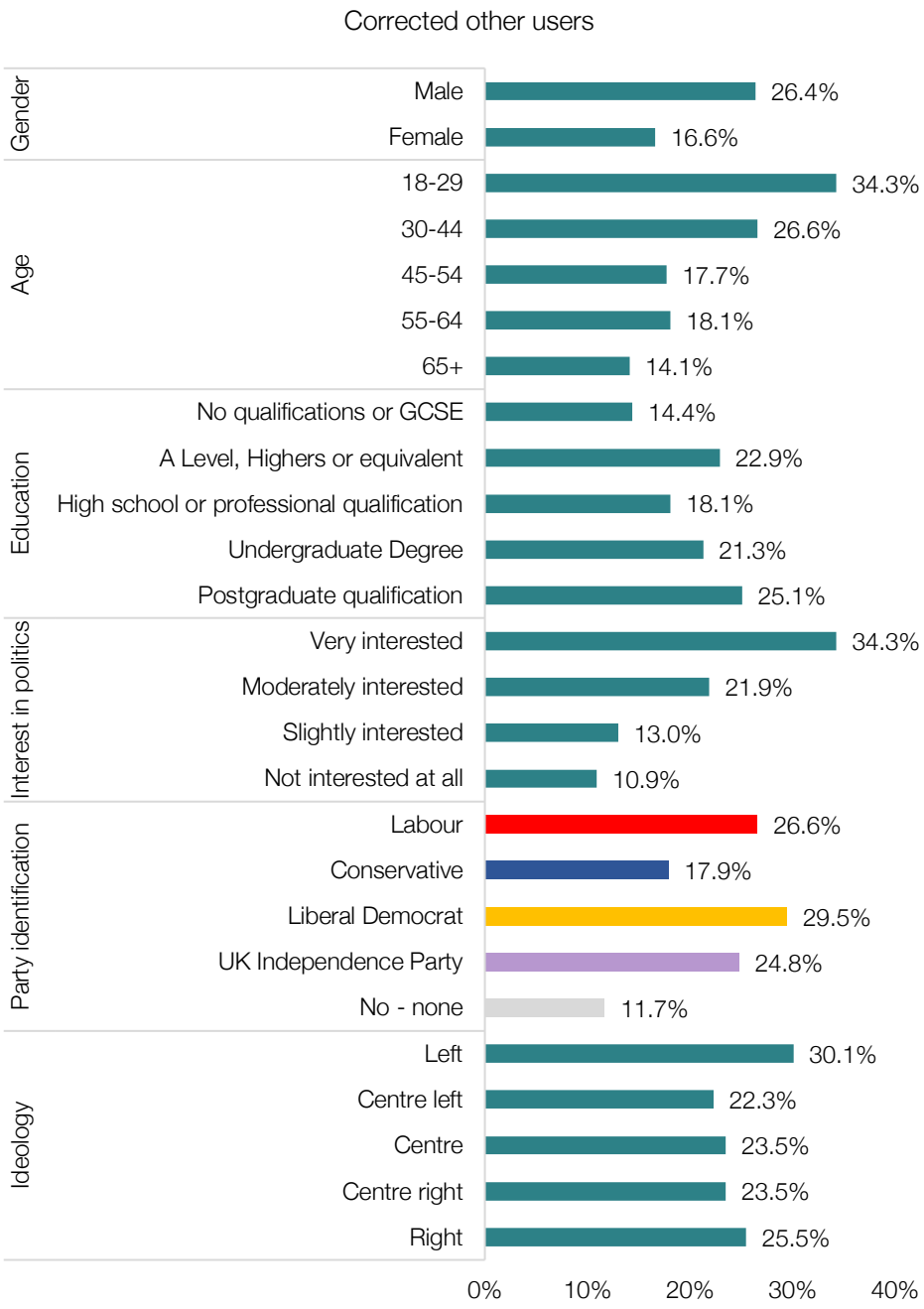
This last finding is particularly surprising if we recall just how many social media users—almost half—said that they saw problematic news on social media in the past month (see Figure 5, above). Clearly there is a mismatch between social media users' experience of encountering problematic news sharing and their ability, or willingness, to do something about it. To some extent this is understandable. Criticising others is a socially demanding form of behaviour because the risks of receiving a negative response are substantial. But given that the disinhibition effects of social media apply just as much in this context as in others, we might expect to see more people engaging in corrective action.

