Misinformation Rules!?
Could "Group Rules" Reduce Misinformation in Online Personal Messaging?

Andrew Chadwick, Natalie-Anne Hall, & Cristian Vaccari

Online Civic Culture Centre (O3C)
Department of Communication and Media
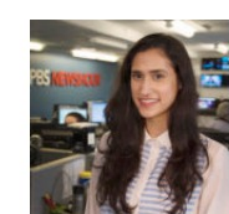Loughborough University

Loughborough University

O3C

The Everyday

Misinformation Project

A Leverhulme Trust funded research programme based at Loughborough University

Loughborough University

O3C

Loughborough University — Centre for Research in Communication & Culture

LEVERHULME TRUST

www.everyday-mis.info

PBS NEWS HOUR
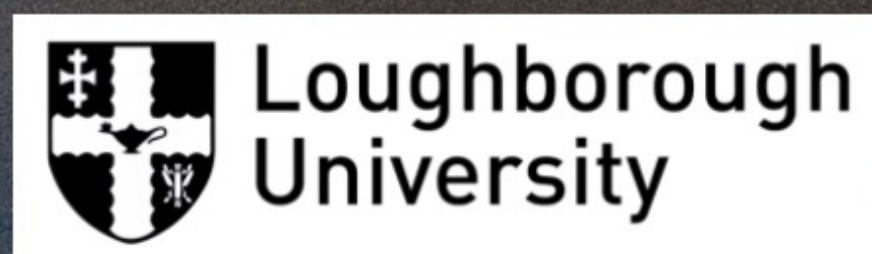
By –
Saher Khan

By –
Vignesh Ramachandran

Millions depend on private messaging apps to keep in touch. They're ripe with misinformation

World   Nov 5, 2021 8:22 AM EDT

Full Fact launches a WhatsApp fact checking service in the UK

- WhatsApp: >2 billion users globally.

- UK: 31.4 million adult users—about 60% of the adult population. Facebook Messenger: 18.2 million UK adult users.

- In many countries (e.g., India, Brazil, UK, Italy, Egypt, Israel, Spain, Germany, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Singapore, etc.) these services are more frequently used than public social media platforms (Global Web Index, 2020).

- Online personal messaging is a hard and distinctive misinformation problem…

Messaging as Hybrid Public-Interpersonal Communication

- Rapid and subtle switching between private-interpersonal and semi-public contexts, and between one-to-ones, small groups, and larger groups.

- Affordances: (1) Intimacy (2) Easy forwarding (3) Virality (4) Loss of provenance (5) Hazy audiences (6) No searchability.

