

# Online Misinformation and Everyday Ontological Narratives of Social Distinction

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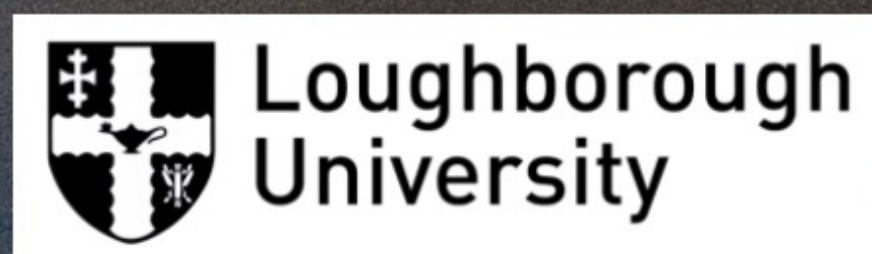
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# The Everyday Misinformation Project

A Leverhulme Trust funded research programme based at Loughborough University



[www.everyday-mis.info](http://www.everyday-mis.info)



- Online personal messaging as a distinctive misinformation problem.
- Limited research, but a new wave (Banaji et al., 2019; Chadwick et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022; Malhotra & Pearce, 2022; Pearce & Malhotra, 2022).



- WhatsApp has 2 billion users globally; in the UK 31.4 million adult (18+) users—about 60% of the adult population.
- Facebook Messenger has 18.2 million UK adult users.
- In the UK, WhatsApp is now more widely and frequently used than any of the public social media platforms.

# Conceptual and theoretical Framework (1)

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- Dialectical, partially inductive; relational-constructivist ontology
- Personal messaging platforms as hybrid public-interpersonal communication (Chadwick et al. 2022, 2023a, 2023b).
- Awareness of the problem of misinformation (Kearney, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2014; Newman, 2021); “normative ideals of informed citizenship” (Swart & Broersma, 2022)
- How do people **make sense of** political information, **in the context of their personal and social relationships** online?
- How do people orient themselves socially to the problem of misinformation?  
What are the implications of this for combating online misinformation?

# Conceptual and theoretical framework (2)

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- Ontological narratives (Somers, 1994)
  - “the stories that social actors use to make sense of—indeed, to act—in their lives” (p. 618).
  - Sources of identity.
  - The transformation of events into episodes sewn together into a narrative plot that makes them consequential for individual agency.
- Cultural capital and social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984)
  - “Taste” acts as a marker of class, moral worth, and social position; certain tastes are ascribed greater social value than others
  - Performing taste is used to distinguish oneself from others and exercise social power.

# Research Design, Data, and Method

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- Qualitative, interpretive method.
- Participants from Opinium Research's national panel of over 40,000 people.
- Two-wave, in-depth semi-structured interviews (Wave 1 n=102, Wave 2 n=80) with the public in three regions: London, the East Midlands, and the North East of England.
- Voluntary media uploads via dedicated mobile ethnography app.
- April 2021 – July 2022.
- Participants roughly reflect diversity of UK: age, gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, and a basic indicator of digital literacy.
- Thematic analysis.

# Findings:

## Ontological narratives of social distinction

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- Significant group constructed selves as innately critically minded, ever-sceptical, savvy information seekers, not susceptible to misinformation.
- This identity work and status work (ontological narratives) was often performed by constructing a binary (distinction) between themselves and others who lack media literacy skills or are naïve.
- Implicit value judgments – normative assumptions about desirable behaviour of “responsible” citizens.
- Signal own social status by distinguishing self from others within social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984).



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“I think I’ve always been somebody who, you know, I don’t read something and necessarily immediately believe it. [...] **I’ve always been quite questioning.** [...] I wouldn’t just read a message that somebody had sent me [...] and think ‘oh, [...] it was The Huffington Post, so it must be true.’ [...] If I was interested, I probably would go and look at different sources of information. [...] **I wouldn’t have just forwarded that straight on.** [...] I’m naturally a suspicious person, I think.” (Christine, F, 50s)



**“I have a critical view of everything and I have a rational view [...] I don't take things on the face of it [...] I'll always ask 'what's the reason for this?' [...] and I know this is lacking in society now, because I think a lot of people don't want to take responsibility for their actions, so they tend to just form an opinion based on, you know, one very narrow view but if you pull a lot of information together you'll be able to form an opinion that is your own. And then you won't point to someone else and say 'Oh, but I heard it from you, you told me to go and attack the Capitol', you know [chuckles]”** (Tobe, M, 40s)