7.1 Who Corrects Others?

As Figure 10 shows, overall, those who reprimand others for their problematic news sharing are

more likely to be male, younger, have higher educational attainment, and be interested in politics. Conservative supporters are less likely than Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters to challenge others. Those on the ideological left are also marginally more likely to challenge others. Given our finding that Conservative supporters are more likely to share news that they knew was made up, it could be that Labour supporters and left-leaning individuals see it as a matter of political duty to try to set the record straight.[21]

Figure 10. Characteristics of News Sharers on Social Media Who Corrected Other Social Media Users for Sharing Problematic News (N=2,005)

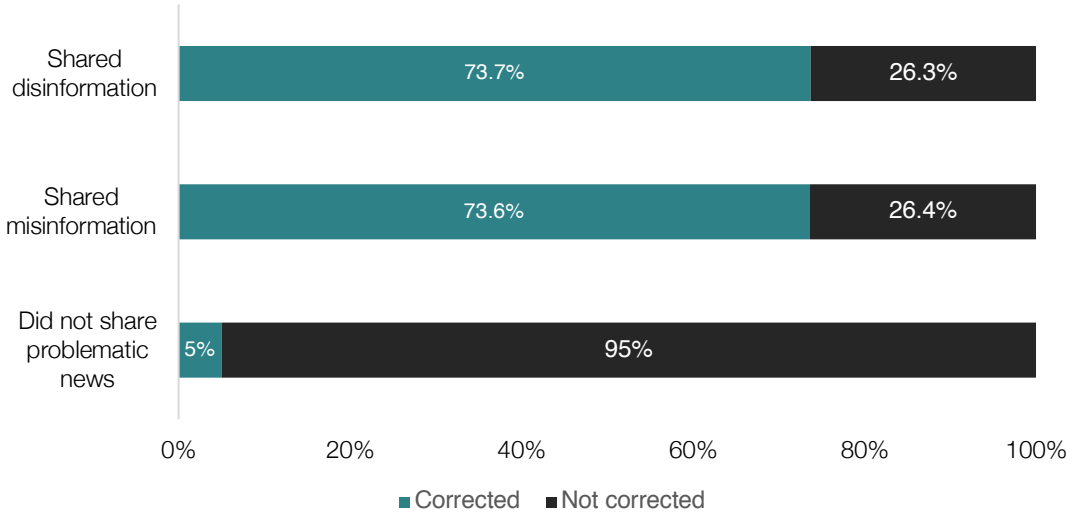


7.2 Who is More Likely to be Corrected?

There are some grounds for optimism if we consider who is more likely to receive reprimands