- Misinformation transitions from the public world into interpersonal networks, where different norms of correction might apply, or be absent.
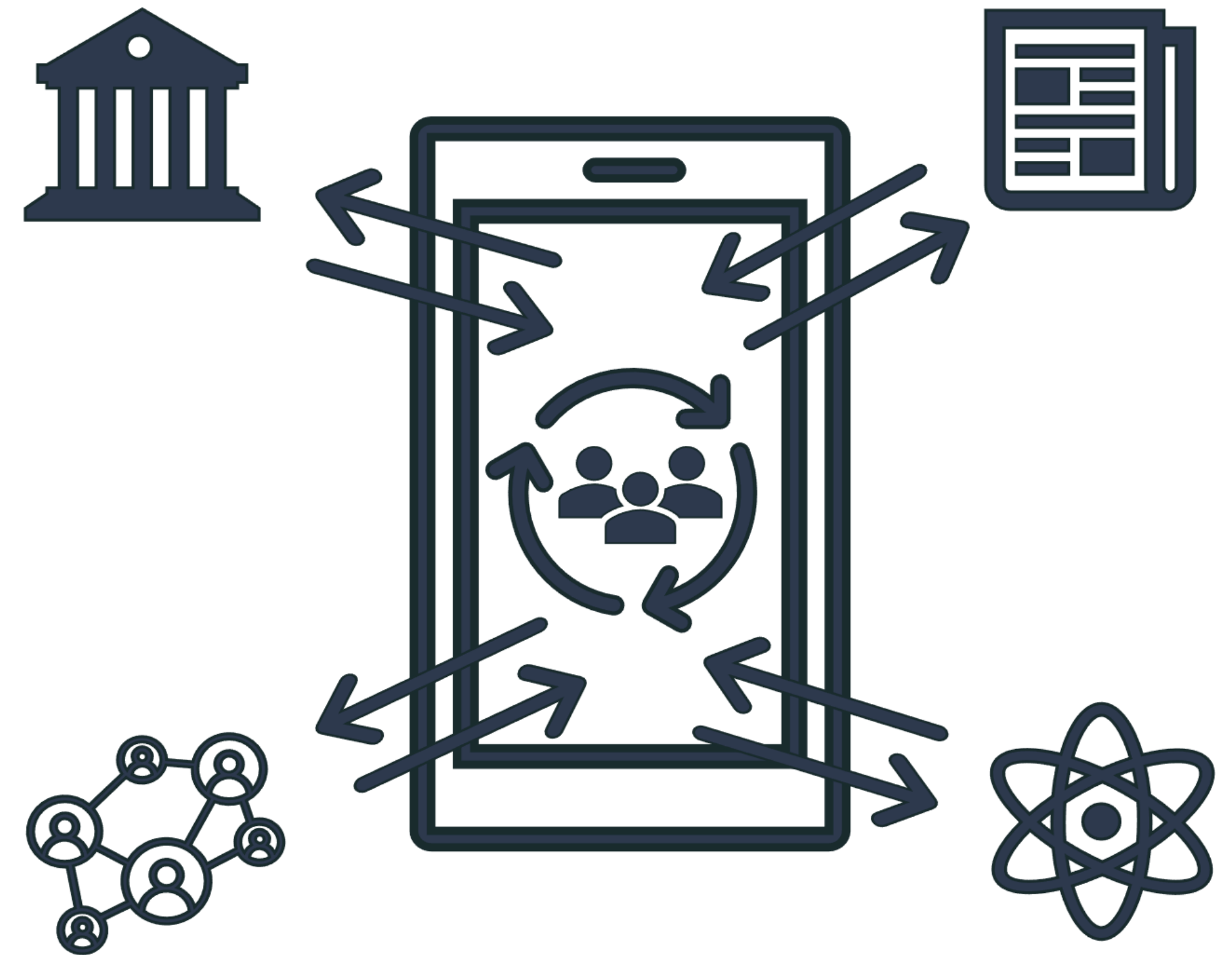
Trust, Affordances, and Vulnerability to Misinformation

- Everyday connection, emotional bonds of kinship or friendship.

- *Personalized* trust based on (Aristotelean) goodwill and shared experience, i.e. *not* external verification or transactional relationships.