“As far as **social media** goes, **I’m quite distrustful of those channels** as reliable sources of information. [...] There’s a sort of like, I think the expression is ‘**echo chamber**,’ so depending on where you are in the spectrum, you’re going to be gravitating towards the groups that it seems to be, that reflect your views and so on. I know where I am on the political spectrum, and so on, but **I really like to take my views from everywhere**—right across—and I don’t like to have something that continually reflects a particular perspective. [...] I think **a lot of my friends don’t even think about it**, when they’re doing stuff, there’s no filter, [...] whereas, for me, I do think about it a lot. [...] **You’ve got to actually have a responsibility** to think it through, [...] try and have some sort of balanced trawl of the sources that you’re using rather than just relying on Farage or whatever else. [...] That requires a lot of investment which people aren’t prepared to make.” (Ken, M, 40s)



**“I’m not familiar enough with the sort of fake news syndrome, because I don’t use Facebook, or, you know, particularly, I don’t get dragged into that sort of miasma of reinforcing one’s opinion because of what you said, or whatever. [...] I don’t listen to people that I don’t know, really. But **they have no access to me, and I don’t have any access to them, so it’s immaterial.**”** (Miles, M, 60s)

- The illusion of control on personal messaging vis-à-vis public social media.

**“It wouldn’t bother me** in the slightest [if others share misinformation] because [...] whatever videos or links to things, I don’t have to actually believe it. **I can look at it and decide for myself** what I think of the article or the video. **If I don’t particularly think it’s accurate, I’ll just dismiss it.”**  
(Evan, M, 50s)

- Misinformation as “not my problem”.



“I’ve always had a curious mind. I’ve always wanted to dig deeper into things. **I’m always sceptical.**

[...]

I mean there’s a lot of the conspiracy theories behind [the vaccines].  
[...] I put all that to one side, because I think that’s just got out of control. So, when some people say ‘oh you’re just a conspiracy theorist,’ um, it’s not that. It’s neither for the vaccination nor against it. **I’m just a person who’s looking for accurate information.”** (Janet, F, 60s)

- For a very small number of users: fine line between savvy information consumer and “epistemic superheroism” (Buzzell and Rini 2022)

# Implications for combatting misinformation

## (1)

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Most people are susceptible to online deception at least some of the time (Chadwick and Stanyer 2022).

- Narratives of immunity may not reflect actual media literacy levels – over-estimation is common (Ofcom 2022; Geeng et al. 2022; Andreou and Nicolaidou 2019).
- The most confident individuals tend to be more likely to overestimate their abilities—Dunning-Kreuger effect (Anson, 2018; Dunning, 2011, Motta et al., 2018).
- Over-confident individuals may be more susceptible to misinformation (Geeng et al. 2020, Jang and Kim 2018)
- Misinformation can and does spread on personal messaging (e.g. Rand & Andrey, 2021)



# Implications for combatting misinformation (2)

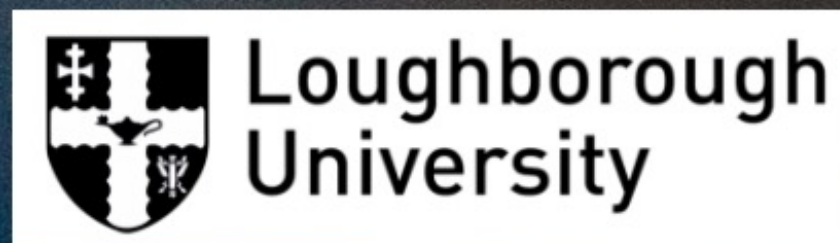
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- Undermines receptiveness to digital literacy campaigns.
- Undermines the collective social endeavour to mitigate online harms.
  - Requires participation in social endorsement, social correction, and the creation of norms.
- If people see misinformation as a problem 'out there' and not relevant to them, they may not engage in combatting it.
- If people actively seek to distance themselves from the problem for reasons of social status, this problem is further complicated.



# Everyday Sharing of Misinformation on Private Social Media

A Leverhulme Trust funded research project based at Loughborough University



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