



Submission of written evidence to the DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation's Inquiry on 'Misinformation and Trusted Voices'

Introduction

It is well known that scientists are amongst the most trusted voices in society, with successive surveys showing high levels of public trust in scientists¹. It therefore follows that it is generally in the public interest for scientists to be encouraged and supported to use their trusted voice to good effect – speaking out regularly to inform public debate and evidence-based policies, and to challenge misinformation.

The Science Media Centre (SMC)² is an independent press office for science, with a mission to make it easier for journalists to get easy access to the best science and scientists. However, we believe that there are too many barriers to open communication from scientists, and that too many publicly funded scientists in the UK are not being encouraged or supported to use their trusted voice. Engaging with the media is not always easy, especially on controversial issues that are typically subject to misinformation, so scientists need to be encouraged and supported to do so. The SMC welcomes this DCMS inquiry into Misinformation and Trusted Voices, and calls on the committee to use its influential role to encourage politicians and the research community to identify and tackle cultures and restrictions which act as disincentives to scientists operating as trusted voices.

Top line points

1. Science, health and environment specialist journalists working for national news outlets should be seen as key trusted voices on those subjects.
2. The public are missing out on a huge supply of scientists that would be extremely valuable in combating misinformation as trusted voices because those scientists work in government-owned research institutes or agencies and are restricted from speaking openly to the media.
3. The public trust scientists who they see as independent and separate from government and politics.
4. A fundamental way to challenge misinformation is to drown it out with good, accurate evidence-based information. To do this, the scientific community needs to ensure that scientists and experts feel supported, encouraged and empowered to enter these debates.

¹ Ipsos Veracity Index 2022: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-veracity-index-2022>

² SMC website: <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/about-us/>

1. Science, health and environment journalists in the national news media

- Few witnesses to the committee from the scientific community have cited journalists as trusted voices. Yet the work of many journalists, especially the specialist science, health and environment correspondents in the UK national news media, is one of the leading sources for the public of accurate, evidence-based and measured information about science. This was something seen particularly in the pandemic, when science and health journalists were conveying accurate information about the virus, vaccines, etc. to a large section of the wider public.
- Polls show that mainstream news outlets are trusted by people more than social media³. Several reports have also shown how people tend to return to more trusted news outlets at times of crisis – including at the peak moments of the pandemic⁴.
- Science journalists often report stories to challenge misinformation. These news articles are likely to reach a much wider section of the public than information from trusted bodies such as the national academies, so it is important to acknowledge that the mainstream news media is a key trusted source. It also needs noting that many science journalists consider it a part of their work to knock down bad stories and persuade their general news editors and colleagues not to run pieces on poorly conducted science.
- The pandemic is a useful case study, as science and health reporters took a very responsible approach to reporting it. This needs to be acknowledge and celebrated, as specialist correspondents are always under threat in newsrooms with tight budgets.
- **The SMC's recommendation to the inquiry** is that the DCMS select committee should: investigate ways to support specialist science, health and environment journalists; and encourage media outlets to safeguard these positions.

2. Government restrictions on publicly funded scientists

- In the UK, there are tens of thousands of very good, trustworthy scientists working for research institutes and organisations that are in various ways linked to government. Examples of such organisations include the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and NHS trusts.
- Scientists in these organisations are under a variety of constraints and restrictions on external communications which result in the public losing out on their trusted voices.

³ Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Press Gazette, 2020-04-08: <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/uk-broadcasters-reaching-record-audiences-during-coronavirus-crisis/>

- These restraints can come from the highest levels of government, including senior communications people and political special advisers (SpAds) in the Cabinet Office and Number 10 who are employed to manage narratives and have consistent ‘messaging’.
- The restrictions come in various ways:
 - Scientists working for arm’s length agencies or government owned laboratories have to seek permission from departmental press teams to do media work, and are often denied it. In cases when they are given permission, this frequently takes so long that it is of little to no use for journalists working to tight deadlines.
 - Such organisations often tend to appoint a small number of scientists to act as the official spokespeople for any media story, and prevent other scientists from helping journalists. This leaves the media and public unable to access the vast expertise of the many other trusted voices in these organisations.
- **The SMC’s recommendation to the inquiry** is that the DCMS select committee should call for a cultural shift inside government, such that politicians and government communications officers see the public interest in encouraging and supporting a far greater number of publicly funded scientists working in government agencies to engage with the media and in public debate.

3. Independent experts as trusted voices

- Surveys show that scientists who are seen as independent from government are trusted more by the public than those who work in Whitehall (91% for scientists employed by universities compared to 76% for those employed by the government)⁵. In other words, scientists being seen as independent from government is critical to them being considered a trusted voice.
- But more and more scientists are getting drawn closer to government (e.g., the previously independent research councils now all being part of the centralised government funder UKRI). As a result, there is more and more control and management of which scientists are allowed to speak out and what they are allowed to say. This level of media management of scientists by government is potentially problematic for status of scientists as a trusted voice.
- **The SMC’s recommendation to the inquiry** is that the DCMS select committee should: urge government to give more independence to arm’s length research organisations and their researchers; and urge the government to acknowledge that encouraging and supporting

⁵ BEIS ‘Public Attitudes to Science 2019’: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/905466/public-attitudes-to-science-2019.pdf

these scientists, who enjoy huge public trust, to speak out more is a good way of countering misinformation and supporting informed public debate.

