In Apps We Trust? Questioning Ofcom's findings on Apps

*On 29 April Ofcom released its 2014 report on media use and attitudes. LSE PhD candidate **Marina Gerner** had a thorough look at the report and found it surprising. She questions its findings regarding attitudes towards apps.*

Wading through a sea of data in Ofcom's *Adults' Media Use and Attitudes 2014* Report, I stumbled across some surprising findings on apps. This year is the first time apps were covered in the questionnaire, even though they began appearing in 2008. In an effort to add digital edge to its report, Ofcom, however, muddies the waters. It overlooks some key facts about apps.

The report's findings include that smartphone users have an average of 23 apps on their phones. Out of these apps they only use ten regularly. The latter point should not come as a surprise to anyone who has ever downloaded the "which animal are you" or the "helium voice booth" apps, but the next point is more surprising.

Trust

Let's compare the results from the following two statements in Ofcom's questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement to:

1. "When I visit news websites or apps I tend to trust what I read or see."

52% of respondents agree, while 26% disagree.

2. "When I read newspapers, I tend to trust what I read."

32% of respondents agree, while 46% disagree.

The numbers are almost reversed. How is it possible that news stories are trusted on apps and browsers, while every second reader in the UK only trusts a newspaper as far as he can throw it?

In her brilliant Reith lecture in 2002, the philosopher Onora O'Neill explains that trust is based on informed consent. It features in any human exchange. We place our trust in strangers when we buy apples or go to a hairdresser. We will quickly withdraw our trust if we are sold rotten apples, or unwillingly subjected to a Mohican. Similarly, readers will mistrust publications they perceive as untruthful, unethical or biased. Trust is the firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something, according to the Oxford Dictionary.

Distrust

Distrusting the media is not a new phenomenon. Long before the invention of the printing press, Socrates, was skeptical about the written word, because it travels beyond the possibility of question and revision, and thus, beyond trust. But according the findings of the report – words are seen as more trustworthy in pixels rather than in ink.

One explanation for this is that online articles are more transparent. Unlike their printed counterparts, they offer timely updates, comment sections, videos and hyperlinks. Being interactive, online sources somewhat mediate Socrates' worry by allowing readers to question and

revise what has been stated. Online stories are released around the clock. If we are looking for information on London tube strikes, online updates are more reliable than articles in print.

It might be that proximity creates trust, when we carry our phones in our pockets and our tablets in our bags. While today's newspaper is tomorrow's fish wrap, online stories won't stain our fingers or occupy our train seats.

Properly measuring the difference

The difference in reported trust levels could also stem from an entirely different place, namely the wording of the study. Looking at the questionnaire with a targeted eye reveals a few ambiguities in the questions related to trust:

1. While the question on newspapers asks respondents if they "trust what they read", the question on apps asks if they "trust what they read and see." The visual aspect was omitted in the question on newspapers; and the power of printed images has thus been neglected.

2. It is also puzzling that responses of people, who previously stated that they do not read newspapers or use apps, have been included. How much trust can a person place into something without using it? It makes me think of the German proverb "what the peasant doesn't know, he doesn't eat," let alone trust.

3. The report also wrongly equates apps with social networks. In the section of notes to the interviewers, we can find a bracket that defines apps with reference to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Tumblr or Pinterest.

But the news stories that we share on social networks overlap with those published in newspapers. After all, major UK newspapers and magazines have their own apps for IOS and Android. There, they mainly publish the same articles they have printed on paper, but, the report overlooks the overlap between news stories on paper and on the screen. This also becomes clear in the questionnaire's preliminary questions, when respondents are asked to indicate how regularly they read newspapers and magazines – 66% say they do. The questionnaire does not ask whether they read them online or in print.

If questions had been worded more precisely, levels of trust might not have been so different after all. It is startling that a report, which was funded by government as well as the industry, fails to engage with the issue of trust in online news stories properly. After all, media companies need their audiences' trust as trust nourishes loyal audiences. Data like this has implications for a publication's brand. Especially in the present economic climate, increased competition over audiences' attention and the convergence of old and new media, trust might be the single most important feature to set a media company apart from the rest.

This post gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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