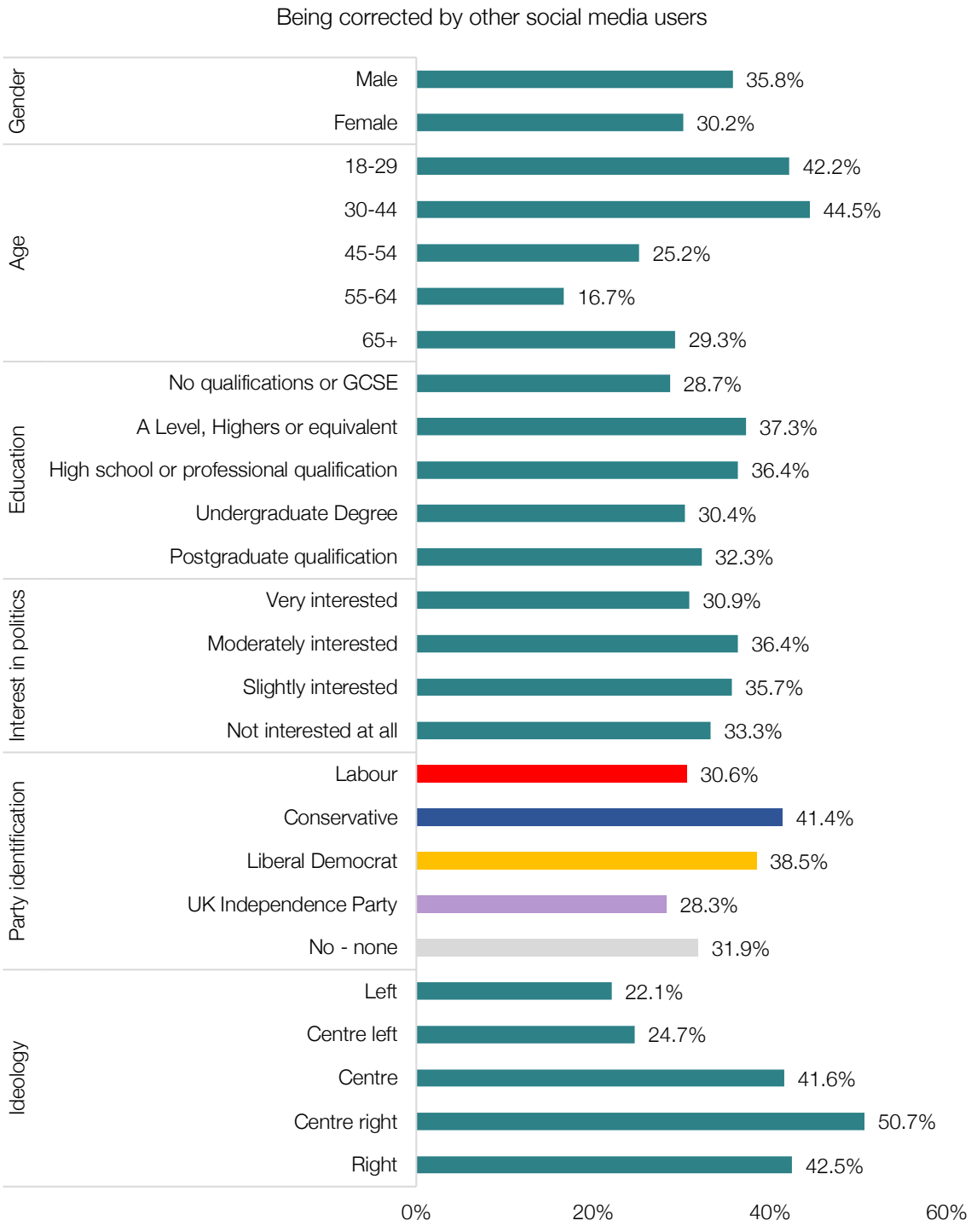
for engaging in misinformation and disinformation when they share news. As Figure 11 shows, about three quarters of respondents who admit to misinforming or disinforming also report being reprimanded by other social media users. This suggests that corrective behaviour is broadly aimed at the target that matters—those who are likely to share problematic news.

Figure 11. The Relationship Between Sharing Problematic News and Being Corrected by Other Social Media Users (N=589)



As Figure 12 shows, the profile of social media news sharers who were challenged broadly matches the profile of those who admit to misinforming or disinforming on social media: they tend to be male, younger, Conservative supporters, and ideologically on the right and centre-right. These findings reinforce our previous observation that, although many social media users are not challenged by other users, the corrective action that occurs does at least seem to be aimed at the right target—the kinds of users who are more likely to share false or exaggerated news.