- Increases vulnerability: makes misinformation more emotionally difficult to challenge.
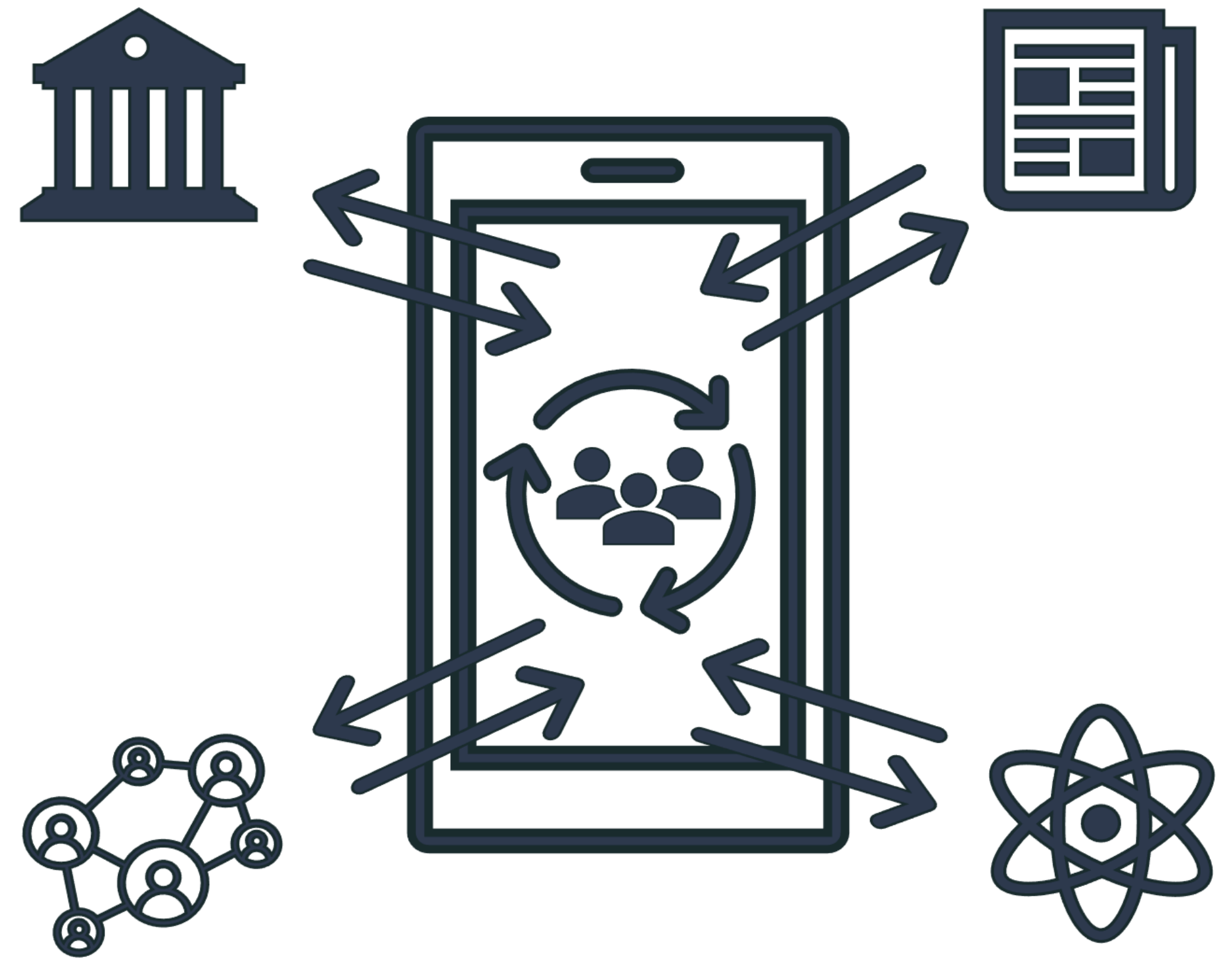
Research Questions

- Our approach: the "logic of discovery" (Luker). *What's going on?*

  - RQ1: What factors lead some personal messaging users to perceive that spontaneous norms in everyday interactions on personal messaging are insufficient to protect their groups from misinformation?

  - RQ2: When users try to create rules, how does the process work, and how do they perceive that the resulting rules affect the spread of misinformation?

Design, Data, and Method

- Longitudinal qualitative design.

- Two-wave, in-depth semi-structured interviews (*N*=102; retention *N*=80) over 16 months (April '21—July '22) with the public in three regions: London, the East Midlands, and the North East of England. From Opinium's national panel of 40,000 people.

- Voluntary data donations (messaging screen grabs, audio narration, text comments) via customized smartphone app between waves 1 and 2, to inform second interviews.

- Participants roughly reflected UK on age, gender, ethnicity, education, and basic digital literacy.

- Thematic coding, then Nvivo matrix queries.

- This study focuses on a subset of 33 participants who, to our surprise, told us about rulemaking or rules.

Key Findings

The Evolution of Rules

- Some people *make a shift from norms to rules because they perceive their social ties will be inadvertently exposed to harm.*

- Group rules *collaboratively reduce the risks of misinformation spreading in networks and causing harm, acrimony, and division.*

- Rulemaking protects the group by *encouraging metacommunication without undermining the goodwill ethic of care toward others that underlies personalized trust.*

Motivations for Rulemaking

- The differences between messaging and public social media:

  - *"there doesn't seem to be a sort of artificial intelligence, or even guidance to people who are running groups"* —Ken, late 50s, apartment building messaging group.