4. Encouraging experts to engage with the media

- A straightforward way of dealing with misinformation is to ensure that it is drowned out by good, accurate, evidence-based information.
- It is therefore incumbent on all those in the science community who are concerned about misinformation to ask themselves how they can get good evidence out into the media and the public.
- Too often, the SMC comes across senior scientists and communications officers who express deep concern about misinformation while themselves taking an overly cautious and risk averse approach to engaging with misinformation. This is especially true when the misinformation is on a polarised or contentious subject. Many communications officers are under pressure to focus on institutional reputation and corporate priorities rather than being encouraged to support their institution's scientists in entering the fray on controversial subjects.
- **The SMC's recommendation to the inquiry** is that the DCMS select committee should: urge the national academies and other scientific bodies to recognise the public interest in countering misinformation; and encourage those bodies to play their part in that undertaking by being bolder and proactively encouraging and supporting their scientists in engaging in media and public debates on contested issues.

Supplementary Notes

A. Social media and misinformation

On some occasions, the SMC has seen a tendency to overclaim for the impact of misinformation on social media without reference to any evidence. Studies show that misinformation proliferates on social media⁶, and also show that many people see misinformation there⁷. But there's a dearth of strong evidence on how that actually impacts either public understanding of science or public behaviour.

For example, according to the Royal Society's report on the online information environment⁸, the vast majority of people in the UK:

- Believe COVID-19 vaccines are safe;
- That 5G is not harmful;
- And that human activity is responsible for climate change.

This is notably different to the common narrative seen in many reports on these issues.

That Royal Society report also stresses the need to build a healthier online environment by proactively putting large amounts of accurate information into the online environment – an important goal of the SMC. In evidence submitted to this committee⁹, Full Fact brought up another extremely important aspect of countering misinformation which the SMC also aspires to achieve – the need to respond to it with fact-based information at speed and proactively, with a failure to do so leading to a vacuum which amplifies the impact of misinformation.

The SMC recently commissioned a poll from Ipsos¹⁰ of British adults aged 16+ which showed that, among adults who have encountered information about science through social media, 50% encountered this information from 'Traditional news media outlets'. This potentially means that the popular idea that young people are not accessing science via news is also exaggerated.

The SMC's recommendation to the inquiry is that the DCMS select committee should commission further research which explores the actual impact of misinformation on people's views, decisions and behaviour.

⁶ 'Sharing of misinformation is habitual, not just lazy or biased', G Ceylan et al, PNAS: <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2216614120>

⁷ Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf

⁸ Royal Society 'The Online Information Environment': <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/online-information-environment/the-online-information-environment.pdf>

⁹ Written evidence submitted by Full Fact to the inquiry: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/111770/html/>

¹⁰ **Technical footnote:** On behalf of the SMC, Ipsos UK interviewed a representative quota sample of 2,137 adults aged 16-75 in Great Britain, and a boost of 200 adults aged 76+. Interviews took place on the online Omnibus between 14th and 18th December 2022. Data for all adults 16+ interviewed have been weighted to the known offline population proportions for adults aged 16+ in Great Britain. The referenced figure refers to the 1433 adults aged 16+ in Great Britain surveyed who had encountered information about science through social media via at least one source.

B. What makes a scientist trustworthy?

The SMC believes that the public sees scientists as trustworthy when they:

- Are impartial;
- Are open and honest about the limitations of research and any remaining uncertainties;
- Are research active in a specific field of expertise and have been for some years;
- Keep to the facts and evidence when speaking to the public and don't share their opinions and political views;
- Try to restrict their comments to their own area of research and expertise;
- Change their view when the evidence changes;
- Avoid being advocates for particular policies, but instead ensure that policy makers and the public are well-informed about where the weight of evidence lies.

The SMC's recent Ipsos poll¹¹ shows that the main reason why British adults aged 16+ trust scientists is 'because they are experts in their field' (68%).

Fiona Fox OBE FMedSci HonFRSB HonFBPhS

Chief Executive

Science Media Centre

¹¹ Technical footnote: On behalf of the SMC, Ipsos UK interviewed a representative quota sample of 2,137 adults aged 16-75 in Great Britain, and a boost of 200 adults aged 76+. Interviews took place on the online Omnibus between 14th and 18th December 2022. Data for all adults 16+ interviewed have been weighted to the known offline population proportions for adults aged 16+ in Great Britain. The referenced figure refers to the 1750 adults aged 16+ in Great Britain surveyed who trusted scientists.