Figure 12. Characteristics of News Sharers on Social Media Who Were Corrected by Other Social Media Users for Sharing Problematic News (N=589)

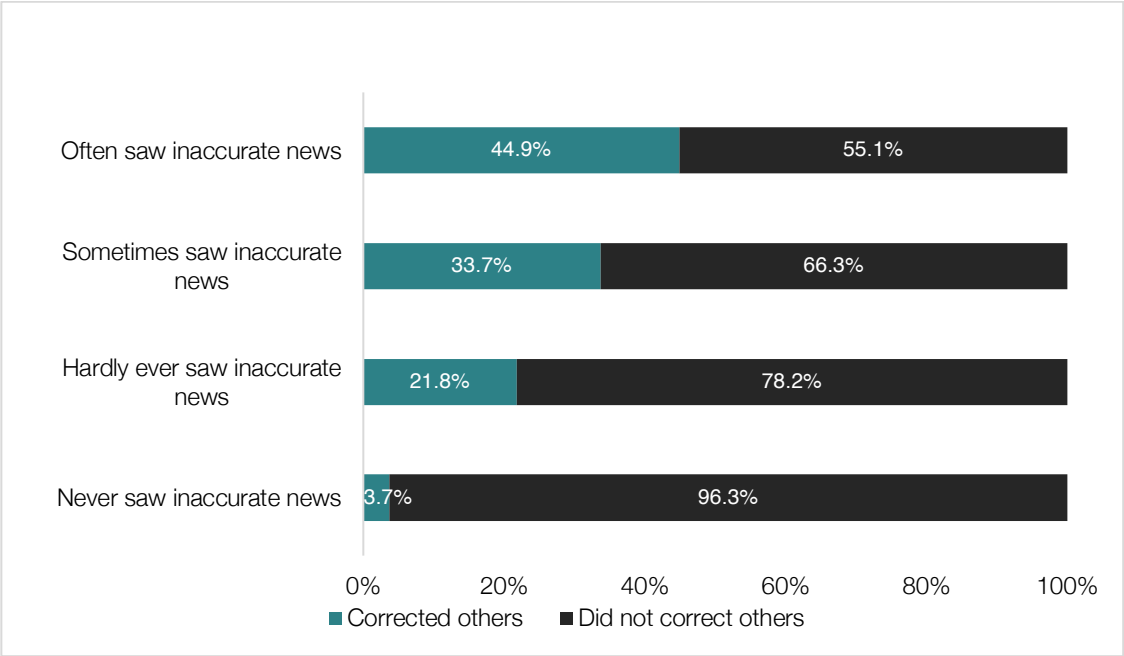


This optimism should be tempered, however, by the last of our findings, which are presented in Figure 13. This Figure shows the relationship between seeing problematic news sharing on social media and reprimanding others for problematic news sharing.

As is logical, the more often that British social media users see problematic news sharing by others, the more likely it is that they will challenge others. But here we also see an imbalance similar to those we saw above: a minority (44.9 percent) of those who said that they often encounter false or misleading news on social media said that they challenged other social

media users for their problematic news sharing. Only a third (33.7 percent) of those who said they sometimes encounter problematic news said that they try to do something about it by telling the person who shared it on social media.

Figure 13. The Relationship Between Seeing Problematic News and Correcting Other Social Media Users (N=1,590)



8. Conclusions

This survey report has unearthed several troubling findings about the contribution of news sharing on social media to Britain's online civic culture.

Evidence of this kind ought to be considered in debates about the future role of social media platforms in British politics and society. But the evidence can also inform a broader debate about the role of all news media in the UK. Digital platforms differ in the extent to which their users engage with established, professional news organizations or online-native news. UK-specific evidence on this theme is currently unavailable, but evidence from the US indicates that the most engaged-with news on Facebook, for example, originates with a mix of online-native and established brands.[22] Much of the political news that is shared on social media is produced by professional news organizations. Clearly there is a problem of trust in social media platforms, but there is also a problem of trust in news more broadly.[23] Our report's most surprising finding is how this crisis of trust appears to be so quickly translating into widespread cynicism and a culture of "anything goes" among so many of those who engage in news sharing on social media. Cynicism is a difficult attitude to measure in a survey—it is pointless asking people the question "are you cynical?"[24] But widespread evidence that people share news that they know is exaggerated or false when they share it should ring the alarm that cynicism has taken hold among a substantial minority of British social media users.