- Managing negative affordances through rules in family groups:

  - *"We have this rule… absolutely no forwards!"* —Rehan, late 20s, extended diasporic family group.

  - *"Don't forward chain messages"* —Penelope, early 20s, extended family group.

- Awareness of the context of vulnerability:

  - *"people who think because their cousin sent it or their brother sent it or, you know, friends or somebody they have a relationship with sent it, it is true. Because obviously that's subjective, right, because you always want to side with people that you, you trust and care about, in your circle."* —Rehan, late 20s, extended diasporic family group.

Processes and Forms of Rulemaking

- The importance of founding moments:

  - *"this is not the place to share this, you know, this isn't good" "You shouldn't be sharing things like that… There needs to be a new group set up"* —Luke, early 40s, new workplace group after racist post.

- Group resets:

  - "That wasn't the idea of the original group"—Sarah, early 50s, neighborhood group founder's intervention to reset the group (second interview).

- Topic rules, to avoid the emotional fallout from posts some members deemed misleading:

  - *"Why are we arguing about this? It's just ridiculous" "We're just not gunna talk about Covid between us, unless it kind of particularly comes up."* —Lydia, late-20s, friends' group, agreeing on a rule.

# Metacommunication, Vigilance, Impacts Over Time

- *"in terms of changes, I've kind of noticed that people are being a lot more cautious about what they're sharing. [...] People are just more concerned about it."* —Luke, early 40s, after new workplace group (second interview).

- *"Everyone else seemed to fall in line, [...] everyone else just kind of organic, organically started to understand what it was for and what it wasn't for."* —Sarah, early 50s, neighborhood group (second interview) after reset intervention.

- *"People tend to behave themselves"*—Barry, early 40s, schoolparents group (second interview).

Delegation Effects, Distancing, and the Fragility of Rules in Larger Groups (1)

- Priya, early 30s, large city group, first interview: *"there are rules in that group… so, if anything goes against their rules then it's, the person is deleted, or things like that. <u>They have actions that are taken</u>."*

- Between her first and second interview, Priya uploaded a screengrab of a link to a well-known UK-based conspiracy theory website that had been posted in the group.

- She tagged it under category "Something accurate and helpful."

Delegation Effects, Distancing, and the Fragility of Rules in Larger Groups (2)

- Priya, second interview: *"I need to be more careful."*

- Larger community group, weaker ties.