This particularly survey does not allow us to say anything about the actual news stories that people tend to share when they misinform or disinform others, but false and misleading information is widespread on British social media and, for many, news sharing obviously plays a major role in its circulation. More than half of British social media users (57.7 percent) encountered news in the past month on social media that they thought was not fully accurate.

Among those who shared news on social media in the past month, 42.8 percent shared inaccurate or false news, and this included 17.3 percent who shared news they thought was made up when they shared it. In the UK, these social media users tend to be male, younger, and interested in politics.

The so-called self-correcting nature of social media operates to some extent, but not as much as we might expect. A substantial amount of sharing on social media of inaccurate or made up news goes unchallenged. Fewer social media users (33.8 percent) report being corrected by other social media users than admit sharing false or exaggerated news (42.8 percent). Far fewer social media users (21.2 percent) report *correcting* other social media users for sharing problematic news than report *seeing* problematic news on social media (57.7 percent). And more than a quarter (26.4 percent) of those who shared inaccurate or made up news did not report being challenged by other social media users for doing so. The most problematic news sharing does not stimulate many social media users to correct the sharers: only 8.5 percent of British social media users said that they criticised another social media user for sharing news that was made up. On their own, UK-based initiatives to combat misinformation that rely on groups of social media users to correct others or flag false or inaccurate content might not, therefore, produce the desired outcomes. Ideology and partisan identity will clearly play a role in what kinds of misinformation individuals consider to be important enough to call out. But there is also a more general problem of declining trust, cynicism, and withdrawal.[25]

Our survey revealed some partisan and ideological differences in sharing inaccurate or made up news on social media. Conservative supporters and those with right-wing ideological beliefs are more likely to share false or inaccurate news and to be reprimanded by others for doing so. Labour supporters, and those who hold left-wing ideological beliefs, are more likely to encounter inaccurate news and to correct other social media users for sharing inaccurate news. Our survey data cannot be used to explain the underlying reasons for this difference. It could be further evidence of Labour's recent strategy of mobilizing its supporters on social media more generally, or it could be a reaction by Labour supporters to the influence of Britain's largely right-leaning, non-public service news media.[26]

These party differences aside, over the longer term, if the trends we identify in this report continue, many people are generally less likely to encounter the kind of interactions that might make a difference to the quality of the news they share. Over time, this situation may contribute to low levels of awareness on social media of the quality of different types of news and a damaging cultural norm that "anything goes" when sharing news online. If unchecked, this may make it more difficult to establish the minimal conditions required to distinguish truth from falsehood—conditions that enable citizens to engage in meaningful discussion across political divides.

About the Online Civic Culture Centre (O3C)

Established in 2018 through Loughborough University's Adventure Research Programme, the Online Civic Culture Centre (O3C) applies concepts and methods from social science and information science to understand the role of social media in shaping our civic culture. Led by Professor Andrew Chadwick, it features academic staff and doctoral researchers drawn from the disciplines of communication, information science, social psychology, and sociology. O3C enables interdisciplinary teams of researchers to work together on issues of misinformation, disinformation, and the rise of hate speech and intolerance online. It develops evidence-based knowledge to mitigate the democratically-dysfunctional aspects of social media. At the same time, it identifies and promotes the positive civic engagement benefits of social media. For more information, visit the O3C website and follow us on Twitter.

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- Professor Josh Tucker, Director of the Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) Lab, New York University.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*, Council of Europe; European Commission (2018). *Final Report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation*; LSE Commission on Truth, Trust and Technology (2018). *Tackling the Information Crisis: A Policy Framework for Media System Resilience*; UK Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Home Department (2019). *Online Harms White Paper*; House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee (2019). *Disinformation and "Fake News": Final Report*.

[2] Online Civic Culture Centre (O3C), Loughborough University: https://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/online-civic-culture-centre/about/

[3] See for example Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions. *European Journal of Communication* 33(2), 122–139; Chadwick, A. (2017). *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, Second edition; Van Aelst, P. et al. (2017). Political Communication in a High-Choice Media Environment: A Challenge for Democracy? *Annals of the International Communication* Association 41(1), 3–27; Thorson, K. & Wells, C. (2015). Curated Flows: A Framework for Mapping Media Exposure in the Digital Age. *Communication Theory* 26(3), 309–328; Tucker, J., Guess, A., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). *Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature*. Hewlett Foundation; Waisbord, S. (2018). Truth is What Happens to News: On Journalism, Fake News, and Post-truth. *Journalism Studies* 19(13), 1866–1878; Woolley, S. & Howard, P. (Eds) (2018). *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*. New York: Oxford University Press; Chadwick, A. (2006). *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[4] For the negative view, see, for example, Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 7(3), 321–326. For a more positive view, see, for example, Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness, and the Democratic Potential of Online Political Discussion Groups. *New Media & Society* 6(2), 259–283.

[5] Chadwick, A., Vaccari, C., & O'Loughlin, B. (2018). Do Tabloids Poision the Well of Social Media? Explaining Democratically Dysfunctional News Sharing. *New Media & Society* 20(11), 4255-4274.

[6] Woolley, S. & Howard, P. (Eds) (2018). *Computational Propaganda*; LSE Commission on Truth, Trust and Technology (2018). *Tackling the Information Crisis*.

[7] Phillips, W. (2015). *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Rainie, L., Anderson, J. and Albright, J. (2018). *The Future of Free Speech, Trolls, Anonymity and Fake News Online*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center; Petersen, M. B., Osmundsen, M., and Arceneaux, K. (2018). A "Need for Chaos" and the Sharing of Hostile Political Rumours in Advanced Democracies. *PsyArXiv* Working Paper. https://psyarxiv.com/6m4ts/ (accessed 11/4/2019); Gillespie, T. (2018) *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media*. New York: Yale University Press. Klonick, K. (2019). Inside the Team at Facebook That Dealt With the Christchurch Shooting. *New Yorker*, April 25: https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/inside-the-team-at-facebook-that-dealt-with-the-christchurch-shooting; Chadwick, A., Vaccari, C. & O'Loughlin, B. (2018). Do Tabloids Poison the Well of Social Media?

[8] The participation rate was 32.8 percent. Opinium Research worked *pro bono* on this survey.

[9] For ease of interpretation, throughout this report we only discuss simple relationships between variables. A caveat applies to this type of analysis. Take, for example, the relationship between gender and sharing news on social media. Males may be more likely to share news than females, but this does not automatically mean that being male is the most important variable associated with sharing news on social media. It may be that other factors—such as interest in politics—play a role, and that it is because males tend to be more interested in politics that they are more likely to share news. Statistical analyses that help disentangle the relative importance of different variables, known as multivariate analyses, are more difficult to interpret for those unfamiliar with statistics, which is why we avoid them in this report. Throughout, we have been careful to present justifiable summaries of the different variables that matter in each case.

[10] https://www.britishelectionstudy.com

[11] On this point about the strategic use of irony, particularly important in the spread far-right ideology online, see Marwick, A. and Lewis, R. (2017). *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*. New York: Data & Society Research Institute. https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf

[12] The classic empirical statement of this view is Verba, S. and Nie, N. H. (1972). *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. New York: Harper & Row.