- Rules existed but delegation effects reduced metacommunication, agency, and vigilance.
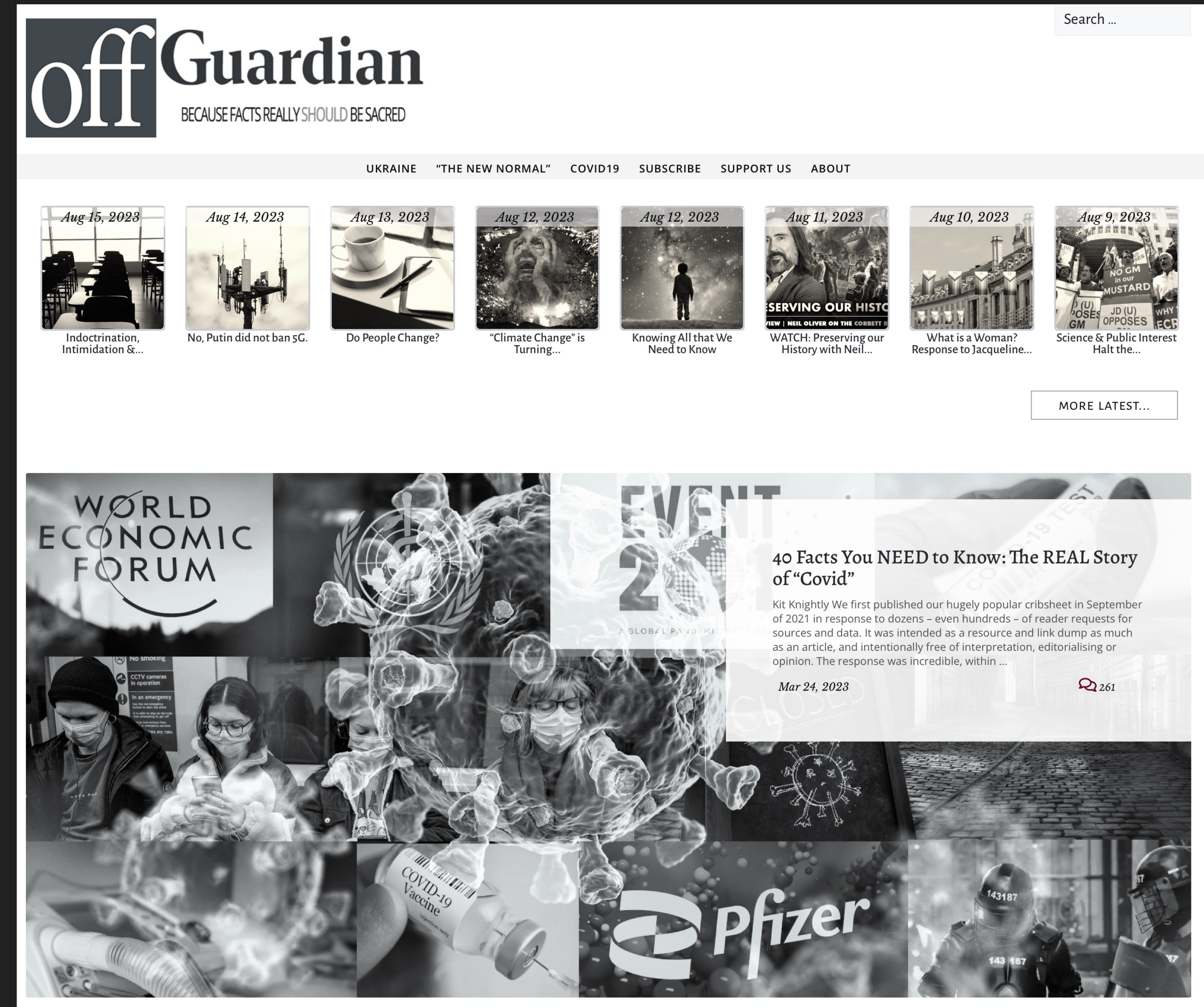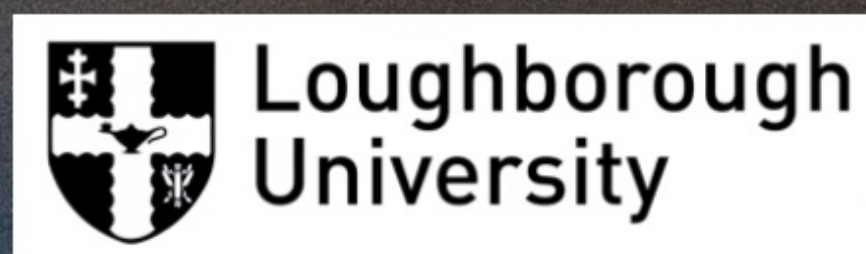
Implications of Our Findings

- Explore further, with different designs.

- Mass *public* social media platforms offer little inspiration. Messaging platforms require contextual approaches based in how interaction norms are established and maintained.

- Borrow inspiration from earlier periods in the internet's development, when community self-regulation through discursive practices was an important organizing logic.

- This kind of rulemaking does not require demanding optimism (cf. political deliberation), yet still involves conscious agency.

- Ethic of care in personalized, goodwill forms of trust can be a powerful motivator.

- Group size and/or homophily will likely always moderate protection from harm.

And finally...

These practices could blunt the impact of elite strategies to deceive and cause harm for political gain

The Everyday

Misinformation Project

A Leverhulme Trust funded research programme based at Loughborough University

www.everyday-mis.info