[13] For the most well-known statement of this view see Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. But the evidence-based debate among researchers is very much alive and ongoing. See, for example, Barberá, P., Jost, J. T., Nagler, J., Tucker, J. A., & Bonneau, R. (2015). Tweeting From Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber? *Psychological Science* 26(10), 1531–1542; Bakshy, E., Messing, S., and Adamic, L. A. (2015) Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook. *Science* 348(6239), 1130–1132; Fletcher, R. and Nielsen, R. K. (2017). Are People Incidentally Exposed to News on Social Media? A Comparative Analysis. *New Media & Society* 20 (7), 2450–2468; Bucher, T. (2018). *If… Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press; Settle, J. E. (2018) *Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[14] The phrase "coarsening and toxifying of our public debate" was used by Prime Minister Theresa May at a speech in February 2018, in the context of the rise in online intimidation of political candidates and campaign volunteers. See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-44188805. See also Owen, L. H. (2019). One Year In, Facebook's Big Algorithm Change has Spurred an Angry, Fox News-dominated—And Very Engaged!—News Feed. *Nieman Lab*: https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/03/one-year-in-facebooks-big-algorithm-change-has-spurred-an-angry-fox-news-dominated-and-very-engaged-news-feed

[15] Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

[16] Kreuter, F., Presser, S., and Tourangeau, R. (2008). Social Desirability Bias in CATI, IVR, and Web Surveys: The Effects of Mode and Question Sensitivity. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5(1): 847–865.

[17] The importance of context, particularly with regard to the intentions of sharers, is only one of many reasons why detailed qualitative inquiry into the determinants of sharing is urgently needed.

[18] Barthel, M., Mitchell, A., & Holcomb, J. (2016). Many Americans Believe Fake News is Sowing Confusion. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. https://www.journalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2016/12/PJ_2016.12.15_fake-news_FINAL.pdf

[19] This distinction between misinformation and disinformation is now becoming widely accepted and features in the UK Government's Online Harms White Paper. A useful discussion is Jack, C. (2017). *Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information*. New York: Data & Society Research Institute: https://datasociety.net/output/lexicon-of-lies

[20] The argument that the internet enables "self-correcting crowds" that discourage the distribution of biased or false information has a long history and it has been influential across many areas of research, but the most well-known writings are probably Lévy, P. (1997). *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. New York: Perseus; Surowiecki, J. (2005). *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdon Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*. New York: Doubleday. Systematic, evidence-based research is now emerging that suggests patterns of correction are complex: much misinformation goes uncorrected and the spread of corrections is much slower than the spread of misinformation. See, for example, Starbird, K., et al. (2014). Rumors, False Flags, and Digital Vigilantes: Misinformation on Twitter After the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing. *iConference 2014*.

[21] We also found that Labour supporters are also more likely than Conservative supporters to recall seeing news on social media that was not fully accurate (61.4 percent versus 53.6 percent).

[22] Owen, L. H. (2019). One Year In, Facebook's Big Algorithm Change has Spurred an Angry, Fox News-dominated—And Very Engaged!—News Feed.

[23] The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018 found that across 37 countries 44 percent trust news overall, while 23 percent trust news on social media: http://www.digitalnewsreport.org

[24] de Vreese, C. H. (2004). The Effects of Strategic News on Political Cynicism, Issue Evaluations, and Policy Support: A Two-Wave Experiment. *Mass Communication & Society* 7(2): 191–214.

[25] It is often forgotten, but should be noted, that both Facebook's "Community Standards" (https://en-gb.facebook.com/communitystandards) and Twitter's "Rules" explicitly discourage the distribution of false and misleading content. The challenges facing social media companies in this regard are immense.

Consider an extreme case: in April 2019, Facebook said that 4,000 users watched the live video of the Christchurch shooting, but no one flagged it as inappropriate until after more than 29 minutes into the stream. Klonick, Inside the Team at Facebook That Dealt with the Christchurch Shooting.

[26] The UK Party Members Project's survey, conducted shortly after the 2017 general election, found that Labour members were significantly more likely than Conservative members to engage on social media. Bale, T., Webb, P., & Poletti, M. (2018). *Grassroots—Britain's Party Members: Who They Are, What They Think, and What They Do*: https://esrcpartymembersprojectorg.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/grassroots-pmp_final.pdf, 37–38.

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